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Diversity Enhances Education

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Few parents are willing to sacrifice their children's education on the alter of some abstract value even if, in principle, they adhere to it. Thus, even as most parents say they want their children to attend a diverse school, many parents continue to fight for and send their children to neighborhood schools, which in most cases virtually guarantees that there will be little to no diversity among those children's classmates.

Parents who send their children to schools with classmates only like themselves make a serious mistake. Diversity doesn't undermine high quality education; it enhances it. You've heard this before. As adults coming of age in a globalizing economy, our children will live and work with people from many backgrounds. Students need to learn how to do this while in school. Attending school with people who are different also prepares children to be citizens of a diverse democratic society. I call these the soft reasons for diversity. There are compelling hard reasons, too. Here I'm talking about grades and test scores, and critical thinking skills -- perhaps the most important academic tools our children learn in school.

Think about your own most meaningful learning experiences in and out of school. They were likely not from books or lectures. Rather, they were first hand experiences that you then integrated into your existing store of facts and conceptual frameworks. A diverse classroom helps to bring this dimension to the learning environment regularly. Let me give you an example from my own teaching experience.

One afternoon last fall, three students came to my office after class to discuss the course materials more fully. One is an international student from Beijing, China, another is an African American raised in North Carolina, and the third is an Irish American from Boston. The topic of our informal discussion was inequality, globalization, and democracy. Each person contributed to the discussion, drawing not only from our class readings and lectures, but also from his or her own experiences as a citizen of the United States or China, and from his or her family's particular history. Imagine the excitement,

the depth, and the breadth of students' learning about social inequality, democracy, and globalization from this discussion compared to what they gleaned from even the best of my brilliantly crafted and flawlessly delivered lectures. Concepts such as democracy, freedom, equality, citizenship, human rights take on palpably more dynamic and meaningful forms when a diverse group of students actively engages in intellectual exchanges about them. Can you envision how a conversation about freedom among all Southern African American, all Chinese, or all Boston Irish American students might pale in comparison?

Scientific research confirms that young people learn more in settings with students from racial, ethnic and social class backgrounds different from their own. Cognitive science offers potential explanations for why learning is enhanced for all students in diverse learning environments. Diversity inhibits "automaticity" in thinking: the tendency to travel down the same thinking paths we developed in the past. Automaticity leads us to get into our car and absent mindedly drive toward work when we intend to go to the cinema. Differences among the people with whom we interact spark us into deeper, more critical thinking.

Diversity among students in a school is important and superior to its alternative - segregation. Genuine diversity, though, must occur in classrooms, too. Ensuring that children learn in a diverse classroom requires teachers and administrators who are comfortable with all students and parents from different social classes and cultures; teachers who are able to craft and deliver lessons that build upon strengths in students' varied backgrounds (as do renown math educators Jaime Escalante and Robert Moses); curricula that thoroughly reflect the world and its people; and a school climate that weaves all of the above seamlessly into the warp and woof of the classroom and the school climates.

All children benefit from diverse learning environments. Our dilemma is whether we adults will allow our children to benefit from this scientific knowledge. To do so, we must face our own stereotypes, false assumptions, and ignorance about people from cultural and social class backgrounds different from our own. And our leaders need to make politically difficult but wiser choices. Once we parents realize that rather than sacrificing our children's future, a diverse education enhances it, consistent with enlightened self-interest, we will cherish that quality in our children's education and demand it from school leaders.