

SCHOOL CHOICE

ISSUES

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IN DEPTH



FREEDOM FROM RACIAL BARRIERS:

The Empirical Evidence on Vouchers and Segregation

By Greg Forster, Ph.D.

OUR CHALLENGE TO YOU

Our research adheres to the highest standards of scientific rigor. We know that one reason the school choice movement has achieved such great success is because the empirical evidence really does show that school choice works. More and more people are dropping their opposition to school choice as they become familiar with the large body of high-quality scientific studies that supports it. Having racked up a steady record of success through good science, why would we sabotage our credibility with junk science?

This is our answer to those who say we can't produce credible research because we aren't neutral about school choice. Some people think that good science can only be produced by researchers who have no opinions about the things they study. Like robots, these neutral researchers are supposed to carry out their analyses without actually thinking or caring about the subjects they study.

But what's the point of doing science in the first place if we're never allowed to come to any conclusions? Why would we want to stay neutral when some policies are solidly proven to work, and others are proven to fail?

That's why it's foolish to dismiss all the studies showing that school choice works on grounds that they were conducted by researchers who think that school choice works. If we take that approach, we would have to dismiss all the studies showing that smoking causes cancer, because all of them were conducted by researchers who think that smoking causes cancer. We would end up rejecting all science across the board.

The sensible approach is to accept studies that follow sound scientific methods, and reject those that don't. Science produces reliable empirical information, not because scientists are devoid of opinions and motives, but because the rigorous procedural rules of science prevent the researchers' opinions and motives from determining their results. If research adheres to scientific standards, its results can be relied upon no matter who conducted it. If not, then the biases of the researcher do become relevant, because lack of scientific rigor opens the door for those biases to affect the results.

So if you're skeptical about our research on school choice, this is our challenge to you: prove us wrong. Judge our work by scientific standards and see how it measures up. If you can find anything in our work that doesn't follow sound empirical methods, by all means say so. We welcome any and all scientific critique of our work. But if you can't find anything scientifically wrong with it, don't complain that our findings can't be true just because we're not neutral. That may make a good sound bite, but what lurks behind it is a flat rejection of science.

FREEDOM FROM RACIAL BARRIERS: THE EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE ON VOUCHERS AND SEGREGATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report collects the results of all available studies using valid empirical methods to compare segregation in public and private schools, both in general and in the context of school voucher programs. Examining the widespread claims that private schools have high segregation levels and vouchers will lead to greater segregation, this report finds that both assertions are empirically unsupported. The existing empirical research indicates that segregation levels in private schools are not substantially different from those in public schools when examined at the school level; that private schools are actually less segregated than public schools when examined at the classroom level; and that private schools participating in voucher programs in Milwaukee, Cleveland and Washington D.C. are much less segregated than public schools. While these findings are descriptive rather than causal, they are sufficient to show that the claims made by opponents of voucher programs are without any empirical foundation.

This report finds:

- There have been seven studies comparing segregation levels in public schools and voucher-participating private schools using valid empirical methods.
- Milwaukee has had a voucher program since 1990. Four valid empirical studies find that the voucher-participating private schools are much less segregated than Milwaukee public schools.
- Cleveland has had a voucher program since 1996. Two valid empirical studies find that the voucher-participating private schools are much less segregated than Cleveland public schools.
- Washington D.C. has had a voucher program since 2004. The only valid empirical study of the program finds that voucher-participating private schools are much less segregated than Washington's public schools.
- There have been three studies comparing segregation levels in public and private schools generally using valid empirical methods.
- Two of these studies examine data at the classroom level, which is the preferable level of analysis. They indicate that private school classrooms are less segregated than public school classrooms. Public schools are more likely to employ practices that have the effect of segregating students of different races into different classrooms, such as ability tracking and within-school magnet programs. This helps explain why students in public schools have a substantially more segregated classroom experience than students in private schools.
- A third study, which has a more comprehensive data set than the other two studies but which is only able to look at schools rather than individual classrooms, finds that segregation is slightly higher in private schools than in public schools. The size of the disparity identified in this study is so small that it is unlikely a reasonable observer would consider it to be a substantial difference.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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His research has appeared in the peer-reviewed publications *Teachers College Record* and *Education Working Paper Archive*, and his articles on education policy have appeared in the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Education Next*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and numerous other publications. He is co-author of the book *Education Myths: What Special-Interest Groups Want You to Believe about Our Schools - and Why It Isn't So*, from Rowman & Littlefield.

He received a Ph.D. with Distinction in political science from Yale University in 2002 and a B.A. *summa cum laude* from the University of Virginia in 1995. His book *John Locke's Politics of Moral Consensus* was published by Cambridge University Press in 2005.

