

Columbia Public Schools can only be as diverse as its neighborhoods

The Columbia Board of Education's goal of increasing diversity throughout public schools has been put on the back burner after another shift of school attendance zones failed to overcome neighborhood segregation within the city.

Neighborhood segregation can be replicated and transferred to the classroom when attendance boundaries zone students to attend their geographically closest public school, says Ansley Erickson associate professor of history and education at Columbia University.

This is largely how the attendance zones were last redrawn and approved by the board in February 2019. When it takes effect Fall 2020, most, but not all students are assigned to schools closest to their homes.

Segregation is not affected by the Columbia Public School District alone. Scott Leopold, Cooperative Strategies company partner says lack of resources is to blame.

"The underlying issue is the lack of distributed affordable housing," Scott Leopold, Cooperative Strategies company partner. "When you have affordable housing concentrated in specific areas, you're going to have poverty concentrated in those specific areas."

If the board and the Columbia Housing Authority worked together to buy property for new developments, segregation would be slightly improved with the opening of every new school, Phil Steinhaus, CEO of Columbia Housing Authority said.

"When the school and the school building is built, more expensive neighborhoods pop up around that school," Steinhaus said. "Lower-income people end up living farther away from school."

The sporadic locations of Columbia's affordable housing made it difficult to achieve a socioeconomic balance of schools' student population, Leopold said.

Schools that have a diverse socioeconomic population typically produce higher-achieving students compared to schools that have higher rates of disparity, according to Cradle to Career Alliance, a nonprofit dedicated to achieving equity in public schools.

"If you have integration at your schools or equity at your schools, where different socioeconomic groups are together," board member Teresa Maledy said. "It really does help close the achievement gap or improve the opportunity gap."

Segregation cannot be solved by a single organization or agency, so collaboration among multiple agencies is beneficial, according to Erickson.

"I think we need to be conscious as we grow," board member Teresa Maledy said. "We need to plan for this and make sure that we're not putting all of it on the school district and the students to help achieve that equity that we want for the community."

With every new attendance zone that is adjusted, the Columbia Board of Education is faced with the same roadblocks and limitations.

During the 2018-2019 school year, only 19.8 percent of students were enrolled in free and reduced lunch at Gentry Middle School, according to Columbia Public Schools. In the same year and 9 miles away, more than 60 percent of students were enrolled in free and reduced lunch at Lange Middle School.

The board is eager to dismantle school segregation, but their reach is limited.

“We value the diversity of our community,” Michelle Baumstark, Community Relations Director for Columbia Public Schools said. “Of course, those are things we want, but we also don't control the housing market and we don't control where people live.”

Until this partnership between CHA and the board happens, the board will continue to struggle with balancing the socioeconomic student population.

“The reality is we will continue to have to redraw attendance areas,” board member Jonathan Sessions said. “But, until the city addresses the issue of affordable housing, we will still see a large disparity of economic data in our community.”

City Councilmember Mike Trapp believes the council's influence will be most beneficial. Passing policy that influences the positive growth of affordable housing throughout Columbia is one thing the council can do, Trapp said.

As the board and Cooperative Strategies continue their partnership for the redrawing of elementary attendance school zones later this year, increasing diversity remains a major priority.

“I think the goal of having balanced and equitable schools is one we should strive for as a school district and as a school board,” Maledy said. “But that it really struck home for me that this is something that the school board alone or the school districts alone is not able to solve.”

Other partnerships may be in the works for the future, but there are no concrete plans yet, Maledy said.