

# One Nation INDIVISIBLE

Stories From the Field

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## Not Your Father's Suburb

### *Race and Rectitude in a Changing Minnesota Community*

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In the mid-19th century, a pioneering East Coast writer named Elizabeth Ellet climbed aboard a steamboat, floated up the Minnesota River and recorded her uneventful, picturesque journey in the book, *Summer Rambles in the West*.

Minnesota's villages, its barren windswept lands and prairie grasses inspired long, florid descriptions of "magnificent" scenery that Ellet declared "unparalleled in the continent." In Chapter 8, Ellet glides by a hilly expanse—the "garden spot of the territory" she calls it—that she'd later be credited with naming: "Eden Prairie." It is a name that implies paradise and it is a place that Ellet had felt lucky to happen upon.

A century and a half later, in 2000, another pioneering woman found her way to Eden Prairie, Minnesota. She too believed she'd stumbled upon a kind of paradise.

Anisa Hashi, then 24 years old, had no ambitions to write a book, though surely her life experiences up to that time would have warranted one. She had only recently fled her native Somalia, settling first in a Kenyan refugee camp and then, like thousands of



Somalis before (and after) her, in the United States. Some of Hashi's acquaintances from Somalia had not long before her found contentment, safety and moderately affordable apartments in Eden Prairie, just outside Minneapolis. So Hashi figured she may as well start her new life there. Like nearly all Somalis, Hashi is a Sunni Muslim. This surely put her in the minority in her new city, where Christian

churches and blonde youth soccer and baseball players dot the landscape. But as Hashi went about life around town, wearing her hijab head scarf and her traditional long dresses, playing with her daughter at the park or browsing bookshelves at the Barnes and Noble, she encountered so many people who—unlike her—were white, but who—just like her—smiled a lot and made friendly small talk.

"I honest to God thought that I lived in the best place in America. Not just Minnesota, but Eden Prairie," Hashi recalls. "When I was out somewhere and coming back toward my apartment and I saw that 'Welcome to Eden Prairie' sign? Oh, I just felt so good, so comfortable, so happy to be coming home." In March, 2010, Hashi, by then the mother of two

girls, became a U.S. citizen. Once in a while, she still takes out her American passport, looks at her picture and smiles.

“I love America,” she says, “To be a part of a place where the country has said to me, ‘Yes, you belong with us, you are part of this place...’ It is just so wonderful.”

Then, several months later, paradise seemed to get a little lost.

In October of 2010, education officials in this affluent school district released a reorganization proposal drawn up by a committee of residents and parents. The proposed plan was designed to redistribute students so as to prevent underuse and overcrowding at the district’s elementary schools. It was also intended to reduce glaring and growing disparities in the racial and socioeconomic makeup between one school, where Somali, African American and lower income students were concentrated and three other elementary schools, which overwhelmingly enrolled white, middle class and affluent students. The plan would move the district from its idiosyncratic K-4th grade system to a more standard K-6 model, thereby reducing the number of transitions students would need to make during their school careers. About 1,000 students, including Hashi’s fourth grade daughter, were slated to change schools under the new plan.

“Eden Prairie suddenly got so ugly,” Hashi says. “It was so sad.”

Parents who opposed the plan fired predictable first shots in blogs, in letters to the newspaper editor, on Facebook and at the microphone during public hearings. Typically, opponents began by stating that “race” had nothing to do with their outrage. (All the

vocal opponents were white, as far as observers and school administrators saw.) Then, they tended toward hot-button rhetoric—“forced busing” and “social engineering”—to characterize a plan that essentially required about a tenth of the district’s students to leave well-funded schools with top-notch facilities and highly qualified teachers and instead attend other well-funded schools with top-notch facilities and highly qualified teachers.

“It sounds like liberal BS at it’s [sic] finest. Please don’t bus outsiders to Prairie View (Elementary School), we don’t want them here,” read one typical *Minneapolis Star Tribune* reader’s response to a story about the plan. And another: “I will not have my kids going to school with gang members and guns. This is liberalism [sic] at its best.”

Anisa Hashi did not like the effect that the plan would have on her family either. Her daughter loved her school, Forest Hills Elementary. Hashi had volunteered as a translator there before becoming a full time clinical lab scientist at a nearby hospital. Her experience at Forest Hills had even helped her gain fluency in English. Because Forest Hills drew

from the more affordable multi-unit apartment complexes, a far larger share of its students was of Somali descent than was the case at other schools. For Hashi, being around so many other Somali families made her comfortable. She’d also gotten to know, like and come to trust Forest Hills teachers and the “warm and incredibly welcoming” principal, Connie Hytjan.

“I never had any problems with the way I dress...All the teachers, I mean everyone, was awesome,” Hashi says. “And my daughter, she just loved it.”

The daughter of Hashi’s best friend, from Somalia, also attended Forest Hills. Hashi was thrilled that the two girls were growing up together, as native-born



American citizens and yet in close touch with their family's roots in eastern Africa.

"It was a shock through me when I found she was going to Cedar Ridge," Hashi recalls. "I knew everyone at Forest Hills...And Forest Hills was closer to my house...It was convenient in many ways for me. But then, I thought about it. And I realized that it was not about me. This is a community and it was about preparing children for a society that is changing."

Hashi still had to break the news to her daughter. "She asked me: 'Who else is going?' And I told her that I knew that one of her friends was going and that it looked like they would be in the same class and she said, 'Oh. Okay.' And that was pretty much it."

But elsewhere in the city, people were not adjusting well to the changes.

"It was like an alternate universe. It's like all of a sudden the [white] parents woke up and realized, 'These [Somali] people are here,' " Hashi says, still looking astonished a year later. "After this happened, it's different. You know, it maybe sounds crazy, but I didn't even feel this way after 9/11."