ABOUT THE FRIEDMAN FOUNDATION



The Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation, dubbed “the nation’s leading voucher advocates” by the *Wall Street Journal*, is a non-profit organization established in 1996. The origins of the foundation lie in the Friedmans’ long-standing concern about the serious deficiencies in America’s elementary and secondary public schools. The best way to improve the quality of education, they believe, is to give all parents the freedom to choose the schools that their children attend. The Friedman Foundation builds upon this vision, clarifies its meaning to the public and amplifies the national call for true education reform through school choice.

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INTRODUCTION

For more than 50 years, it has been one of the major policy goals of the U.S. education system to reduce segregation levels in public schools. However, even after the removal of legal barriers to integration, the gradual enlightenment of public opinion on racial matters and decades of enormous efforts to make school integration a reality, America's schools still are heavily segregated by race. While many factors are at work, this is mainly a result of residential segregation. For various reasons, Americans tend to live in racially homogeneous neighborhoods, and this fact is reflected in school attendance patterns.

It often is claimed that private schools are heavily segregated by race and that school vouchers, which allow parents to use their portion of government education funding at the public or private school of their choice, lead to greater segregation. U.S. Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr. of Illinois claims that “the underlying political foundation and dynamic of the [voucher] movement is avoidance of racial integration.”¹ Hugh Price of the Urban League says vouchers “will wind up subsidizing segregation.”² David Berliner of Arizona State University, a prominent defender of the public school monopoly, declares that “vouchers add another means to segregate our citizens, this time using public money.”³ Berliner has even accused vouchers of leading to genocide: he testified to the New Mexico state legislature that “voucher programs would allow for splintering along ethnic and racial lines. Our primary concern is that voucher programs could end up resembling the ethnic cleansing now occurring in Kosovo.”⁴

These claims are unfounded. This report collects the results of all available studies that use valid empirical methods to compare segregation in public and private schools. It finds that the claims made by voucher opponents are empirically unsupported. The existing empirical research indicates that segregation levels in private schools are not substantially different from those in public schools at the school level; that private schools are actually less segregated than public schools at the classroom level; and that private schools participating in voucher programs are much less segregated than public schools.



**WHY WOULD VOUCHERS
REDUCE SEGREGATION?**

WHY WOULD VOUCHERS REDUCE SEGREGATION?

The argument that vouchers will lead to greater segregation is frequently heard, although it is not frequently checked against the available evidence to see if its claims are true. On the other hand, it has been difficult for the argument that vouchers will not increase segregation to get a hearing. As a result of this one-sided public discussion, many people tend to dismiss out of hand the empirical evidence showing that private schools in voucher programs are actually less segregated than public schools. People have difficulty accepting empirical evidence that they don't find plausible, and as long as they only hear one side of the voucher debate regarding segregation, they don't find the evidence showing lower levels of segregation in private schools to be plausible. If we first consider the reasons why vouchers might be expected to reduce segregation levels, this will facilitate a more fair evaluation of the available evidence.


In the current government monopoly system, school attendance is determined by where people live. This makes it especially difficult for public schools to avoid reproducing the segregation that arises from housing patterns. Widespread residential segregation virtually ensures that the public school system will remain heavily segregated in spite of all efforts to the contrary.

Efforts to desegregate public schools by

busing students over long distances every day have not been successful. Busing is very unpopular with white and minority families alike, even when those families desire integration.⁵ This is primarily because busing is very expensive and it is burdensome for the families, who may have to get their children up before dawn and wait until evening for their return. Parents cannot be legally required to bus their children across municipal lines, so some families, specifically those with the financial means, escape from burdensome busing policies by moving to the suburbs.

The other major approach to public school desegregation has been “magnet school” and “public school choice” policies. The idea behind this approach is to let parents choose which public schools to attend, in the hope that this will break down the geographic barriers that cause segregation in public schools. But these efforts also have failed to generate sufficient migration of students across geographic lines. This is not to say that magnet schools and public school choice are necessarily bad policy – they have other benefits and drawbacks independent of their effects on segregation. However, it must be acknowledged that the available evidence does not provide much support for the theory that they can substantially reduce segregation.⁶ The public school system doesn't seem to be able to offer parents strong enough attractions to in-



A young child with their hand raised in a classroom. The child is seen from the back, wearing a light green shirt. The background is slightly blurred, showing other students and a teacher in a classroom setting.

