The Case for Balance: Socioeconomic Diversity and Its Impact on Schooling

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Abstract

This essay outlines the case for keeping schools diverse socioeconomically as an important priority in school choice and school assignment. The author uses the current climate surrounding charter schools and private vouchers to connect to other times in the history of our nation's schools when diversity was threatened, namely the civil rights era and the more current rhetoric surrounding bussing and the return to "neighborhood schools." Using data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress as well as timely research articles and amicus/policy briefs on socioeconomic diversity and the re-segregation of schools, the article hopes to arm any child advocate with the information and rationale behind balance in school assignment, framing the three principal reasons as 1) socioeconomic diversity brings strength, stability, and parent/teacher satisfaction to schools, 2) socioeconomic diversity is cost-effective, and 3) socioeconomic diversity produces greater academic gain at all income levels. The article ends with practical ways that advocates can insure balance is a priority in the school and community.

Key Words

socioeconomic diversity, school assignment, re-segregation

Yes, it's deja vu: much like the civil rights era, then the introduction of vouchers, then the discussion of race in student assignment, now with the rise of racially-identifiable charter schools across the country (Bonner, Stancill, & Raynor, 2017; Klein, 2016; Orfield, 2014) we are again at a national crossroads on segregation.

When it comes to diversity these days, the discussion centers around socioeconomic status. In Kentucky, HB 151 threatened earlier this year to dismantle one of the country's most successfully integrated school districts proposing a neighborhood schools' bill that would have re-segregated schools virtually overnight (Arnett, 2017; Quick, 2017).

Fortunately, on this issue, thoughtful stakeholders have over fifty years of data— the most convincing being the newest—that make another case for socioeconomic balance in K-12 schools.

Balance Has Been a Satisfaction and a Strength

It's hard to imagine that any twenty-first century parent would discourage a child from learning early and often how to work within difference. While many studies show that disadvantaged kids achieve more in diverse socioeconomic settings, new research clearly shows that the same goes for the middle class:

The 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress, for example, supports the idea that all children, regardless of socioeconomics, see academic gains along with other, harder-to-measure results as a result of integration—including increased expressive language, leadership skills, college attendance, self-confidence, and critical and creative thinking abilities (Kurlaender & Yun, 2007;

Loewenberg, 2017; Marsh, Chaney & Jones, 2012; Mickelson, 2016; NAEP, 2015; Phillips, 2014; Quick, 2017).

As social advocate Anya Kamenetz states, "more millennial parents are recognizing that it's a skill to thrive in diverse environments, and employers are looking for people who can get along with individuals from all different backgrounds" (Kamenetz, 2017; see also Mickelson, 2016; Ramohai, 2013). Siegel-Hawley (2012) adds that a global economy will rely on schools that have promoted cultural competency and soft skills such as "flexibility, innovation, and risk … [and] diverse schools are optimal settings to do so" (p.1).

McCormick, et al. (2015) likewise study the influence of peer groups in childhood and early adolescence and conclude that student homophily—the tendency to form friendships more easily with peers who share the same characteristics—is a disposition best diversified through schooling, where the "ability to form friendships with peers different from themselves depends largely on how much within-classroom access they have to potential friends who are different from them" (p. 818).

They assert that these types of cross-friendships have also been linked to other strengths in schools and their students, including cooperative interdependence and increased attention to skill development over rote knowledge (2015; see also Barth et al., 2013; Hallinan & Teixera, 1987; Phillips, K.W., 2014; Spivak, White, Juvonen, & Graham, 2015; Strohmeier, 2012). Wells, Fox, and Cordova-Cobo analyze many of these studies and boil the results down succinctly: "the benefits of school diversity run in all directions … [and] diversity makes us smarter" (Wells, Fox, & Cordova-Cobo, 2016).

Furthermore, not only with the "why" but the "how" of socioeconomic diversity is working, as more school districts weight diversity in assignment algorithms. A 2010 survey in a school system nationally recognized for its socioeconomic diversity—Wake County, NC—found 94% of parents highly satisfied with their child's school and assignment (Capitol Broadcasting Company, 2011; Wake County Public Schools, 2011).

