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Toward a Vision of Racial Equity in Richmond Schools

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We both bring a nuanced perspective to education. Taikein is a native of Prince Edward County. Growing up three blocks from the historic R.R. Moton High School, he learned the impacts that flawed policy and selfish adults have on students. His passion is to guarantee that all families have the opportunity to design an education that piques the interest of their children. Genevieve is a graduate of Richmond Public Schools (RPS) who benefited from her experiences as a white student in nominally desegregated schools, which would later shape her interest in researching school segregation. At the same time, she also benefited from the accommodation that RPS continues to extend to white families.

Our vision for racial equity in Richmond schools includes real integration, enabled by stronger and more inclusive advocacy. It is based on our collective personal and professional experiences, research and best practices from around the country. We believe these strategies will lead us toward greater racial equity in Richmond and the education all of our children deserve.

Richmond education stakeholders need to work toward the “5 Rs,” or Race & Enrollment, Resource Allocation, Real Relationships, Representative Staff and Faculty, and Restorative Justice.

Real Integration as a Goal

To advance racial equity in education, Richmond education stakeholders—all of us—need to work toward what youth activists in New York City have dubbed [“real integration.”](#) Real integration deepens our collective consciousness around dismantling racial caste in public education. It is based on what NYC student activists call the “5 Rs,” or Race & Enrollment, Resource Allocation, Real Relationships, Representative Staff and Faculty, and Restorative Justice. The students acknowledge that racial diversity in enrollment represents a first step on the path toward real integration, but then turn toward the importance of distributing educational resources equitably, fostering shared power and relationships across lines of difference, ensuring racial diversity among faculty and staff and approaching discipline restoratively rather than punitively. Real integration is a comprehensive and continuous process, one that stands to benefit individual students and our broader society. Students who learn early how to connect, think and problem solve across social cleavages will possess fundamental skills for an increasingly diverse 21st century workforce and democracy.

Real Integration in Historical Context

Real integration draws on elements of a too often overlooked 1968 U.S. Supreme Court decision dealing with a Richmond area school district. The Court’s ruling in *Green v. New Kent County* required school districts to immediately eliminate segregation “root and branch,” laying out six factors that would determine whether a district no longer operated two systems of schooling, one for Black students and one for white students. Like the more contemporary demand for real integration from NYC students, the *Green* factors went beyond ensuring that students of different

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racial/ethnic backgrounds attended schools together to require desegregation in faculty assignment, facilities, transportation, extracurriculars and quality of education. *Green v. New Kent County* dealt specifically with the New Kent school division's long delay on school desegregation, exemplified by an inadequate freedom-of-choice plan that offered too little freedom or choice to Black families bearing the burden of tackling a system of racial oppression. The decision also addressed Massive Resistance that had unfolded elsewhere in Virginia, including the wholesale closure of public schools in Prince Edward County. Its emphasis on equalizing woefully unequal school facilities also got to the heart of what Barbara Johns, an early youth leader in the movement, demanded.

Authentic community engagement gives us an opportunity to elevate the voices of those most affected by flawed policy and practice.

In the wake of federal retrenchment on school desegregation enforcement, Richmond moved quickly to stem white and affluent flight to surrounding suburbs. The city accommodated—and continues to accommodate through student assignment policies—white and affluent preferences for schools and classrooms imbued with the highest status and containing the most meaningful educational resources. And when the high status schools do not have the necessary resources, unequal social and political capital ensures they are soon forthcoming. We have, as a society, continued to make policy choices that create and sustain racially segregated, high poverty schools and districts. Because we also then choose to starve those same schools and

districts of much needed resources, **Richmond's accommodation of white and affluent educational preferences too often has come at the expense of historically marginalized students. While RPS has taken steps in the right direction, students don't receive the same education in each school.**

Harms of Racially Unequal Education—and Advocacy to Address Them

This is a situation that damages us all. It sanctions sharp discord between our democratic ideals and unequal reality, creating childhood confusion that closes racially and economically advantaged students off to the full humanity of their less advantaged peers. This, as Dr. Martin Luther King powerfully reminded us, “distorts the soul and damages the personality” of all involved. Ongoing accommodation to white and affluent families additionally means that as a community, we remain comfortable ill-equipping the overwhelming majority of Richmond students for participation in our economic and civic life.