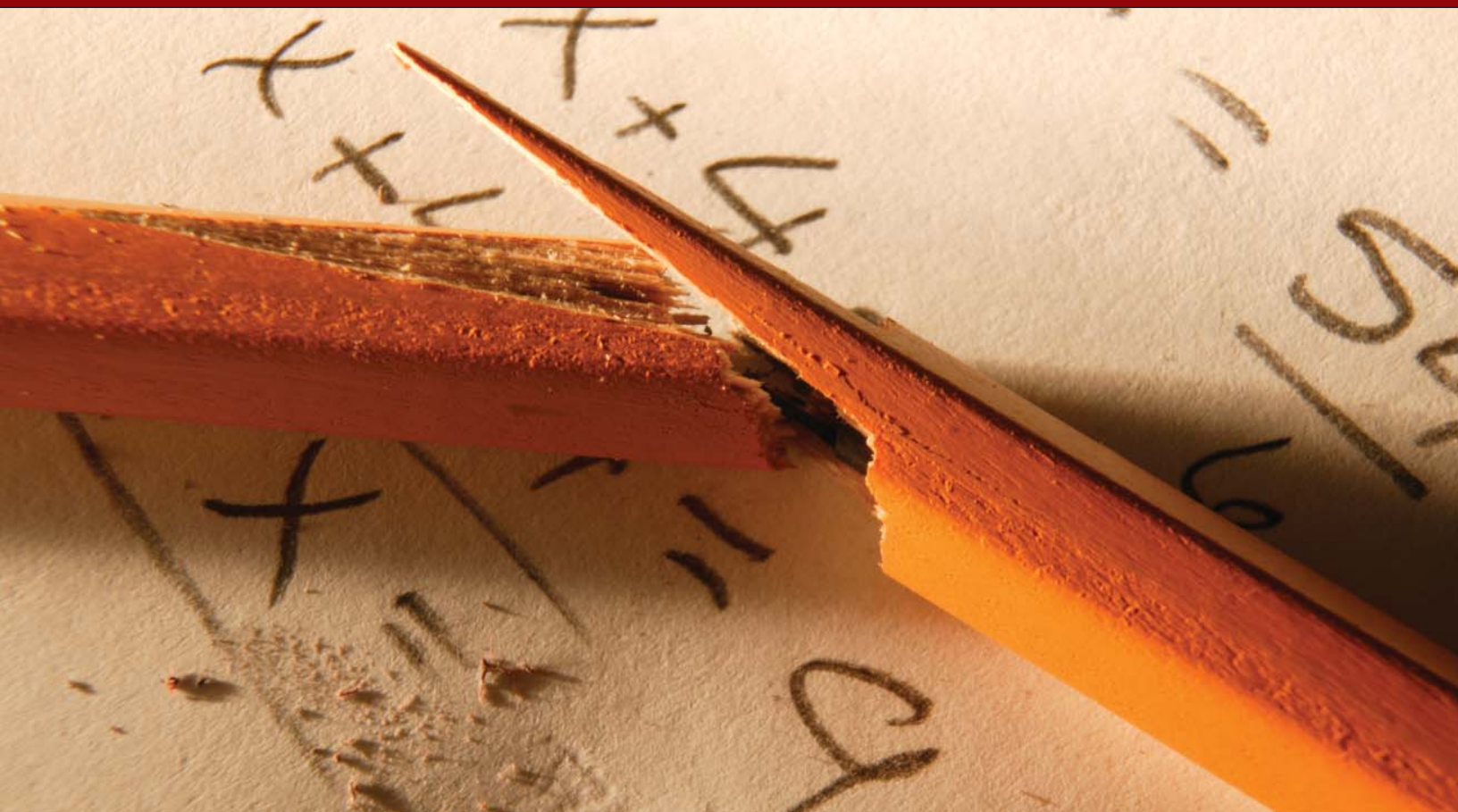
duce them to accept longer commutes to school. Even the investment of huge sums of money in magnet schools has not drawn a sufficient number of suburban children into central cities.

After 50 years of failed efforts, it seems unlikely that the public monopoly system is going to be desegregated anytime soon. Private schools, by contrast, typically draw students from a much larger geographic area than public schools. Because private schools offer a superior education and other attractions that parents want for their children but cannot get at public schools, parents are more willing to accept longer commutes to them.⁷ What's more, the greater desirability of private schools gives parents a reason to overcome any qualms they may have about desegregation. Parents are more likely to trust private schools to handle the challenges of a multiracial classroom environment. For example, private schools have more freedom to implement effective discipline policies, and are thus more able to prevent racial tensions among students from escalating into bigger trouble. Federal data confirm that racial disruptions occur much less frequently in private schools.⁸

This means private schools have the potential to mitigate the effects of residential segregation in a way public schools cannot. But in the absence of vouchers, families must pay to send their children to private schools. This imposes a serious restriction on access to private schools, hindering their ability to draw children of different races across geographic boundaries. While public schools face a geographic barrier to desegregation, private schools face a monetary barrier.

There is, however, one big difference. It is much easier to overcome the monetary barrier than it is to overcome the geographic barrier. School vouchers empower parents to enter the private school market, breaking down the monetary barrier and making it easier for them to seek schooling across geographic boundaries. This would result in a greater mixing of students of different races. This is why vouchers may successfully desegregate schools where previous policy options have not.

For some, vouchers will always be associated with segregation. This is because southern segregationists briefly seized upon vouchers in the 1950s as a way of maintaining access to segregated schools in the face of public school integration efforts. But the association of vouchers with segregation is unfair. Public schools have a much longer and stronger historical association with segregation than school vouchers. The connection between vouchers and segregation was brief and fleeting, leaving no lasting impact whatsoever on students and schools – a statement that cannot be made about segregation in public schools. The modern school choice movement has no connection to this passing segregationist episode. Many of its leaders are minorities themselves; all of them abhor discrimination. Schools participating in voucher programs are held to strict state and federal antidiscrimination laws that forbid any form of racial segregation. And, as we will see, the evidence shows that vouchers are in fact moving children from more segregated public schools into less segregated private schools.