The same holds true in Jefferson County, Missouri, where even after "marrying the value of integration to the concept of choice, 90 percent of families receive their first choice school" (Quick, 2017) in a weighted system. Shifting housing preferences in the twenty-first century give us a unique moment to embrace these efforts at socioeconomic integration, as Millennials express a strong preference to live in urban settings.

Administrators taking advantage of this preference and studying the challenges of modern gentrification have a unique opportunity to satisfy the preferences of young families who value diversity and are increasingly moving their housing to diverse neighborhoods (Wells, Fox, & Cordova-Cobo, 2016). In these ways, the link between strong diversity in the schools and a strong system in society in general has already been made nationally and remains a source of satisfaction.

Balance Meets the Demands of Cost of Efficiency

Criticism of diversity cloaked in some rhetoric behind "neighborhood schools" espouses that bussing, teacher incentives in diverse schools, etc., cost more. Researchers and educators, however, now realize that socioeconomic integration is more effective *both* academically and fiscally than extra funding concentrated to high poverty schools. Magnet school systems

across the country provide an abundance of research-verified examples.

Non-magnet, more traditional school assignment models now also show gains. Lowenburg (2017) and others, for example, cites school districts in Maryland where students in high poverty neighborhoods close the achievement gap more quickly when they are randomly assigned to diverse middle class schools with no additional funding. Likewise, the Century Foundation cites more equitable access to resources without additional funding required, as all students enjoy "well-maintained facilities, highly qualified teachers, challenging courses, private and public funding" (Century Foundation, 2016; also see Ayscue, Frankenburg, & Siegel-Hawley, 2017; Jackson, 2009; Massey & Fischer, 2006).

An extensive study by Basile (2012) and another by Chiu and Khoo (2005) support these findings, concluding that integration of schools leads to more efficient and equitable access to all kinds of social and cultural capital; these researchers likewise urge that integration be early in children's lives, where the effects have been found to be more long-lasting. Kahlenburg and Potter (2014) quantify this effect, citing studies to show that any intervention that increases socioeconomic diversity in a school by at least half would yield three to five times return on that investment.

In addition to concluding that extra funding in high poverty schools is not as effective, these researchers cite equally important economic benefits of better preparing students to work in a global society. Massey and Fischer (2006) have also noted an increase in educational expectations from staff and from students of well-integrated schools in comparison to similar segregated schools, finding academic expectations to be

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significantly higher with no real-cost difference between the infrastructures.

Anti-Diversity Means Anti-Excellence

Forty years of research has shown that socioeconomic diversity in schooling produces academic excellence, at both the high end and the low end of the socioeconomic spectrum (Berry & Hirsch, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005; National Center for Education Statistics, 2015; Rothwell, 2012). In addition, an undisputable link between high poverty and low achievement remains, and the schools that have beaten the odds are exceptions-- highly funded, small endeavors that are simply not scalable.

North Carolina Advocates for Children's Services cite more than ten studies to show that "high poverty schools have lower student achievement and more difficulty hiring and retaining quality, experienced teachers … Students are more likely to be successful when they are in heterogeneous classes in socioeconomically diverse schools in which concentration of poverty is kept as low as possible" (Langberg & Brege, 2010, p. 3; see also Wells et. al., 2009). A 2010 meta-analysis of a large data set involving math outcomes, for example, finds that "students of all races and income levels are more likely to have higher math outcomes when they attend racially and socioeconomically diverse schools" (Loewenberg, Aug 1, 2016; see also Carnoy & Garcia, 2017; Lubienski & Lubienski, 2014; Mickelson, 2016).

This research, along with the NAEP data and other large scale studies, has been described as "consistent and unambiguous" (Loewenburg, 2016 Aug 1). Building on this history, a 2013 metaregression analysis by Mickelson, Battia, and Lambert goes further to assert that the earlier diversity happens in a student's experience, the better. They find that

"the ill effects of the negative association between racial segregation and mathematical outcomes likely compound as students move from elementary through high school" (p. 139). Kirp (2012) echoes this research, finding that "Amid the ceaseless and cacophonous debates about how to close the achievement gap, we've turned away from one tool that has been shown to work: school desegregation" (p.1). Excellent growth in mathematical outcomes across the socioeconomic spectrum, both researchers argue, is associated with diversity.