Advocacy to undo these systemic injustices in Richmond has been marred by a culture of false starts and ulterior motives. Authentic community engagement gives us an opportunity to elevate the voices of those most affected by flawed policy and practice. To effectively do this, we must learn from other social movements to advocate for robust change in the city. As advocates, we should commit to the following:

- Embracing and nurturing youth activism.
- Remaining patiently impatient. Changing systems in a meaningful way takes time. We must understand and clearly communicate that these changes won't come overnight and some mistakes will be made along the way. Setting these expectations will be a quintessential task as we truly work to build “people power.”
- Developing cross-racial dialogues and alliances.
- Centering needs of families of color; cultivating white allies that are willing to speak up about a system that continues to heavily cater to their interests.

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- Supporting the recommendations put forward by the RPS Equity in Enrollment commission. We know that over the years, many students in RPS have been ineligible for admission or enrollment related to a host of barriers, including lack of transportation and difficult-to-attain prerequisites. While the current administration is working to eliminate those barriers, the Commission's work is rooted in not only making admission more equitable, but is also hyper-focused on supporting students who have been historically underrepresented at the specialty schools. Full disclosure: we are co-chairs of this commission, which also includes student and family voices, as well as the voices of RPS educators and cross-sector allies. In many ways, the commission embodies best practices outlined in this section.

The Choice and Solutions Before the City

Our city now confronts a choice. School segregation between Black and white students in Richmond has skyrocketed over the past several decades, even as residential segregation has slowly fallen. Roughly 70% of elementary school age children would need to change schools to achieve a racial distribution that reflects the overall RPS enrollment, compared to about 58% of residents. Ongoing separation in our schools is driven in part by how our school boards draw attendance zone boundaries and design choice policies that allow students to attend out-of-zone schools. It flows too from federal, state and local policies related to housing and land use and past and present discrimination in mortgage lending and real estate. Individual choices about where to live and send children to schools interact with these systems and are shaped by how much meaningful contact we have experienced with members of other racial/ethnic and socioeconomic groups. Which brings us back to the fundamental importance of real integration in public education.

Based on our personal and professional experiences, and with real integration as our guide, we offer the following ideas for individuals, advocates and policymakers to consider as we move forward.

- Make existing school segregation a trigger for rezoning processes and ensure that new processes further integration and do not exacerbate segregation. These goals should be clearly delineated as among the top 1 or 2 priorities during the rezoning process. Center students' voices in rezoning by including student representatives on the committee and school board.
- Create diversity goals and weight current systems of choice like open enrollment and specialty schools to advantage disadvantaged students. As RPS expands secondary school choice with theme-based middle and high schools programs, ensure that civil rights guardrails like interest-based admissions, guaranteed transportation and extensive outreach define the system.
- Coordinate the housing, transportation and education sectors to enhance mobility and create more affordable housing in the zones associated with highly resourced schools.
- Transform how we fund schools in the Commonwealth of Virginia.
- Centralize and redistribute local PTA funds.
- Nurture teacher and leadership diversity in all RPS schools through intentional faculty assignment policies. Prioritize diversity in teacher and leadership pipelines.
- Support intensive, intentional efforts within RPS schools to disrupt racially disparate academic tracking and discipline.

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- Work with our regional school division partners to ameliorate a regional system of segregation. Support efforts to expand access and equity in existing regional partnerships like the Governor's schools and draw on school choice lessons from CodeRVA, the first federally funded regional magnet school in the state.

There are many actions needed to enhance racial equity in the city of Richmond, but none are more pressing than transforming our public schools. Our current public education system is perpetuating inequities; sometimes by choice, and other times by force. RPS has made some small steps toward addressing this sobering truth, but we have not gone far enough. De facto segregation has not only limited educational opportunities available to students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (who are disproportionately Black and brown), it permeates throughout the fabric of this city. As we grapple with heightened awareness to racial injustice in America, it's important for us to find viable solutions in this city as well. Embracing the aforementioned vision of real integration in Richmond Public Schools is the step in the right direction.

Taikein Cooper

Taikein Cooper is the Executive Director of Virginia Excels, which partners with students, families, and communities to shape public education by advocating for policies and practices that are good for all kids, regardless of race or family income.

Born in historic Prince Edward County, Taikein has a deep affection and strong commitment to local politics and helping people engage in the American political process. , one of the five counties in the landmark **Brown v. Board of Education** case, Cooper is a 2006 graduate from both Southside Virginia Community College and Prince Edward County High School. He has lived in Virginia his entire life, except to attend college at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Genevieve Siegel-Hawley

Genevieve Siegel-Hawley is an associate professor of educational leadership at Virginia Commonwealth University. Her research examines school segregation and resegregation in U.S. metropolitan areas, along with strategies for promoting inclusive school communities and policy options for a truly integrated society.