

Grawemeyer Awards

Economist who traced long-term success of school integration wins Grawemeyer education award

An economist who found that integrating U.S. public schools in the 1970s and 1980s benefited students over time has won the 2022 University of Louisville Grawemeyer Award in Education.

Rucker Johnson, a University of California-Berkeley public policy professor specializing in education economics, received the prize for ideas set forth in “Children of the Dream: Why School Integration Works,” his 2019 book written with Alexander Nazaryan and co-published by Basic Books and the Russell Sage Foundation.

[Johnson](#) studied the progress of more than 15,000 schoolchildren through adulthood. He found those who attended integrated schools experienced greater educational attainment, earned more income, faced less poverty, enjoyed better health and were not as likely to go to prison as adults than those who attended segregated schools.

“Many people believe integration was a failure when in fact it was actually a success,” Johnson said.

Although the United States is more racially diverse today than ever, school segregation has increased and educators are still witnessing significant student achievement gaps linked to socioeconomic status and race, he noted. The best way to fix the problem is to restore integration, boost funding for high-need schools and improve preschool education, he suggests.

“Our public schools can play a transformative role in creating opportunity, lowering poverty and encouraging upward mobility, or they can reinforce inequality. The choice is up to us.”

Johnson, who has studied topics ranging from federal spending on the Head Start program to the effects of school reform on education and the economy, has been invited to give policy briefings at the White House and Capitol Hill.

Despite a belief held by some Americans that the school integration of several decades ago did more harm than good, Johnson found the opposite to be true, said Jeffrey Valentine, who directs the education award.

“His study offers compelling evidence of how integration and more equitable school funding can improve life outcomes for black students without harming other students,” Valentine said. “He also makes a strong case for improving our nation’s educational system through public policies that encourage integration, strengthen early education and create a fairer funding model for schools.”

The annual \$100,000 Grawemeyer Awards, which also honor seminal ideas in music, world order, psychology, and religion, are named each December pending final trustee approval. Winners will visit Louisville in April to accept their awards and give free talks on their winning ideas.