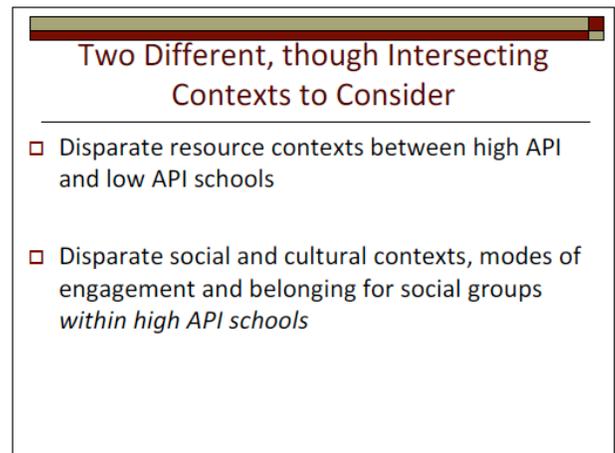


**RESEARCH BRIEF: A Tale of Two Contexts – Achieving equity between and within San Francisco Public Schools**

In 2010, San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) asked Stanford University Professor Prudence Carter to examine issues of educational equity within the district. Funded by the NAACP Legal Defense & Education Fund and the Council of Great City Schools, the aim of the study was to inform SFUSD’s school board’s decisions related to a new district student assignment policy. For three months, Professor Carter and a team of researchers interviewed individuals and group of principals, teachers and students within 24 elementary, middle, and high schools in SFUSD for a total of more than 200 individuals. Carter and her team examined three main conceptual questions:

- What academic, cultural, social, and organizational factors do educators and students perceive as affecting students’ and specific social groups’ school performances?
- How do educators and students discuss difference and think about the role(s) of diversity in schools?
- How do educators and students perceive the current student assignment system? What do they support?

**Figure 1:**



**Schooling, Equity, and Academic Well-Being**

As seen in Figure 1, in SFUSD, there are two different, though intersecting contexts to consider:

- 1) *Disparate resource contexts exist **between** high API (Academic Performance Index) and low API schools.* Lower API schools confront the challenges of high percentages of students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, different access to experienced teachers and basic physical plant and library resources.
- 2) *Disparate education experiences, modes of engagement and belonging for social groups, particularly African American, Latino, and Pacific Islander students exist **within** high API schools.* More specifically, disparate educational experiences for different social groups exist for students within high API schools and in turn enable persistent “gaps” among groups. Some of the mechanisms through which these variable educational experiences occur include:
  - a. Status hierarchies formed through divisions such as honors versus general and special education and immersion verses non-immersion facilitate systems of marking or ranking. The higher status classes or streams were generally perceived as having more engaging pedagogy, higher expectations, and access to additional resources.
  - b. Unequal educational experiences occur through both formal academic and extracurricular activities. Because of transportation and distance issues, those students who cross town for school—usually the groups who are socio-economically disadvantaged and perform less well academically—are not participating in learning enrichment and arts programs to the same extent as their peers with more family resources and capital.
  - c. The current assignment system engenders some forms of social and cultural isolation of particular minority groups, which pose both pedagogical and engagement issues.
  - d. Students perceive that disparate educational experiences are also influenced by patterns of teacher favoritism and student labeling.

- 3) In some high API schools in San Francisco, the social and cultural isolation of particular minority groups poses both pedagogical and engagement issues. Some educators in these particular high API schools were aware of the limits of having less than a critical mass of students from historically underrepresented and disadvantaged groups and suggested that their schools needed to cultivate an environment that is culturally and psychological “safe” for these students.

### **On Diversity and Schooling**

- 1) While educators and students alike expressed their value for diversity, educators also wanted to maintain their advantages as parents for their own children, even if the consequence is the reduction of schools’ diversity levels.
- 2) School stakeholders expressed variable concepts of diversity:
  - a. Students and educators in both high and low API schools in this study thought of themselves as diverse.
  - b. The absence of groups with perceived high status is noticeable and mentioned frequently by students and educators in low API schools.
  - c. The converse is not true in high API schools, although some students expressed a desire for more language diversity.
- 3) With regard to the maintenance of diverse schools, educators in high API schools spoke of the struggle to recruit underrepresented racial and ethnic minorities. They discussed some trepidation of taking students away from other lower API schools.
- 4) In contrast, educators in lower API schools were dissatisfied with the transfer of behaviorally and academically challenged students to their schools after they have not made the grade at high API schools.

### **Views and Attitudes about the Current Assignment System**

- 1) Neighborhood schools were the most frequently talked about model of schools.
- 2) Educators primarily expressed preference for neighborhoods schools for the following reasons: 1) reduction of transportation time; 2) building community; and 3) increasing parent involvement.
- 3) Yet, given that family capital and resources vary significantly across the city, neighborhood schools would not move SFUSD away from separate and unequal educational contexts and consequently could set the city back.

### **Policy Recommendations**

- Set a similar resources threshold in all schools
- Address the deep resources disparities between schools
- Cultivate teacher professionalism and development around social difference and cultural sensitivity to address teacher-student disconnect
- Consider an assignment of students in “pods” or “posses” across school levels to reduce social and cultural isolation and to facilitate network and community building
- Minimize status hierarchies in ability and interest groups (e.g. tracks, immersion)
- Maintain high expectations of educators and students and create engaging educational contexts in all schools