But test scores alone do not define excellence. Even more compelling cases are seen in a research-verified list of far-ranging and transformative systemic results, including:

- increased, proactive resistance to discrimination (Hurtado & Deangelo, 2012; Siegel-Hawley, 2012; Spivak, White, Juvonen, & Graham, 2015);
- a greater propensity toward completing tasks, higher levels of educational attainment, creativity, and intellectual engagement (Eaton, 2010; Ho, Gol-Guven, & Bagnato, 2012; McCormick et al., 2015; Mikelson, 2016; Phillips, 2014);
- increased student leadership opportunities (Bowman, 2013);
- lower teacher turnover and more effective teacher ratings (Ayscue, Frankenburg, & Siegel-Hawley, 2017; Jackson, 2009; Massey & Fischer, 2006);
- greater capacity for empathy, civic engagement, pluralistic orientations, and global citizenry (Bowman & Denson, 2012; Hurtado & Deangelo, 2012; McCormick et al., 2015; Phillips, 2014); and
- increased overall long-term health in school environment and into adulthood

(Ayscue, Frankenburg, & Siegel-Hawley, 2017; Bowman, 2013; Johnson, 2011; Kugler, 2002; Mickelson, 2016; Siegel-Hawley, 2012).

All of the results above are correlated with socioeconomic diversity in school assignment algorithms (Kamenetz, 2017; Loewenburg, 2016; Potter, 2017). Other "soft-skill" benefits to socioeconomic diversity are equally impressive, again across the spectrum of ability. For example, Fortune 100 companies briefed in Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin (2015) rank as "a business imperative" (Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin, p.11) the ability to work collaboratively across cultures, a common correlation to being schooled in diverse settings.

Wells, Fox, and Cordova-Cobo (2016) echo this finding: "The research legitimizes the intuition of millions of Americans who recognize that, as the nation becomes more racially and ethnically complex, our schools should reflect that diversity and tap into the benefits of these more diverse schools to better educate all our students for the twenty-first century" (p. 4).

Finally, many researchers link academic excellence and socioeconomic diversity to one of the 4 "big C's" in twenty-first century education: increased capacity for critical thinking.

Study after study reveals that "exposure to diversity enhances critical thinking and problem-solving ability" (Wells, Fox & Cordova-Cobo, 2016) as well as to increased "student satisfaction and motivation, general knowledge, and intellectual self-confidence" (2016, p. 9; see also Gilfoyle, 2015).

It is in the area of increased capacity for critical thinking, perhaps, where the important "how" of how diversity benefits all students is best demonstrated. As Deo (2011) finds, when abstract examples are tied to concrete examples from a diverse set of circumstances and cultural norms, the engagement and open-mindedness of critical conversations between diverse students flourish.

Antonio et. al. (2008) go even further to find that proactive efforts to disrupt cognitive function and implicit or explicit biases stimulate growth: they conclude that even the mere inclusion of difference and divergence in perspective leads to growth in student critical thinking and perspective-taking outcomes (also see Cunningham & Rious, 2014; Richeson, Trawalter, & Shelton, 2005; Wells, Fox & Cordova-Cobo, 2016).

Diversity promotes learning when classroom time spent in "robust classroom discussions … heightened dialogue and debate … multiple lenses … complex, more flexible thinking … and the wide-ranging and probing discussions that occur in diverse classrooms [that] help generate creative, high-quality solutions to problems" (Seigel-Hawley, 2012, p. 2; see also Page, 2008). Simply put, diversity forces students to challenge assumptions and imagine possibilities for divergent thinking, creating breakthrough and discovery—excellence found only through the diversity of perspectives.

Toward a Policy with Balance: Preparation, Presence, Principle

Although school boards bear the weight of guaranteeing a sound education for all students through school assignment, advocacy on a micro-level in each school community can demand such soundness. Discussions about race, socioeconomic status, and equity, about

privilege and principle are understandably difficult, but they are critical.