**INADEQUATE METHODS FOR
MEASURING SEGREGATION**

INADEQUATE METHODS FOR MEASURING SEGREGATION

“The schools are well integrated, given that they are horribly segregated.”


-Jay Greene

Unfortunately, most of the previous research on school segregation is fundamentally compromised by inadequate definitions of segregation. For obvious reasons, a study that defines segregation in the wrong way cannot provide any meaningful information on segregation levels in schools.

Researchers usually use the racial make-up of a larger administrative unit – such as a school district, a municipality or a private school system – as the standard against which segregation in individual schools is measured. This problem is present, for example, in commonly used segregation measures such as the Index of Dissimilarity, the Index of Exposure and the Gini Index.⁹ All this approach really does is measure the evenness of the racial distribution within the chosen administrative unit. It ignores any segregation caused by the structure of the administrative unit itself. Much of the segregation in the public school system occurs because school districts and municipal boundaries themselves are segregated, so studies using this approach effectively mask the real level of segregation.

Jay Greene of the University of Arkansas provides an instructive example that shows how this problem undermines the validity of such measures of segregation. In studies using the prevailing method, a school that is 98 percent white is considered perfectly integrated if it is located





in a school district that also is 98 percent white. The school receives this perfect score even if the 98-percent-white school district is located right next door to another district that is 98 percent minority. Clearly we should consider this segregation, but the prevailing method masks segregation when it occurs at the district level. Greene issues a concise verdict on what studies like this really are saying: “The schools are well integrated, given that they are horribly segregated.”¹⁰

Another common problem in the existing research on school segregation is the failure to compare similar grade levels. Elementary schools tend to be more segregated than secondary schools because they draw from a smaller geographic area. In addition, the proportion of elementary and secondary schools is not the same between the public and private sectors. Private schools are more likely than public schools to be elementary schools. This means that a comparison of all public schools and all private schools will create a false impression of greater segregation in private schools. To get an accurate picture of segregation levels, we must compare elementary schools to elementary schools and secondary schools to secondary schools.

A good example of this inadequacy can be found in the book *School Choice and Diversity: What the Evidence Says*. The centerpiece of the book is a study by John Yun of the University of California at Santa Barbara and Sean Reardon of Stanford University that purports to show that private schools are more segregated than public schools.¹¹ Yet, in the same volume, Greene shows that this study suffers from fundamental flaws in methodology,

the most important of which is its failure to compare like grades to like grades.¹² All the study really shows is that private schools are disproportionately elementary rather than secondary.

It also is important not to compare student populations made up only of pre-kindergarten or kindergarten students. Access to and voluntary participation in these grade levels is heavily uneven. White parents seem to be more likely than minority parents to desire kindergarten participation for their children and are definitely more likely to have the means to purchase it in private schools where it is not available in public schools. In most states only part-time kindergarten is available in public schools, and white parents may be more likely to seek out and purchase full-time kindergarten in private schools. This cannot help but skew the results of any segregation analysis. For example, a research team led by Gary Ritter of the University of Arkansas purports to show that private schools are more segregated than public schools. However, since Ritter’s data set includes only the highly unrepresentative grade of kindergarten, it is impossible to say whether he really is measuring a difference between public and private schools or only a difference in access to kindergarten programs.¹³



**RESEARCH USING VALID
EMPIRICAL METHODS**

RESEARCH USING VALID EMPIRICAL METHODS

Vouchers are moving students into private schools that are substantially less segregated than public schools.

The best way to measure segregation is by comparing schools to the racial composition of the larger metropolitan area in which they are located. By looking at the whole metropolitan area rather than a particular administrative unit such as a school district, we can detect levels of segregation that most studies miss. A second-best way employed by some studies is to measure the occurrence of racial homogeneity – for example, measuring the percentage of schools that are more than 90 percent white or more than 90 percent minority.

Some may wonder why the percentage of students who are white or non-white is the standard for measuring segregation. Certainly it is true that, with increasing numbers of Hispanic and Asian persons in the population, the binary black/white view of racial issues is obsolete. Given this, there may be interest in other measures of racial composition. However, the public's primary concern regarding school segregation is the continued existence of large numbers of schools that are very heavily white or very heavily non-white. To test for the presence of these schools, measuring percent white versus percent minority is appropriate.

The studies reviewed below, while they use valid empirical methods, do not answer all questions relevant to vouchers and segregation. In particular, the available evidence is only descriptive. Research-



Private Schools in Voucher Programs are Less Segregated than Public Schools

This table lists the results of every available study using a valid empirical method to compare segregation levels in public schools and voucher-participating private schools. Studies are considered valid if they measure segregation levels using an external standard, compare like grades to like grades, and are not restricted to unrepresentative kindergarten programs.

