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NOTES:

Measuring economic disadvantage for targeting anti-poverty efforts

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Anti-Poverty programs, and especially programs to select students for public or K-12 schools or for college admission are interested in using measures which identify deserving students and which create diversity. However some state governments and some Federal Courts have made using ethnicity to select students illegal.

Some schools, most notably the UCLA Law School, have attempted to create diversity using measures of disadvantage not including ethnicity. It is difficult to do this efficiently, however. Most measures of disadvantage do not meet the average persons' sense of fairness – the seemingly most disadvantaged are sometimes skipped over in favor of the seemingly less so.

There are two bodies of scientific literature which provide some guidance on this problem:

1. In the United States it is well-established that the prestige of one's occupation is a combination of the average income of the workers in the occupation, plus the average years of school completed by the workers, with the two factors being equal in importance. This measure of occupational prestige has been a basic building block of sociological research for the last 50 years. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands of scientific papers using this measure. It therefore makes sense to try to use the same technique to measure the socioeconomic status of students.

2. More recent research has focused on the importance of what is called "concentration of poverty." There are now many scientific papers, including a number by Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, which show that the poverty of one's neighborhood is an important factor affecting the academic performance of children.

3. Research has shown that block characteristics are very highly correlated with ethnicity. In many cities, the poorest blocks are always minority.

This implies that a school district can create diversity in its schools by using data on the educational level of parents and the income level of parents measured for individual blocks using data provided by the U.S. Census. All that is necessary is a street address to identify the economic status of the block. Using block-level data makes it possible to recognize the combined disadvantages that minorities suffer being from disadvantaged homes but more importantly being from segregated and impoverished neighborhoods.

However, There is one important caveat: The degree to which a neighborhood is disadvantaged cannot be determined accurately using income alone. As James Coleman argued convincingly, the educational resources of the neighborhood families is also important.

Simply adding neighborhood income and neighborhood educational level is not necessarily the right approach, because a neighborhood which is somewhat poor and somewhat low on education may be in better health than a neighborhood which is extremely poor even though its families are not in the lowest level of education, or a neighborhood where incomes are not at the lowest level but education is very low. For example, a Latino neighborhood might have average income, but a low level of education if there are many immigrants there. Conversely, an African-American neighborhood may have a relatively high level of years of school completed but low incomes. It appears that an inconsistency in the two measures is a sign that the neighborhood will have difficulty. For this reason, it seems that a student who comes from a neighborhood with a very low level of either income or education, coupled with a moderate level of the other measure, may well be more disadvantaged than is a student with moderately low levels of both adult education and income.

This simply means that if we measure disadvantage of a block by its income (either percent of families below a poverty line, on the median income), or by its adult educational level (the percent who are not high school graduates or the median number of years of school completed), it is probably not a good idea to simply combine the two by adding the two measures. There are several alternatives which will identify neighborhoods which are disadvantaged on one index and not the other. The simplest is divide all blocks into four categories, those disadvantaged on both income and the median years of schooling, those which are not disadvantaged on either education or income, and those that are disadvantaged on either one or the other. Making minor adjustments to these four categories should allow a

school to create a school assignment plan which makes sure that every school has both educationally disadvantaged children and financially disadvantaged children. Creating a fine-tuned plan to economically desegregate a school district should produce a very high level of ethnic desegregation. The computer work and the calculations are not difficult; any city department of planning has the capability to do this.

. Here are two simple methods:

1. If the school district chooses a traditional assignment plan, assigning all students on a block to the same school, it can simply draw a plan in which every school has the same proportion of students from low-income blocks and from low-education blocks.

2. If the school system wishes a choice system, every student can be offered the opportunity to attend every school, with a rule that no one school can have an excessive number of students who are disadvantaged on either index. Most reasonable procedures for doing this would wind up creating schools that have similar levels of disadvantaged students and a very good balance of Hispanics, African-Americans, and others.

Note that this method should be more successful thatn the tradtional desegregation plan in that it will create ethnic desegregation and socioeconomic desegregation at the same time.