Transparency and intention

A first, essential step for all stakeholders involves transparency and intention from the bottom up. Advocates must both understand and consider the myriad demographic, educational, and political forces that impact diversity in school settings. School leaders must read and think deeply about these issues as they address concerns and decisions that face them each day, decisions that have both intended and unintended consequences on the students they lead.

A good example lies in the fact that, in recent decades, colleges and universities have had a more effective focus on promoting diversity by putting diversity criteria into their accreditation and quality ranking apparatus: if higher ed institutions are not diverse, they simply will not be highly ranked. During these same 25 years, by contrast, k-12 education has focused more on raising achievement and test scores: "this focus on student outcomes almost exclusively as the central measure of equal educational opportunity has, in the long run, led to less emphasis on the educational experiences of students … and thus, fewer efforts to support integration efforts" (Wells, Fox, & Cordova-Cobo, 2016, p. 6).

If diversity measures were added to the algorithm that decides which schools are equitable, excellent, or both, gains that diversity has enjoyed in higher education settings could be anticipated in k-12 settings as well. If advocates for diversity subscribe to updates from organizations like The National Coalition on School Diversity, or local and state think tanks that pinpoint specific regional concerns, they will know where to go, what questions to ask, and how best to address

inequities as the need for the most current and relevant information arises.

These organizations can also tease out important issues regarding the layered complexities of defining Socioeconomic Status (SES) to determine school assignment algorithms, keeping in mind that accurate SES profiles for the twenty-first century, for example, might include variables such as free and reduced lunch percentage, parental income and educational level, percentage of single parent households, percentage of home ownership, even eligibility for specific government programs (Siegel-Hawley, Frankenburg, & Ayscue, 2017).

Each district (even adjoining districts) may have different variables—so administrators and advocates simply cannot do it on their own or rely on their own paradigms, even localized and sensitized ones. Once school administrators and advocates gather this information and make intentional decisions with it, they can share it widely: information about student assignment should be abundant, clear, and accessible in order for parents to make informed decisions, informed public comment on assignment plans, and informed votes and petitions at the local and national level.

Informed presence and voice

Once this groundwork for advocacy has been laid, school administrators can join parents and child advocates at all levels to practice a next step—informed presence and voice. While school leaders and administrators exhibit many strengths to the public they serve, there can be very few more important in this century than being a consistent, informed advocate for diversity in schooling. What should be a given for one of the most diverse groups of students the United States has ever seen in its history of

public schooling is sadly not present at all in some of the national conversations we face today.

School superintendents and administrators would do well for themselves and their constituents, surely, to be known as an uncompromising presence for diversity, an unflinching advocate for all children. The foundational but fleeting principle of these stakeholders should be to conduct these conversations and policy-shaping sessions with integrity, intentionality, evidence-based decision making, and consensus-seeking.

Administrators also need to articulate early and often the central principle that advocating for all children is advocating for diversity in their school peers and experiences. If we must deal with labels, let's label "good schools" as ones that are defined by socioeconomic diversity and inclusion; from teacher ed programs to first-year teacher evaluations to principals' awards to national superintendents of the year, diversity efforts should be articulated, implemented, incentivized and celebrated.

Like-wise should parents be an uncompromising presence and voice for diversity: like-minded advocates should work together with their differing schedules and priorities to maintain visibility and activism provide an essential gatekeeping force, an army of volunteers who manage to keep issues surrounding diversity in schooling always on the table and part of the conversation affecting school policy. These voices should be heard broadly, on a range of inter-related topics.

In the twenty-first century, for example, Eaton (2010) reminds us that racial housing patterns, shifts in migration, even gentrification in urban settings are all factors in diversity affecting schooling, so parents and citizens can seize opportunities in choices and in buying patterns and in community conversations and gatherings of all descriptions to think, speak, and act in ways that intentionally insert the value each of us place on socioeconomic diversity. Not only students in schools but also adults in the communities and workplaces should be given equal status, should be encouraged to work toward common goals, and should experience the support of intergroup relationships. We can model our commitment and our values to others and for other generations in the everyday and the particular.

Celebration of situated and anecdotal
A final, crucial piece toward a practical, balanced method to promote diversity in schooling is perhaps a surprising, less obvious one, that of ownership and authentic celebration of the situated and the lived experience in schools that enjoy true diversity.

Important research has been done to suggest that the simple act of focusing on the day-to-day experiences of diverse populations in schools may be the missing link to massive academic gains: when children learn side by side and cooperatively and when those interactions are nurtured to produce "creativity, motivation, deeper learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills "(Wells, Fox, & Cordova-Cobo, 2016, p. 15; see also see Bowman & Denson, 2012), all students at all income levels can increase cognitive function along with dispositions of empathy, social justice, inclusion, civic engagement, and leadership in local and global contexts.

Equally in need of celebration is the growing list of intellectual benefits of diversity as backed by research; if parents and advocates celebrate these benefits as passionately as they celebrate academic gains, if they demand more

emphasis on these benefits and less emphasis on testing, for example, we can shift the conversation.

As a qualitative researcher who studies autobiography, narrative, and reflection, I still hear whispers about what is/is not research based on the situated and contextual nature of schooling.

Let me assure anyone with a great story to tell about how diversity was championed in a district, about how children were positively affected in a school that enjoys diversity, how a conversation or Socratic seminar or critical five minutes of conflict was forever shaped by the context of the diverse people in the situation: we have a data point to create.

Hard conversations or layered concepts like diversity are just that—they are hard, they are layered, they are complex, they are contextual. When viewed in light of 50 years of research—varied, robust, and broad—AND with the realization that simple changes can have large and far-reaching returns in the lives of our students, the case for socioeconomic balance in schooling seems strong and, indeed, fairly obvious.

As obvious and right and sensible as socioeconomic balance in schooling seems, it remains equally as layered and intractable. Even with the cloud of witnesses represented here, making the case may not be easy.

Nevertheless, the goal of equipping and transforming not one, not 100, but ALL children in a district—creating education for the best as the best education for all—must be a primary yardstick.

Author Biography

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The *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* is a refereed, blind-reviewed, quarterly journal with a focus on research and evidence-based practice that advance the profession of education administration.

Mission and Scope

The **mission** of the Journal is to provide peer-reviewed, user-friendly, and methodologically sound research that practicing school and district administrations can use to take action and that higher education faculty can use to prepare future school and district administrators. The Journal publishes accepted manuscripts in the following categories: (1) Evidence-based Practice, (2) Original Research, (3) Research-informed Commentary, and (4) Book Reviews.

The **scope** for submissions focuses on the intersection of five factors of school and district administration: (a) administrators, (b) teachers, (c) students, (d) subject matter, and (e) settings. The Journal encourages submissions that focus on the intersection of factors a-e. The Journal discourages submissions that focus only on personal reflections and opinions.

Copyright

Privacy
The names and e-mail addresses entered in this journal site will be used exclusively for the stated purposes of this journal and will not be made available for any other purpose or to any other party. Please note that the journal is available, via the Internet at no cost, to audiences around the world. Authors' names and e-mail addresses are posted for each article. Authors who agree to have their manuscripts published in the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* agree to have their names and e-mail addresses posted on their articles for public viewing.

Ethics
The *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* uses a double-blind peer-review process to maintain scientific integrity of its published materials. Peer-reviewed articles are one hallmark of the scientific method and the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* believes in the importance of maintaining the integrity of the scientific process in order to bring high quality literature to the education leadership community. We expect our authors to follow the same ethical guidelines. We refer readers to the latest edition of the APA Style Guide to review the ethical expectations for publication in a scholarly journal.

Upcoming Themes and Topics of Interest
Below are themes and areas of interest for publication cycles.
1.   Governance, Funding, and Control of Public Education
2.   Federal Education Policy and the Future of Public Education
3.   Federal, State, and Local Governmental Relationships
4.   Teacher Quality (e.g., hiring, assessment, evaluation, development, and compensation of teachers)
5.   School Administrator Quality (e.g., hiring, preparation, assessment, evaluation, development, and compensation of principals and other school administrators)
6.   Data and Information Systems (for both summative and formative evaluative purposes)
7.   Charter Schools and Other Alternatives to Public Schools
8.   Turning Around Low-Performing Schools and Districts
9.   Large scale assessment policy and programs
10.   Curriculum and instruction
11.   School reform policies
12.   Financial Issues

Submissions
Length of manuscripts should be as follows: Research and evidence-based practice articles between 2,800 and 4,800 words; commentaries between 1,600 and 3,800 words; book and media reviews between 400 and 800 words. Articles, commentaries, book and media reviews, citations and references are to follow the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, latest edition. Permission to use previously copyrighted materials is the responsibility of the author, not the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*.

Cover page checklist:
1. title of the article
2. contributor name(s)
3. terminal degree
4. academic rank
5. department
6. college or university
7. city, state
8. telephone and fax numbers
9. e-mail address
10. 120-word abstract that conforms to APA style
11. six to eight key words that reflect the essence of the submission; and
12. 40-word biographical sketch
13. identify if the submission is to be considered original research, evidence-based practice article, commentary, or book review

Please do not submit with headers or footers with page numbers. Rather than use footnotes, it is preferred authors embed footnote content in the body of the article. Articles are to be submitted to the editor by e-mail as an electronic attachment in Microsoft Word, Times New Roman, 12 Font.

Acceptance Rates
The *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* maintains of record of acceptance rates for each of the quarterly issues published annually. The percentage of acceptance rates since 2010 is as follows:

2012: 22%
2013: 15%
2014: 20%
2015: 22%
2016: 19%
2017: 20%

Book Review Guidelines
Book review guidelines should adhere to the author guidelines as found above. The format of the book review is to include the following:
- Full title of book
- Author
- Publisher, city, state, year, # of pages, price
- Name and affiliation of reviewer
- Contact information for reviewer: address, city, state, zip code, e-mail address, telephone and fax
- Reviewer biography
- Date of submission

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Publication Timeline

Issue	Deadline to Submit Articles	Notification to Authors of Editorial Review Board Decisions	To AASA for Formatting and Editing	Issue Available on AASA website
Spring	October 1	January 1	February 15	April 1
Summer	February 1	April 1	May 15	July1
Fall	May 1	July 1	August 15	October 1
Winter	August 1	October 1	November 15	January 15

Additional Information

Contributors will be notified of editorial board decisions within eight weeks of receipt of papers at the editorial office. Articles to be returned must be accompanied by a postage-paid, self-addressed envelope.

The *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* reserves the right to make minor editorial changes without seeking approval from contributors.

Materials published in the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* do not constitute endorsement of the content or conclusions presented.

The Journal is listed in Cabell's Directory of Publishing Opportunities. Articles are also archived in the ERIC collection. The Journal is available on the Internet and considered an open access document.

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AASA Resources

✓ Learn about **AASA's books program** where new titles and special discounts are available to AASA members. The AASA publications catalog may be downloaded at www.aasa.org/books.aspx.

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✓ The **AASA School Safety and Crisis Planning Toolkit**, available to members, is comprised of a set of online resources to assist school districts before, during and after a crisis. This package features a myriad of resources as well as a select group of safety leaders throughout the U.S. who are ready to provide peer-to-peer guidance about a variety of crises, including shootings, hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, fires, suicides and other major disruptions that come without notice. For additional information, visit www.aasa.org/toolkits.aspx.

✓ **AASA's Leadership Services Department** is centered on work that provides knowledge on critical issues facing the education community and the expertise to address them. The multitude of initiatives support superintendents and school system leaders at every career level, from those aspiring to go into administration to those whose work has made them champions for our public schools and children. For additional information on leadership opportunities and options visit www.aasa.org/Leadership-and-Professional-Development

✓ **Upcoming AASA Events**

AASA National Superintendent Certification Program (R*) Midwest 2021 Cohort, Feb.11-13, 2019, Stephen Murley, Lead Teacher, Los Angeles, Calif.

AASA 2019 National Conference on Education (R*), Feb. 14-16, 2019, Los Angeles, Calif.

*R (Registration required)