STUDY	LEVEL OF ANALYSIS	CITY	RESULTS
Howard L. Fuller and George A. Mitchell, "The Impact of School Choice on Racial and Ethnic Enrollment in Milwaukee Private Schools," Institute for the Transformation of Learning, December 1999.	School	Milwaukee	Public elementary students were more likely than students in participating Catholic elementary schools to be in racially homogeneous schools (58 v. 38 percent)
Howard L. Fuller and George A. Mitchell, "The Impact of School Choice on Integration in Milwaukee Private Schools," Institute for the Transformation of Learning, June 2000.	School	Milwaukee	Public school students were more likely than students in participating private schools to be in racially homogeneous schools, in both elementary schools (54 v. 50 percent) and secondary schools (37 v. 16 percent).
Howard L. Fuller and Deborah Greiveldinger, "The Impact of School Choice on Racial Integration in Milwaukee Private Schools," American Education Reform Council manuscript, August 2002.	School	Milwaukee	Public school students were more likely than students in participating private schools to be in racially homogeneous schools, in both elementary schools (58 v. 50 percent) and secondary schools (44 v. 29 percent).
Greg Forster, "Segregation Levels in Milwaukee Public Schools and the Milwaukee Voucher Program," Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation, August 2006.	School	Milwaukee	Public schools scored higher than participating private schools on an index of segregation by 13 points (each point is equal to one percentage point difference between the schools' percent white and the metro area's percent white)
Jay P. Greene, "The Racial, Economic and Religious Context of Parental Choice in Cleveland," paper presented at the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management meeting, November 1999.	School	Cleveland	Public elementary and middle school students were less likely than elementary and middle school voucher recipients to attend schools with racial compositions similar to that of the metro area (5 v. 19 percent); the public school students were also more likely than voucher recipients to attend racially homogeneous schools (61 v. 50 percent)
Greg Forster, "Segregation Levels in Cleveland Public Schools and the Cleveland Voucher Program," Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation and the Buckeye Institute, August 2006.	School	Cleveland	Public schools scored higher than participating private schools on an index of segregation by 18 points (each point is equal to one percentage point difference between the schools' percent white and the metro area's percent white)
Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters, "An Evaluation of the Effects of D.C.'s Voucher Program on Public School Achievement and Racial Integration After One Year," Manhattan Institute, January 2005.	School	Washington D.C.	Public schools differed from the racial composition of the metro area by a greater amount on average than participating private schools (40 v. 34 percentage points); public school students were more likely than students in participating private schools to attend racially homogeneous schools (85 v. 47 percent)

Conclusion: School vouchers do not put students into more segregated schools. All the available empirical research finds that vouchers are moving students into private schools that are substantially less segregated than public schools.

ers have not yet developed an adequate empirical method for examining causal relationships in the relevant variables. In other words, many factors are at work in determining the segregation levels in private schools in Milwaukee, Cleveland

and Washington D.C., and we cannot yet empirically measure the extent to which their lower segregation levels are a result of the voucher programs vis-à-vis other factors.

However, the descriptive evidence we do have is more than enough to provide a baseline against which popular claims can be evaluated. Because these studies use valid empirical methods, their results should be taken seriously. When opinion leaders make claims about segregation levels in private schools and in voucher programs, these claims should be examined in light of the available evidence.

Research Comparing Public Schools and Voucher-Participating Private Schools

Seven empirical studies have compared segregation levels in public schools and voucher-participating private schools without falling afoul of the methodological problems described above. These studies use school-level data, since classroom-level data are not available. While it would be preferable to have classroom-level data, these school-level studies still provide valid evidence on the effects of vouchers on segregation.

Two studies of the Milwaukee voucher program were conducted by Howard Fuller and George Mitchell of Marquette University. In the first study, they compared Milwaukee public elementary schools to Catholic elementary schools participating in the voucher program. They found that 58 percent of public elementary students and 38 percent of Catholic elementary students attended schools that were racially homogeneous (more than 90 percent white or 90 percent minority).¹⁴

In the second study, Fuller and Mitchell compared Milwaukee public schools to all private schools participating in the voucher program. They found that in public schools 54 percent of elementary students and 37 percent of secondary students at-

tended racially homogeneous schools. Students attending private schools in the voucher program were less likely to be in racially homogeneous schools; Fuller and Mitchell's data tables indicate that, overall, 50 percent of elementary students and 16 percent of secondary students in voucher-participating private schools were in racially homogeneous schools.¹⁵

In a third Milwaukee study, Howard Fuller of Marquette University and Deborah Greiveldinger, then of the American Education Reform Council and currently at the Friedman Foundation, compared racial enrollments in Milwaukee public schools with those of private schools participating in Milwaukee's voucher program. They found that in Milwaukee public schools, 58 percent of elementary students and 44 percent of secondary students were in racially homogeneous schools. Students attending private schools in the voucher program were less likely to be in racially homogeneous schools; the data tables indicate that 50 percent of elementary students and 29 percent of secondary students were in racially homogeneous schools.¹⁶

Greg Forster of the Friedman Foundation conducted a fourth Milwaukee study. He calculated a "segregation index" measuring the difference between the racial composition of each school and the racial composition of the school-age population in its metropolitan area (as defined by the federal Office of Management and Budget). He then used linear regression to compare segregation levels in public schools and voucher-participating private schools within the city of Milwaukee, applying statistical controls for school level (elementary or secondary) to ensure appropriate comparisons. Forster's regression analysis found that voucher-par-



Private Schools Provide a Less Segregated Classroom Experience

This table lists the results of every available study using a valid empirical method to compare segregation levels in public and private schools generally. Studies are considered valid if they measure segregation levels using an external standard, compare like grades to like grades, and are not restricted to unrepresentative kindergarten programs.

STUDY	LEVEL OF ANALYSIS	SCOPE	RESULTS
Jay P. Greene, "Civic Values in Public and Private Schools," in <i>Learning from School Choice</i> , ed. Paul Peterson and Bryan Hassel, Brookings Institution, 1998.	Classroom	Twelfth grade classrooms nationwide	Public school classrooms were more likely than private school classrooms to be racially homogeneous (54 v. 41 percent); public school students were less likely than private school students to be in classrooms whose racial balance was close to that of the national student population (18 v. 37 percent)
Jay P. Greene and Nicole Mellow, "Integration Where It Counts," <i>Texas Education Review</i> , Spring 2000.	Classroom	Lunchrooms in Austin and San Antonio	Public school students were less likely than private school students to sit in mixed-race groups at lunch (50 v. 64 percent); with statistical controls for city, seating restrictions, school size and grade level, the gap increased (43 v. 79 percent)
Greg Forster, "Segregation Levels in Milwaukee Public Schools and the Milwaukee Voucher Program," Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation, August 2006; and Greg Forster, "Segregation Levels in Cleveland Public Schools and the Cleveland Voucher Program," Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation and the Buckeye Institute, August 2006.	School	All public and private schools in the 100 largest U.S. metro areas	Public schools scored lower than private schools on an index of segregation by 2 points (each point is equal to one percentage point difference between the schools' percent white and the metro area's percent white)

Conclusion: At the school level, the empirical research finds no substantial difference between segregation levels in public and private schools. At the classroom level, a preferable level of analysis, the research indicates that private schools are less segregated than public schools. The classroom experience of students in private schools exposes them to greater integration than the experience of students in public schools.

participating private schools were 13 points less segregated than Milwaukee public schools on the segregation index. This would be equal to the difference between a school that was 60 percent white and a school that was 73 percent white, if both were located in a city that was 50 percent white.¹⁷

Greene examined the Cleveland voucher program. Examining elementary and middle schools, he found that 19 percent of voucher recipients attended private schools that fell within 10 percentage points of the racial composition of the metropolitan area, compared to 5 percent of Cleveland public school students. He also found that 61 percent of public school

students attended racially homogeneous schools (more than 90 percent white or 90 percent minority), compared to half of voucher recipients.¹⁸

Forster conducted a second study of the Cleveland program, applying the same segregation index as in his Milwaukee study. He compared segregation levels in public schools and voucher-participating private schools within the city of Cleveland, comparing both to the racial composition of school-age children in the greater metro area. His regression analysis found that voucher-participating private schools were 18 points less segregated than Cleveland public schools on the segregation index. This would be equal to

the difference between a school that was 60 percent white and a school that was 78 percent white, if both were located in a city that was 50 percent white.¹⁹

Greene and Marcus Winters of the University of Arkansas analyzed the new voucher program in Washington D.C. They find that in public schools the percentage of students who are white differs from the percent white of the metro area by an average of 40 points, compared to 34 points for private schools participating in the voucher program. They also find that 85 percent of public school students attend racially homogeneous schools (more than 90 percent white or 90 percent minority), compared to 47 percent of students in participating private schools. When the definition of “racially homogeneous” is made stricter, such that schools need to be 95 percent white or 95 percent minority to qualify, the gap widens. While 84 percent of public school students attend racially homogeneous schools by this definition, 43 percent of students in participating private schools do so.²⁰

Research Comparing Public and Private Schools Generally

Only three empirical studies have been conducted comparing segregation in public and private schools generally (not in the context of voucher programs) using valid empirical methods. Taken collectively, they find that segregation levels in private schools are not substantially different from those in public schools at the school level, and that private schools are actually less segregated than public schools at the classroom level.

Greene examined data from a representative sample of 12th-grade classrooms in public and private schools. He found that

more than half of public school students (54 percent) were in racially homogeneous classrooms – that is, their classrooms were more than 90 percent white or more than 90 percent minority. Only 41 percent of private school classrooms were similarly homogeneous. Private school classrooms also were more likely to be similar in racial balance to the national student population, which was 74 percent white; 37 percent of private school students and 18 percent of public school students were in classrooms that were between 65 percent and 85 percent white.²¹

Greene and Nicole Mellow of the University of Texas at Austin visited a random sample of lunchrooms in public and private schools in Austin and San Antonio. They measured how often students sat in racially mixed groups at lunch, finding that 64 percent of private school students and 50 percent of public school students sat in a group with at least one student of a different race. Adjusting statistically for city, seating restrictions, school size and grade level, they found that 79 percent of private school students and 43 percent of public school students sat in mixed groups.²²

Some methodological issues do limit the applicability of these first two studies. Both examine representative samples rather than a comprehensive data set that includes all schools, and one includes data from only two cities and is not easily replicable. These issues do not render the studies invalid or fundamentally flawed, but they do limit the strength of the conclusions we can draw from them.

On the other hand, these studies have the particular advantage of looking at classroom-level data rather than aggregate school-level data. It is the daily experi-



ence of students in classrooms that we care about most. Some practices, such as ability tracking or within-school magnet programs, have the effect of reintroducing segregation at the classroom level even in schools that appear to be racially mixed at the school level. We haven't accomplished much if we produce well-integrated schools with heavily segregated classrooms.

Forster compared segregation levels in public and private schools in the nation's 100 largest metro areas, using the same segregation index as in his studies of the Milwaukee and Cleveland voucher programs. This study used school-level data, since classroom-level data were not available for such a broad sample of schools. He found that the difference between segregation levels in public and private schools was less than two points on the segregation index, with private schools being slightly more segregated than public schools.²³

Does this third study show a substantial difference between public and private schools? There is no scientific test for what counts as a "large" or "small" difference; this is a matter of judgment, not scientific determination. However, a thought experiment can help us form an idea of whether a difference of less than two points represents a substantial variation between public and private schools. Imagine you live in a metro area where the school-age population is 50 percent white. Consider the difference between a school in this area where 68 percent of the students are white and one where 70 percent of the students are white. Would a reasonable observer be more likely to say that the second school is substantially more segregated than the first, or that there is not a substantial difference in the

level of segregation at the two schools? While this is not a scientific test, it seems highly unlikely that the general public would call a school substantially more segregated than a benchmark school if it varies from that school by two percentage points. Using that reasoning, we can say that the difference between segregation in public and private schools is not a substantial difference.

Private schools are actually less segregated than public schools at the classroom level.



CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION

Contrary to widespread claims, the empirical research finds no substantial difference between segregation levels in public and private schools. Quite the opposite is true; at the classroom level, a preferable level of analysis, the research indicates that private schools actually are less segregated than public schools. The daily classroom experience of students in private schools exposes them to better racial mixing than the experience of students in public schools. Even at the school level, the research finds no substantial difference between public and private schools.

Also contrary to widespread claims, school vouchers do not put students into more segregated schools. In fact, all the available empirical research finds that vouchers in Milwaukee, Cleveland and Washington D.C. are moving students into private schools that are substantially less segregated than the local public schools.

This evidence is descriptive rather than causal, but it is sufficient to show that the claims made by opponents of voucher programs are without any empirical foundation. It supports the conclusions that private schools are less segregated than public schools at the classroom level and that private schools participating in voucher programs are less segregated than public schools. Thus, the evidence we have allows us to say that the daily experience of students in the classroom appears to be less segregated in private schools, and that voucher programs are helping students gain access to this more-integrated experience.

Private schools have a much greater potential to desegregate students because they break down geographic barriers, drawing students together across neighborhood boundaries in a way the government school monopoly cannot match even when it tries to do so. This potential is hindered by the monetary barrier that keeps many students from exercising the option of attending a private school. School vouchers overcome the monetary barrier, enabling private schools to make desegregation a reality.

ENDNOTES

¹ Jesse Jackson Jr., "Vouchers: Illegitimate Cure for Legitimate Concerns," *Madison Times*, July 5, 2002.

² Zina Vishnevsky, "Education Needed to Thrive, Urban League President Says," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, March 16, 2002.

³ David Berliner, et. al., "Will Vouchers Work for Low-Income Students?" Education Policy Project, CERAI-00-37, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Dec. 19, 2000.

⁴ *EIA Communiqué*, Educational Intelligence Agency, May 10, 1999.

⁵ See Diane Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade: American Education, 1945-1980*, Basic Books, 1985, p. 114-181; Richard A. Pride and J. David Woodard, *The Burden of Busing: The Politics of Desegregation in Nashville, Tennessee*, University of Tennessee Press, 1985; and David Frum, *How We Got Here: The 70's: The Decade that Brought You Modern Life - for Better and Worse*, Basic Books, 2000, p. 251-265.

⁶ The author is not aware of any studies adhering to valid empirical methods that find magnet schools or open enrollment policies are effective at reducing segregation. The best study of magnet schools of which the author is aware is a federal study of a non-representative sample of 292 magnet schools. It found that 43% of magnet schools did not reduce segregation at all, and a further 7% reduced segregation by less than one percentage point; only 17% reduced segregation by at least five percentage points (see Bruce Christenson, et. al. "Evaluation of the Magnet Schools Assistance Program, 1998 Grantees," U.S. Department of Education, 2003). A Public Policy Forum study of Wisconsin's open enrollment policy found that transfer students made up less than 1% of the student population in the average district (see "Districts Satisfied with Open Enrollment, Motivated to Retain & Attract Students," Public Policy Forum, December 30, 1998). Interestingly, according to a follow-up study, administrators mostly report that parents choose open enrollment for reasons of convenience, while the parents themselves mostly report that they choose it for reasons of school performance (see "Open Enrollment: Survey Suggests School Performance Matters," Public Policy Forum, December 23, 1999).

⁷ The finding that private schools provide superior academic results is supported by a large body of studies using the best scientific methods. The consensus among empirical studies on this issue is as strong as on any social policy question whatsoever. Seven studies using random assignment, the gold standard for scientific research, have found that students randomly chosen to receive vouchers had higher academic outcomes than similar students randomly chosen to remain in public schools (see Jay P. Greene, Paul E. Peterson and Jiangtao Du, "School Choice in Milwaukee: A Randomized Experiment," in *Learning from School Choice*, eds. Paul E. Peterson and Bryan C. Hassel, Brookings Institution, 1998; Cecilia Elena Rouse, "Private School Vouchers and Student Achievement," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, May 1998; Jay P. Greene, "Vouchers in Charlotte," *Education Next*, Summer 2001; William G. Howell and Paul E. Peterson, *The Education Gap*, Brookings Institution, 2002; and John Barnard, Constantine E. Frangakis, Jennifer L. Hill and Donald B. Rubin, "Principal Stratification Approach to Broken Randomized Experiments: A Case Study of School Choice Vouchers in New York City," *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, June 2003).

⁸ See Jay P. Greene, "Civic Values in Public and Private Schools," in *Learning from School Choice*, p. 99.

⁹ Major studies using these methods include James Coleman with Thomas Hoffer and Sally Kilgore, *High School Achievement*, Basic Books, 1982; and Robert Crain, *Private Schools and Black-White Segregation: Evidence from Two Big Cities*, Institute for Research on Educational Finance and Government, Stanford University, ERIC document #259-430, 1984.

¹⁰ Jay P. Greene, "Choosing Integration," in *School Choice and Diversity: What the Evidence Says*, ed. Janelle T. Scott, Teachers College Press, 2005, p. 30.

¹¹ John T. Yun and Sean F. Reardon, "Private School Racial Enrollments and Segregation," in *School Choice and Diversity: What the Evidence Says*, ed. Janelle T. Scott, Teachers College Press, 2005. While Yun and Reardon use a segregation measure that compares schools to a larger administrative unit, and is thus inadequate for the reasons discussed above, they provide data tables that allow us to reconstruct their analysis using an adequate definition of segregation. Their data produce the same result (i.e. public schools are less segregated than private schools) even with this adjustment. Thus the problem of comparing like grade levels is the more important flaw in their analysis.

¹² Greene, "Choosing Integration."

¹³ Gary Ritter, Alison Rush and Joel Rush, "How Might School Choice Affect Racial Integration in Schools? New Evidence from the ECLS-K," *Georgetown Public Policy Review*, Spring 2002.

¹⁴ Howard L. Fuller and George A. Mitchell, "The Impact of School Choice on Racial and Ethnic Enrollment in Milwaukee Private Schools," Institute for the Transformation of Learning, December 1999.

¹⁵ Howard L. Fuller and George A. Mitchell, "The Impact of School Choice on Integration in Milwaukee Private Schools," Institute for the Transformation of Learning, June 2000.

¹⁶ Howard L. Fuller and Deborah Greiveldinger, "The Impact of School Choice on Racial Integration in Milwaukee Private Schools," American Education Reform Council manuscript, August 2002.

¹⁷ Greg Forster, "Segregation Levels in Milwaukee Public Schools and the Milwaukee Voucher Program," Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation, August 2006.

¹⁸ Jay P. Greene, "The Racial, Economic and Religious Context of Parental Choice in Cleveland," paper presented at the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management meeting, November 1999.

¹⁹ Greg Forster, "Segregation Levels in Cleveland Public Schools and the Cleveland Voucher Program," Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation and the Buckeye Institute, August 2006.

²⁰ Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters, "An Evaluation of the Effects of D.C.'s Voucher Program on Public School Achievement and Racial Integration After One Year," Manhattan Institute, January 2005.

²¹ Jay P. Greene, "Civic Values in Public and Private Schools," in *Learning from School Choice*, ed. Paul Peterson and Bryan Hassel, Brookings Institution, 1998.

²² Jay P. