



***The National Coalition_{on}
School Diversity***

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**DO SCHOOL CHOICE PROGRAMS
CONTRIBUTE TO THE RESEGREGATION
OF AMERICAN SCHOOLS?**

CASEY COBB

In general, controlled school choice policies that aim to integrate schools along the lines of race or ethnicity and socioeconomic status are most often successful in achieving that goal. Unregulated systems of school choice, however, tend to exacerbate school segregation (Cobb & Glass, 2009).

SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

School choice programs differ in the extent to which decisions over student assignments are regulated. The simplest distinction separates “controlled” school choice and “unregulated” school choice plans. Controlled school choice attempts to desegregate or integrate schools to promote more equitable peer environments. Numerous research studies point to the harmful influences of minority and class-based isolation endemic in so many of America’s schools as a result of residential segregation. At the same time, research also shows the benefits of racially and economically integrated schools that help foster cross-racial understanding, enhance critical thinking skills and academic achievement, and promote better life opportunities (Johnson, 2019; Linn & Welner, 2007; Mickelson & Nkomo, 2012; Orfield, Frankenberg, & Garces, 2008).

Controlled school choice programs consider a variety of student and school characteristics with the ultimate goal of balancing school enrollments by race, family wealth, and student achievement (Frankenberg, 2018; Orfield, 2013). School districts that are under court orders to desegregate still may consider the race of individual students to achieve their goals. Even under court orders to desegregate, many modern-day plans rely on voluntary participation by families. Such plans often involve magnet schools (i.e., special interest schools such as the arts or science)

designed to attract students from diverse backgrounds. However, there is an important distinction between court-ordered versus voluntary integration plans.

Districts that are not legally mandated to desegregate may—voluntarily—design school choice plans to foster integration. Voluntary school choice programs were once freely able to consider the race of individual students who chose to participate. But, a closely divided Supreme Court decision in 2007 (*Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*) represented a major setback for voluntary student integration plans. The Court limited the use of individual race-based considerations in assigning students to schools. The Court’s ruling pressured districts with voluntary racial integration plans to either abandon them or attempt to desegregate by using neighborhood-based racial data or race-neutral characteristics, such as family income (Anderson & Frankenberg, 2019). Unfortunately, race-neutral policies are not very effective at achieving racial integration (Siegel-Hawley, Frankenberg, & Ayscue, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

Charter Schools and Segregation

Charter schools operate by and large under conditions of unregulated school choice. Although some state charter school policies (such as those in California) encourage charter schools to strive for racial diversity—a goal made easier by their lack of traditional school attendance boundaries—this is rarely monitored by either the schools themselves or state agencies. Consequently, as several studies have shown, most charter schools end up more racially and economically homogeneous than the surrounding traditional public schools (Bifulco & Ladd, 2007; Cobb & Glass, 1999, 2001; Frankenberg, Siegel-



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Hawley, & Wang, 2011; Kotok et al., 2017). Two different charter school demographic profiles can be easily recognized: charter schools that predominantly serve students of color in urban communities, and charter schools that enroll predominantly White students, particularly in racially diverse communities. The latter scenario is strongly suggestive of “White flight” or “White exodus” where parents leave racially diverse schools so that their children can attend schools that are less diverse, more racially homogeneous. Research that examines parental preferences and decision-making in schools attests to this phenomenon (e.g., Billingham & Hunt, 2016). White flight was common during the era of court-ordered desegregation; but as these integration efforts waned, White flight was replaced by other more subtle means of achieving the same ends.

Research is mixed on the enrollment of low-income students in charter schools. Some studies reported that charter schools enroll more poor students than nearby traditional public schools (Carnoy et al., 2005; Epple, Romano, & Zimmer, 2016) while others found lower proportions of poor students relative to nearby traditional public schools (Hoxby, Murarka, & Kang, 2009; Saporito, 2003; Tuttle et al., 2010). Finally, there is consistent evidence that charter schools sort students in other ways. While a very small number of charter schools aim to serve specific subpopulations, charter schools on the whole under-enroll English language learners and students with disabilities (Heilig et al., 2016; Mavrogordato & Harris, 2017). A new elite type of charter school has been recognized by Brown and Makris (2018), who referred to them as “prestige” charter schools because they disproportionately serve students from advantaged backgrounds.

Intra- and inter-district open enrollment policies have also been found to increase social stratification (Holme & Richards, 2009). These programs are generally unregulated, and those that aspire to promote integrated schools have been hamstrung by the 2007 *Parents Involved* Supreme Court decision. For instance, a 2009 study of race-neutral choice policies in Durham, North Carolina, found that they worsened school racial segregation (Bifulco, Ladd, & Ross, 2009). The researchers' analysis of parent choice patterns revealed that White, middle, and upper-middle class parents found ways to enroll their children in the highest performing schools irrespective of school choice policy. Studies of New York City's competitive school choice plans in 2013 and 2018 revealed similar results (Roda & Wells, 2013; Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2018).

The demographics of student enrollments in school voucher and neovoucher (e.g., tuition tax credits, education savings accounts) plans may be regulated depending on the state or city policy they operate under. Most conventional school voucher programs limit participation to low-income families or students with disabilities. Neovoucher programs, such as education tax credits and education savings plans, run the gamut from virtually no regulation to some restrictions based on family income. A 2017 analysis of Louisiana's voucher program, which allows low-income and mostly students of color from low-performing public schools to attend a private school, found that a large majority of voucher students reduced racial isolation of the public schools that they left but marginally increased segregation in the private schools they attended (Egalite, Mills, & Wolf, 2017). Another study done in 2010 estimated the effects of a universal voucher program in California based on voting data

from a statewide ballot initiative (Brunner, Imazeki, & Ross, 2010). The researchers found that White parents of children in public schools were more supportive of the voucher program if their children attended schools with high percentages of non-White students; this was also true for non-White households with children in public schools.

CONCLUSION

In sum, the evidence shows that if school choice programs cannot or do not pay attention to social class and race, they generally increase segregation among schools. That is, racially and ethnically diverse schools become less diverse under unregulated choice plans. Parents who enjoy social and economic advantages manage to maintain those advantages, especially in unregulated school choice programs. School choice policies consistently provide an advantage to the dominant cultural group (Cobb & Irizarry, 2020). As one education scholar recognized:

. . . in choice systems advantage-seeking parents are able to use their relevant capitals to negotiate diverse forms of provision and fuzzy rules of access. In this sense school choice may be considered as a class strategy, a mechanism for reproducing social advantage, a means of "doing" class (cf. Ball 2003) in a very practical way. (Ball, 2003, 83, from Ball & Nikita, 2014).

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