The deafening anger over minor adjustments to school boundaries attracted statewide and even national media attention to Eden Prairie. This city-suburb just 11 miles southwest of Minneapolis quickly became the poster child for the racially and culturally transforming American suburb.

"Old images of race and place are changing rapidly," writes the demographer William Frey, in his 2011 report, *Melting Pot Cities and Suburbs*. "The shifting social, economic and political structures of these places will challenge leaders...to understand and keep pace with the myriad implications..."

In other words, Eden Prairie is a harbinger of coming suburban storms. But what differentiates Eden Prairie from the dozens, if not hundreds, of places similarly situated, is that educators here refused to cave under pressure from an organized, privileged class who saw no reason to mess with a "neighborhood school"

organization that incorporated economic and racial segregation into its design. At a time when race, ethnic and class lines are intensifying in communities across the nation, Eden Prairie is instructive precisely because educators chartered and stuck to a different course.

The lessons we draw from Eden Prairie may determine our capacity to respond constructively to racial change in the new American suburb. The border wars provide more than just a chilling warning about bad things that can happen

when educators dare upset the status quo of a privileged class. Eden Prairie also demonstrates that courage, flexibility and adaptation may be the qualities educators in the changing American suburb need most of all. More than this, though, until states and national leaders affirm a vision of integration and clear plan for achieving it, forward thinking educators like Eden Prairie's will be left largely on their own and needlessly vulnerable as they face some of the most vexing challenges of our time.

It is not surprising that such a battle would erupt here and that it would play out around education. Eden Prairie, a generally friendly former farming town, has for a couple of decades now been an envied address, one of those places successful people move to "for the schools." This remains unchanged. What has changed is that it is no longer only white middle class families doing the moving. Back in 1960, just 2,000 people lived in what was back then an agricultural community. During the 1980s and early 90s, developers paved over much of the wild beauty that had so enchanted Elizabeth Ellet. The grain fields

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—Anisa Hashi,  
Eden Prairie parent

and orchards nearly vanished, too. The developers built big box stores and corporate office parks, created a warehousing district, mapped out opulent subdivisions, more modest and mixed income planned neighborhoods and, as well, a relatively small share of subsidized affordable housing. From 1960 to 2000, Eden Prairie’s population grew 3,000 percent. (Yes, 3,000 percent.) A decade later, in 2010, some 60,000 residents had spread themselves over Eden Prairie’s 32 square miles. Throughout all the frenetic build up, the city managed to retain some natural amenities that increase its appeal. Much of Eden Prairie is wetland that can’t be developed, lake shore and protected creek corridors.

In recent years, more families of Somali descent, African Americans and Latinos made their way here. By any standard, Eden Prairie remains an extremely affluent community. Its median household income is \$93,200, out-earning the typical Minnesota household by nearly \$40,000 a year. That said, the city’s poverty rate did double over a decade, from a modest three percent in 2000 to a bit less modest six percent in 2010. That year, the regional planning agency, Met Council, found that several communities, including Eden Prairie, while still more than 80 percent white, maintained several “minority-majority” census blocks where more than 50 percent of residents were people of color.

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“People always want to know: Why did Somalis come here? Why did Somalis come to Eden Prairie,

Minnesota? Well, it is not so complicated,” says Ahmed Jama, a father of three who owns a local language translation service. “Somalis moved from the city because we heard that the schools were good. Is that not what American people do?”

### An Educator’s Education

In the 1980s, the grind and grunt of yellow cranes and earthmovers was Eden Prairie’s ubiquitous soundtrack. People from Minneapolis, from St. Paul and from other regions around the state and even from other parts of the coun-

try had only just begun buying up the new houses, renting apartments and enrolling their kids in the city’s celebrated public schools.

Around this time, a soft-spoken 22-year-old St. Paul native named Melissa Krull had just graduated from the teacher-training program at nearby St. Cloud State University. From a couple of other good offers, Krull chose to take a job in Eden Prairie as a special education teacher. Her father had been in the real estate business, and had predicted that sleepy Eden Prairie would in the coming years morph into a sophisticated boom town, offering his daughter



the opportunity to pursue her career in a first-class school system. Melissa Krull, meanwhile, focused on the day-to-day. She loved working with elementary school students who had learning challenges, mental retardation or physical impairments. The students presented so much variation in personality, strengths

and interests. Krull loved getting to know each student and finding ways to reach and connect with every child, playing a role in the students' educational progress and in their relationships with the other kids. It was deeply rewarding work. No student was ever exactly like another. But nearly all of the students she taught in those early days were white. In the 1990s, though, Krull watched excitedly as enrollment not only increased, but as the city's cultural fabric grew more complex and diverse.

"That diversity I immediately viewed as a real plus for everyone," Krull recalls. "My parents had certainly instilled these values in me growing up, a value of and respect for different cultures, for empathy...I was never a great rabble rouser but we were raised with very strong values."

Eden Prairie's new diversity includes a mix of racial and ethnic groups, both native born and immigrants. As was a common trend across the nation in the late 1980s and early 1990s, African American and Latino families began moving out of Minneapolis and St. Paul to the surrounding suburbs. Meanwhile, Somali, Vietnamese and Hmong families also began migrating out of the Twin Cities to settle in suburban communities. Like immigrants across the nation, new Minnesotans too are now more frequently skipping the traditional urban leg of their journey and heading straight to suburbia. In Eden Prairie, the growing presence of Somali families is the most visible manifestation of demographic cultural change. This is not only because Somalis' numbers are larger than other cultural or racial groups (they are), but likely because they are more identifiable. Native Somalis' first language is, of course, that of their homeland: Somali. Women and girls from Somalia traditionally wear a headscarf and often, flowing, ankle-length dresses.

Somalis began arriving in Minnesota in significant numbers after fleeing an eviscerating civil war. The central government in this eastern African nation on the Indian Ocean collapsed in 1991 and fell into the hands of warring insurgents. Famine, drought and violence were commonplace. Schools, which had been government supported and free, shut down. Those Somalis who were able to escape the chaos, killing, hunger and thirst often hiked for days or weeks to refugee camps in Ethiopia or Kenya. Later, American service agencies and churches settled Somali refugees across the United States. Minnesota's Twin Cities region was a common destination for Somalis, in part because two major resettlement organizations—the Lutheran Church and Catholic Charities—have strong presences here. At the time of many resettlements, the 1990s, Minnesota's economy was strong, allowing refugees to find jobs in a variety of sectors. About 32,000

Somalis now live in Minnesota, with the vast majority in the Twin Cities region. Minnesota has largest share of Somalis of any state. About 1.1 million Somali refugees now live all over the world.

As Eden Prairie continued to develop and develop, school enrollment would peak at about 11,000 in the early 2000s. After more than two decades in the classroom, Melissa Krull had moved into the central administration, working in several positions, including the staff development director and later, assistant superintendent. In 2002, she took over as superintendent temporarily after the school board declined to renew her boss' contract. After a year of filling the district's top post, the school board unanimously decided not to bother searching for a superintendent. They hired Krull in 2003.

*"People always want to know: Why did Somalis come here? Why did Somalis come to Eden Prairie, Minnesota? Well, it is not so complicated. Somalis moved from the city because we heard that the schools were good. Is that not what American people do?"*

—Ahmed Jama, Eden Prairie parent

The early 2000s were a particularly challenging time for public school educators everywhere. The federal No Child Left Behind Act, signed into law in 2001, had created sanctions and forums of public shame for schools where students did not make “adequate yearly progress.” Though many states had for years already disaggregated their test scores by racial groups and by income levels, NCLB mandated that districts make the data publicly available.

NCLB forced Melissa Krull and other educators to take a much closer look at the differences in achievement levels between racial and ethnic groups and between students from lower income families and students from middle class families.

White middle class students were doing “just great,” she said. “But when you broke it down? African American kids, our Latino students, our lower income students were not anywhere near that level that the white, middle class students had reached.”

In the first days after the data came back, Melissa Krull recalls “losing a lot of sleep.”

“We just could not have this,” she said. “This was just not acceptable.”

In early 2003, Krull and her fellow Eden Prairie educators began what she calls “the journey” that led to shifts in school culture, a variety of supports for struggling students and, later, the controversial redrawing of school boundaries to reduce segregation. That was the year the school district, under its previous superintendent, joined a multi-district cooperative called the Western Metro Education Program (WMEP). Based in Minneapolis, WMEP came about as part of a court settlement from a lawsuit in which civil rights groups had charged that the vast inequalities and segregation between school districts violated the state constitution by delivering unequal educational oppor-

tunities. Under the settlement, the state also started a voluntary interdistrict choice program, “The Choice is Yours,” enabling low-income students from Minneapolis and St. Paul to attend schools in the suburbs. (11 districts participate, including Eden Prairie.) One of three similar “integration districts” in the state, WMEP also operates two magnet schools that draw a racially diverse student enrollment from both Minneapolis and its suburbs. WMEP sponsors numerous trainings and workshops for educators in its 13 member districts. Many of these focus on pedagogy and curriculum and practices that show promise in racially and culturally diverse educational settings.

Eden Prairie’s teachers and principals attended a variety of workshops offered through WMEP. Krull, other administrators and teachers were so impressed that they hired two organizations they’d worked with through WMEP—the California-based Pacific Educational Group and the New York-based National Urban Alliance—to consult directly with Eden Prairie.

Both groups help public school educators foster higher achievement by assessing and, if necessary, helping local educators alter prevailing school cultures, practices, policies and curriculum in response to an increasingly diverse student body. Some of the changes might be subtle. Perhaps teachers hang up more pictures of kids who actually attend the school as opposed to stapling up generic stock photos. School staff might validate students’ home language through signage and greetings and incorporate various family customs into discussions and curriculum. In workshops, facilitators invite educators to examine the unwitting biases they may carry into their teaching practice or that shape their expectations. Perhaps a white middle class teacher expects every parent to attend all conferences and help with book reports. Perhaps that same teacher becomes dismayed when a child fails to look adults in the eyes while speaking. Conversely, perhaps a teacher



Melissa Krull

places few demands upon and expects very little from students who come from immigrant families. Perhaps a teacher is too frightened to talk about students' varying cultures, particularly in a political climate that engenders fear of Muslims and immigrants. Teachers and principals in Eden Prairie were forced to ask themselves a series of questions. For example: Are our ideas, our rules, our expectations, born, at least in part, from a "white" or "middle class" or "racially inexperienced" perspective? And, how might we shift those perspectives, draw students out and harness the vast potential of growing diversity for all the students?

"This is what makes Melissa and many of the educators in Eden Prairie distinct," says Glenn Singleton, president of the Pacific Educational Group. "She was unwilling to begin conversations about the value of diversity and of equity if she wasn't going to follow all the way through. She hit the kind of political challenge that a lot of leaders would not be able to tolerate. But she could not tolerate staying in a space that harmed kids." Singleton developed PEG's "Beyond Diversity" seminars that draw from his and his colleagues' decades of experiences in school districts and too, from Singleton's book, *Courageous Conversations: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools*, co-authored with Curtis Linton.

After reflection and consultations with trainers and experts at Pacific Educational Group and the National Urban Alliance in New York, Eden Prairie's overwhelmingly white core of teachers and principals began to more deliberately develop curriculum that could be "differentiated," that is, presented orally, visually or via technology, to accommodate students' varying skill levels, learning styles and language proficiencies. In classrooms, they tried out newly learned techniques for talking about cultural difference in ways that encouraged conversation, respect and critical thinking. If a child said or did something unwittingly culturally offensive, teachers had learned how to confront that behavior in a constructive, rather than simply shaming, way.

The district also opened and staffed a new center where students, many of whose parents could not assist them with homework and many of Somali descent, could stay from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. On a typical evening, about 100 students headed to the center to finish homework, read or get extra help. In an effort to narrow what Krull terms an "enrichment gap," every elementary school now runs free after school programs offering students a multitude of choices including golf lessons, cooking lessons and homework help. Unlike many other districts that staff more informal after school programs with volunteers, Eden Prairie's program employs regular classroom teachers. Principals more consciously reached out to parents from a range of cultural backgrounds, rather than simply relying on the usual PTO organizers who tended to be white and affluent. Educators invested in Somali, Spanish and Vietnamese translators. They displayed signage in several of the 23 languages spoken by Eden Prairie's students, hung flags of many countries and placed cultural symbols on classroom shelves.

Much of the work in Eden Prairie, then, went on behind the scenes—in classrooms, teacher meetings and staff trainings—with carefully selected mentors. It got accomplished far more quietly than desegregation would. But it was all of a piece. Like her colleagues in the central office, and like many school principals and teachers who'd engaged in the long "journey" that shifted school culture and practice, Melissa Krull never viewed racial integration or socioeconomic integration as an end in and of itself. Rather, it was a route toward equity, a way of staying true to the school district's stated mission: "Educating for success in a diverse and changing world."

## The Heavy Duty Issue

Melissa Krull is not a "deep voiced, real loud, bold and in your face kind of educational leader," says Glenn Singleton, of PEG. "You look at her at first and she is slim and attractive and speaks softly, and you might think to look at her, even to talk with her

at first that this is not going to be the type of person to take on a heavy duty, big issue like school integration. But you'd be wrong. She is a person with very strong values, a very strong constitution."

It was numbers, again—another giant gap—that was stressing Melissa Krull out. The schools she and her colleagues were working so hard to make "equitable," and "welcoming" and "culturally relevant" were also, Krull says straight out, "segregated by race and by class."

The disparities between schools could be seen most starkly in the numbers from one school: Forest Hills Elementary, which Anisa Hashi's daughter had attended. In 2006, about 30 percent of students there were from low income families. Less than 4 miles to the west, Prairie View Elementary School drew students largely from the affluent, middle class and white subdivisions and older established homes in its designated attendance zone. Only 6 percent of students there were from low income families. This was also about the percentage of lower-income students at Cedar Ridge Elementary School.

Early that year, Nanette Missaghi, the district's integration program coordinator put together a report and PowerPoint presentation detailing the academic research about the educational harms of segregation and the academic benefits of desegregated schools. She had shown it to central office colleagues and later, to the school board. The findings were clear: Over decades, researchers had concluded that students of all racial and ethnic groups benefitted in the short-term in math, science and reading from attendance at desegregated and diverse—as opposed to high-poverty, nearly all black, or nearly all Latino—schools. Research also noted other benefits. For example, educators in economically, racially diverse schools were generally better able to counteract the well-documented negative effects that poverty has upon individual students, therefore registering far higher graduation rates than segregated schools. Benefits also showed up over the long-term. Students

who had attended racially diverse schools, researchers have concluded, tended to "perpetuate" desegregation by choosing diverse college campuses, neighborhoods and workplaces later in their lives.

But in 2007, the school board, to Krull's disappointment, decided to delay discussion about boundary changes. Just the mention of the possibility had inspired threats of lawsuits. Krull, Missaghi and many other educators, including some school principals, were disappointed. Meanwhile, an exhaustive facilities study revealed other challenges. Some of the district's elementary schools, it showed, were "underutilized"—in other words, they could potentially accommodate far more kids—while others were "overutilized," that is, starting to get crowded.

And just as Krull and other educators had warned, the socioeconomic disparities between elementary schools were continuing to widen. By 2010, more than 40 percent of students at Forest Hills qualified for free and reduced lunch and 21 percent had limited proficiency in English. Meanwhile, at the most affluent elementary school, Cedar Ridge, just 9 percent of students qualified for free and reduced lunch. With support from her central office colleagues and school principals, Krull initiated discussions about the socioeconomic imbalances again. She hoped to simultaneously solve under-use/over-use problems and move the district to the more streamlined K-6 organization. So, with the school board's blessing, Krull assembled a committee of parents and residents and asked them to develop boundary changes to resolve all the challenges she and her colleagues had identified. Committee members worked over the summer of 2010. Committee members presented a plan in the fall. "We thought we'd be well received," Krull remembers. "This plan was logical, sensible and fair. It had been developed by people in the community, with the overall community in mind."

The border war commenced.



## The Adult Problem

A new Facebook page soon popped up. It provided a forum not only for attacking Melissa Krull's "far left" "social engineering," but also for expressing envy of her svelte figure. A few people expressed their dislike of the superintendent's hairstyle. One common theory put forth on the page accused Krull of "conspiring" to reorganize for the sole purpose of securing a larger building for the elementary school her daughter attended. A YouTube video surfaced making the same accusation and featuring ominous background music befitting a heist film. Another adopted an apocalyptic Star Wars theme. The group "Yes for Neighborhood Schools" hired prominent Missouri lawyer John Munich, known for fighting against school desegregation. The group first threatened to sue over racial discrimination, even though the school assignment plan identified children by income level, in keeping with recent Supreme Court rulings. (No lawsuit was ever filed.) A widely disseminated document, issued anonymously and written in legalese, implied again that Krull's intention was to secure a larger, nicer building for her daughter's school. On one morning, about two dozen men and women lined up outside of Krull's office. They pumped fists. They held signs bearing Krull's name inside circles slashed by red. One read: "Send your child to Forest Hills!" (Krull's adopted daughter, born in Guatemala, attends the district's only magnet school, which uses a Spanish immersion curriculum.)

At public hearings—the district hosted seven of these well-attended events around the city—plan opponents often interrupted plan supporters, many of them of Somali descent, and cut off school administrators as they tried to speak and answer questions. Krull even had to take out a civil protection order against one parent, who had come into her office and

threatened to "do whatever it takes" to remove her from her job.

"The anger has been so disproportional to what is being discussed. There is this dog whistle language—'neighborhood schools and sense of belongingness,'" observes Bill Lapadat, a white parent of an 8th grader. He had supported the boundary change, and ran for school board but lost in November, 2011. "I know for a fact there were many people who did not speak out in favor of this change because they are afraid of backlash. They are afraid that backlash is going to happen to their kids in sports or in their friendships. I believe this [opposition] group is much smaller than they claim to be. It's just that these people are people of privilege and means."



## The Win

By a 4 to 3 vote, the school board in December, 2010 approved the plan to redraw attendance zones, close an intermediate school and redistribute fifth and sixth graders to the district's existing elementary schools under a new K-6 model. In spite of the hue and cry over "busing," the plan ended up slightly reducing the average amount of time a child spent on a bus ride—from about 20 to about 16 minutes.

In September, 2011, some six years after Eden Prairie's educators had reached consensus about the harm of growing racial and economic isolation, district administrators oversaw smooth implementation of this plan, which increased diversity in the city's elementary schools and reduced the isolation of low-income students of color at Forest Hills. Looking inside the city's schools in 2012, one finds orderly, bright and colorful classrooms, generally happy groups of active and engaged children, hallways advertising Read-a-Thons and Book Fairs, banks of shiny computers, children with varying skin tones eating, talking and goofing off in cafeterias and girls

in head scarves on playgrounds jumping rope with their white and Asian-American classmates. On playgrounds, in hallways and in classrooms, there is little evidence of the in-between—the adult-led fury that preceded implementation of the boundary change plan.

“That’s because integration is not a child’s problem,” says Somali parent Abdirashid Santur, who favors the new school assignment plan. “The children have no problems with integration. This is an adult problem.”

Anisa Hashi, whose daughter “adjusted in a day” to Cedar Ridge, agrees.

“It is time to let the children carry on because they do not have a problem with each other, with being together and sharing classrooms,” she says. “Let’s realize that we are all human beings in this community together now. Let’s remember that this is a *community*.”

## The Loss

About a week after the school reorganization plan went into effect, the opposition succeeded in pressuring the school board to buy out the eight remaining months left in Melissa Krull’s contract. A buyout usually implies that a school board cannot find any compelling, legally legitimate reason to fire a superintendent.

Melissa Krull, meanwhile, sits on her back porch on a Saturday afternoon. Undaunted by her recent unemployment, she says: “I would absolutely do this again... You don’t sign up for these jobs to do nothing. You sign up for them to do what you think is the best thing for kids and their educations.”

From the outside, at least at the end, it might have appeared that Melissa Krull was alone, that no one stood beside or behind her in favor of integrating or

reorganizing the schools. It was easy to forget that a majority of the board that now wanted Krull out had originally *supported* the boundary changes, if by a slim margin. And few in Eden Prairie seem to remember that the boundary changes had been recommended initially by a diverse committee of parents and residents, most of whom quickly faded far into the background once the battle lines were drawn. And numerous educators report that several elementary school principals had openly expressed to Krull and to several other administrators their support for the boundary changes, as had a core of teachers.

“I was a buffer between the [opposing] parents and the rest of the school organization. I just didn’t want our teachers and principals under that kind of fire. It wouldn’t have been good for the kids and so that was my role as I saw it,” Krull says now.

The opposing parents had lost the border war but had succeeded in removing

Krull, under whose leadership students in all racial groups had posted notable achievement gains. (Krull is quick to point credit for those improvements away from her and toward principals and teachers, and also to acknowledge the collaborations with Pacific Educational Group and National Urban Alliance.) Similarly, Krull credits her colleagues “on the ground, in the schools” for dramatically narrowing the “achievement gaps” between middle class students and low-income students and between white students and students of color. This was a goal she set long ago, back when the “gap” data of the early 2000s had kept Krull up at night.

“Melissa Krull realized that you cannot keep one group of people separate and isolated from the rest of the community,” says Ali Kofiro, a Somali parent who also supported the boundary changes. “All these children are the residents of the future. This is the next

*“You don’t sign up for these jobs to do nothing. You sign up for them to do what you think is the best thing for kids and their educations.”*

—Melissa Krull, former school superintendent, Eden Prairie, MN

generation of community members. No one is more important or should be more powerful than anyone else in getting an education. That's what Melissa Krull saw and that is why they showed her the door."

Reporters from the state's largest newspaper, the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, had always covered the border war with perfunctory objectivity. After Krull announced her imminent departure, though, the editorial board took a stand: "Melissa Krull is being shown the door—ironically—at the same time that statewide test results show that she's led her staff to do an exemplary job with students...It's troubling that what happened in Eden Prairie could have a chilling effect on other suburban superintendents and school boards that understand the value of desegregating schools."

## The Best Place to Live?

Much is made of Eden Prairie's recent #1 "Best Places to Live" distinction granted in 2010 by CNN's *Money* magazine. Lamppost banners advertise the honor. The city's official website touts the #1 status on its homepage. But upon entry, the community, such as it is, feels disordered, diffuse. There is no real center, at least not in the traditional sense of a walkable commercial thoroughfare, an identifiable heart, a "main drag," where people might theoretically shop, meet friends for coffee or a beer, take a Pilates class, or go to the library. Such a thing did once exist, along Eden Prairie Road, also known as County Road 4.

These days, "Eden Prairie Center" refers to a shopping mall, anchored by JC Penney, Target and Kohl's. "Eden Prairie Center" is owned and operated by the Chicago-based corporation General Growth Properties. Interstate 494 runs through the city's northeastern quadrant. Highways 5 and 212 traverse its middle and Highway 169 cuts along Eden Prairie's eastern edge. The Minnesota River forms a border to the south. Tanning salons, chain bagel shops and department stores sprout from concrete. The city

does maintain more than a hundred miles of walking and bike trails. But the highways, strip malls, congested thoroughfares and dense corporate office parks sit alongside vast stretches of the paved paths, making the whir and rumble of traffic and the odor of diesel fuel prominent features of leisure time.

The radical physical transformations inspired grumbling among residents over the years. But the brisk development also expanded a tax base from which to build a world-class public school system. In a context of such rapid growth, cultural change and seeming incoherence, schools potentially become indispensable binding agents for community cohesion. The capacity for that is diminished, Melissa Krull observes, if "you've got one racially identifiable, high-poverty school that's different, separated from all the others...when members of the next generation are effectively separated from each other during a really important developmental period." There is only one middle school and one public high school in Eden Prairie. Thus, all students—African American, Somali Muslim, Asian, Latino and white—eventually come together anyway. However, these schools are even larger than the elementary schools, hindering meaningful interaction. More than 3,000 students attend Eden Prairie's lavish high school. By adolescence, educators stress, stereotypes and cultural notions are often set and more difficult to change. "Better to lay that groundwork early," Krull says, concurring with educational research that demonstrates the same.

Public schools are the first places where migration patterns, adjustment challenges and cultural differences usually manifest themselves and too, where the potential from learning from diversity is likely the greatest. When Melissa Krull and her colleagues first took note of the demographic shifts in Eden Prairie, they immediately called upon Myron Orfield, a professor at the University of Minnesota School of Law, former state legislator and one of the nation's leading experts on the implications of racial and economic segregation in metropolitan America. For decades, Orfield had been collecting and crunching data on

Minnesota's demographic changes and had spoken regularly with other educators in similarly changing suburbs, both in Minnesota and across the country. In Eden Prairie, Orfield spoke with school board members and central office administrators about the changes in the Twin Cities region. He flashed colorful maps depicting the pockets of racial and economic segregation developing in Eden Prairie and in other suburbs like it. He talked about the need for communities to begin developing plans now to avoid worsening segregation, which, educational research shows, tends to have deleterious effects on education.

"I think the default position of school administrators, generally, is that they want to draw integrative boundaries," Orfield says. "They know it is good for the kids and they don't want one school to go off into the ditch." Not all local desegregation efforts have been as bruising as Eden Prairie's, Orfield points out. In 2010, educators in the increasingly diverse 4,300-student suburban district just west of Minneapolis, St. Louis Park, altered school boundaries as a way to reduce economic isolation and to save money. Some parents did indeed oppose the plan, but in the end school leaders were able to win broad-based support for their efforts.

Reducing and preventing segregation in schools promotes not just fairness and educational quality, Orfield and other points out. An integrated school can contribute to wider community prosperity. Otherwise, the well-documented downward spiral spins like this: Because of racially segregated housing patterns, school boundary lines coterminous with those patterns produce "racially identifiable" schools. For a host of reasons, schools that enroll substantial concentrations of low-income students tend to register lower achievement levels. The school develops a negative reputation within the larger community, likely in part because of racial prejudice and in part because of typically lower relative academic performance. Realtors then steer white middle class families away from that area and toward streets that feed into schools considered, rightly or wrongly, to be "good."

This intensifies school segregation and contributes to the social and economic isolation of identifiable populations—in this case, Somali, other black, Latino, Vietnamese and lower-income families—from the larger community. This separation creates the conditions for stereotypes and prejudice about people of color to grow stronger. Community cohesion erodes and in many cases, commercial interests disinvest and the problems associated with high levels of concentrated poverty—crime, for example, or declining home values—begin to emerge in an identifiable (and for people with the means, avoidable) area.

"It's very difficult to achieve integration one district at a time... The affluent residents don't tend to like it and they are powerful and they get mobilized," Orfield says, having observed the phenomenon several times around suburban Minnesota. Not all the backlash, he stresses, "is necessarily wickedly racial," but stems from the fact that "everyone wants to go to the so-called good schools." The events in Eden Prairie and in other districts Orfield has studied where administrators chose *not* to draw boundaries that create integration, demonstrate the need, he says, for a "metropolitan plan" and an "affirmative vision" that would create stably integrated schools and housing. Several years ago, Orfield's Institute on Race and Poverty released just such a plan for the Twin Cities region and he is working on another now. It called for several state policies and programs, including regional magnet schools near "high-density job centers" and changes to the operation of federal housing programs that exacerbate racial segregation.

Several months after the eruption in Eden Prairie, a 12-member bipartisan committee appointed by the state's education commissioner moved a step closer toward what Orfield, a committee member, calls an "affirmative vision" on integration. In February, 2011, the committee recommended to lawmakers that they create clear incentives for school districts that use voluntary desegregation efforts. It also recommended creation of a program, Achievement & Integration that would develop a new "integration

rule” that explicitly prohibits school segregation while also putting money into programs such as all-day kindergarten and college preparation efforts. The state’s existing “desegregation rule” identifies schools and districts in danger of becoming racially isolated and provides funding to help districts ameliorate segregation. However, the state has no real power to force communities to develop plans for preventing and eradicating segregation.

As Orfield had seen in other communities, the loudest public opposition to integration in Eden Prairie did indeed emerge most boldly from a few particularly privileged corners of the city, according to school administrators who kept track of complaints. This included the opulent gated country-club community called Bearpath, where \$2 and \$3 million homes are the norm. Another neighborhood known as the “Island” around picturesque Mitchell Lake, as well as the upper-middle class subdivision called “The Sanctuary,” became centers of opposition. Frequently, however, the same parents distraught over the loss of “neighborhood schools” threatened to pull their children from the system all together and drive their kids for longer distances to schools in less diverse neighboring districts. Despite the cozy wholesomeness that “neighborhood school” might conjure up, Eden Prairie elementary schools typically sit two miles from a student’s home and enroll about 600 students. According to school administrators, complaints came with particular frequency from parents whose children under the new plan would be newly placed in Forest Hills, the school enrolling by far the largest share of low-income students and of black students, most of them of Somali descent.

In April, 2011, an Eden Prairie Realtor (and plan opponent) asserted that housing values of homes in

the new Forest Hills zone would decline as a result of the re-mapping. “I had people just last night make an offer on a house on Serenity Lane,” Scott Carlston told a local reporter. “They had lived in Eden Prairie and were moving back, but they said they wanted [their child to go to] Cedar Ridge” and were upset when they were told that house was in the Forest Hills territory.



### “That” School

Forest Hills Elementary School sits back from Holly Road, at the foot of a knoll where a modest neighborhood of single-family homes, trees and well kept lawns begins. Outside, an American flag flaps in the breeze. Inside, a colorful mural greets visitors. In the painting, a racially diverse group of children, hooked into backpacks, walk up a path. A Somali girl in a hijab stands prominently at the front. A fellow path-walking girl of indeterminate ethnicity faces the Somali girl, smiling at her ebulliently.

The headline “SUCCESS STORY” shouts from a framed newspaper article on a wall near the principal’s office. In 2011, a reporter from *The Star Tribune* wrote this glowing feature about Forest Hills’ success in adapting to the needs of its “unique demographic.” As did students in the district as a whole, students at Forest Hills vastly improved their performance on state tests in recent years. Several of Forest Hills’ methods and programs showed so much promise in narrowing the achievement gap between poor and middle class students that district administrators this year replicated them in Eden Prairie’s far more affluent and higher achieving elementary schools. This included the S.M.A.R.T. Room—it stands for Stimulating Maturity through Accelerated Readiness Training—where kindergarteners and first graders grapple across overhead bars and jump, spin

and roll. It looks like indoor recess. However, the seeming mayhem represents the integration of the most rigorous recent research on child brain development. This research suggests that childrens' brains become prepared for tasks through sensory experience—by touching things and moving their bodies. The overhead ladder, for example, exercises students' eyes to move “as a team”—a crucial foundation for reading. Studies also suggest that jumping while repeating letters or sounds or while spelling helps knowledge take root in a child's brain. Several years ago, educators at Forest Hills began offering free after school activities through its “Campus Connections” program. These activities include homework and extra academic help but also go beyond it, including such activities as golf and choir, with all of the classes taught by school staff. A bus provides transportation home for kids who take part. (Ninety-two percent of Forest Hills students participated last year.) The goal here is to provide all students—not just those whose families can afford it—access to the type of high-quality enrichment activities that research links to improved school performance. Versions of the Forest Hills program began in all elementary schools in 2011.

In the fourth week of classes at Forest Hills, the children walking the halls, or working out math equations or sounding out new words, seem unfazed by all the moving and transitioning that nearly half of them have accomplished. Pictures of students and teachers decorate classroom doors and hallways. Each locker carries a student-drawn name label: Carolyn, Nurudi, Paige, Amal. It is an organized but playful place where teachers talk in soft tones. It features typically wholesome suburban elementary school events: In September, a local firefighter drove a truck to the school and detailed home safety precautions to kindergarteners. Officer Jim from the police department talked with first graders about how to stay safe and “be good citizens.”

“I like it here,” says Kevin, a third-grader who had attended another elementary school in the district the

previous school year. “The gym teachers, the art teacher, the math teacher, they are all nice...” A Somali girl who had attended Forest Hills since kindergarten and an Asian girl who is new to the school hug each other, their cheeks pressed. They saunter down the hall, back to class, their arms hooked around each other's shoulders.

On the expansive playground, kids of all races and ethnicities swing hula hoops around skinny hips, and push each other on the swings. A teacher points toward the sky, helping the children spot the hawk circling overhead. Children chase each other and squeal. There are no outcasts, no race-based groupings. Kevin dashes around from group to group, taking a turn swinging, hula hooping and jumping rope. A dramatic spray of red sumac and wispy beige prairie grasses make a natural border between the playground and a manicured soccer field just beyond.

If all this welcoming and honoring of diversity sounds too soft in our data-driven era of accountability, let's look at the hard data.

In 2008, only 49 percent of Forest Hills' black students passed the state-administered tests in reading. Three years later, in 2011, 73 percent of black students passed. Latino students also made gains, with 44 percent passing in 2008 and 55 percent passing in 2011. White students held steady, with 87 percent passing in 2008 and 89 percent passing in 2011. Students designated as having “limited English proficiency” (LEP) posted dramatic improvements. In 2008, no LEP students were able to pass the state's reading test. By 2011, the share of Forest Hills' LEP students passing the reading test had grown to 57 percent. Students from families that earn low incomes demonstrated similarly striking progress. In 2008, 45 percent of such students passed the state's reading test; just three years later, 64 percent had passed.

In recent years, educators say that the school principal, Connie Hytjan, and the teachers at Forest Hills had zeroed in on the needs of individual students by looking at test score data, listening to the observa-

tions of teachers, and scouring homework and classwork to identify patterns or clues to students' weaknesses and strengths.

"These are the most dedicated educators you could ever imagine," says Nanette Missaghi, the integration program coordinator. "And (the principal, Connie Hytjan) is just an exemplary leader. Phenomenal."

Missaghi and Krull credit Hytjan with a laser-like focus on each child, her flexibility in "differentiating" curriculum to boost particular skills for particular kids, and her success in reaching out and involving parents, particularly in immigrant families, who had previously felt uncomfortable in the public schools.

So, if things were going so well at Forest Hills, then why change the composition of its enrollment? There are several reasons.

First, Forest Hills' test score improvements, while promising, had endured for just a few years up to that point and educators worried about whether they could be sustained, say, after a change in leadership or if a core of experienced teachers left. Demographic forecasts predicted the school would, in very short order, be enrolling even more low-income students if boundaries were not adjusted.

Second, it also was exceedingly clear that Forest Hills' demographics were, as Myron Orfield had predicted, fueling a negative perception of the school, in spite of whatever test scores students might register. In recent years, district records show that white middle class families had indeed opted to leave Forest Hills, choosing private school or else enrolling in another district under the state's open enrollment policy. This trend coincided with a steady increase in the numbers of students from immigrant families, African American students and students from families with low incomes enrolling in the school.

"Forest Hills is an excellent school. It had also become known as the Somali school," says Nanette Missaghi. "Forest Hills became known among some

people as 'that' school. It wasn't accurate, nor was it fair. But it was there."

Third, as Glenn Singleton puts it, the educators in Eden Prairie had come to understand that "white kids need to be able to function in experiences of confusing color—and kids of color need to be able to function in whiteness." Thus, the obvious thing to do would be to counteract the structures that exacerbate segregation and then create a school assignment plan that allows for more interaction between students of various backgrounds.

Ahmed Jama, the Somali parent of three, had listened to all the arguments for and against the boundary plan. He read the academic research about the effects of school diversity and harms of segregation. And in time, Jama became one of the most vocal proponents of the integration plan, even though he also regularly touted the improvements at Forest Hills, where large shares of Somali students went to school.

"All children benefit from integration," Jama says. "I know many Somali families who are happy with Forest Hills but do not know people in our Somali community who are in favor of segregation. That is not acceptable and it is not a good policy for a community, for a country."

## Opening Up

Before the boundary changes, the share of students qualifying for free lunch had varied by as much as 33 percentage points between regular (non-magnet) elementary schools in Eden Prairie. After the remapping, in 2012, the largest variance between the schools was 15 percentage points.

Administrators had projected that the disparities would be reduced far more than they actually were. But educators expect that over time, families moving into the middle class areas of the new Forest Hills zone will opt to send their children to Forest Hills, thereby reducing the racial and economic disparities between buildings over time. (The share of students

of color has increased at all the elementary schools except at Forest Hills, where the share of white students increased by about 4 percentage points.)

Enrollment in Eden Prairie's schools declined by about 300 students in 2011. Administrators had projected a loss of about 150 students through attrition, as enrollment has been declining in the district and kindergarten classes getting smaller. But the unexpected loss of 118 elementary school students, administrators suspect, is likely due, at least in part, to parents putting their kids elsewhere to avoid their newly assigned school, or else to avoid attending the same school that in 2011 began enrolling more low-income students and students of color.

As Myron Orfield notes, Eden Prairie has some characteristics crucial to creating stable and equitable integrated schools over the long term. Its tax base is healthy. Its housing stock is diverse. Educators have proven their willingness to reexamine and change their policies, practices, curriculum and school cultures in response to demographic change. Local politics, however, may pose the biggest challenge, at least in the short term. In November, 2011, four candidates strongly supported by parents who had been opposed to the boundary changes, won the four open seats on Eden Prairie's 7-member school board. As of February, 2012, the new board has made no moves yet to overturn boundary changes and it is not clear that it will. On their still-active Facebook page, opposing parents now regularly ridicule "diversity training" offered through Pacific Educational Group and the National Urban Alliance and suggest that the schools' partnerships with the organizations be severed.

The border war's most public casualty was Melissa Krull, who at age 51 is spending some newly acquired free time designing a program that would bring school leaders and national experts together to develop state and national level policies and re-prioritize funding to help suburban educators avoid racial and economic segregation. Achieving integration, though, she stresses, "must" be coupled with

the "re-imagining" of suburban schools that are more responsive to children of color, English language learners and lower-income students. Krull says that during the border wars she felt bolstered by the numerous supportive phone calls, emails and private notes from peers across Minnesota and from local parents, particularly from the Somali community. At the same time, Krull says, she understands why nearly all those same people "were also too scared" to go to the microphone and express their opinions in a "climate of fear and anger." Krull hopes that in the coming years, she can help generate "a climate of public support for equity-minded suburban educators," and a "strong network of good people who can learn from each other and stand together when the going gets tough."

"My feeling is, if we can't get this right, if we can't create equitable, diverse schools that look like society looks today? Where everyone has the opportunity to succeed?" Krull says, "I worry that we aren't going to be able to do much to benefit the next generation at all."

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Photo of Melissa Krull, reprinted with permission, the *Eden Prairie News*.

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*"Stories from the Field" is an occasional publication of One Nation Indivisible. To share a story from the field about efforts to create, sustain or improve racially, culturally or linguistically integrated schools, neighborhoods or social institutions, please write to Susan Eaton: [seaton@law.harvard.edu](mailto:seaton@law.harvard.edu)*

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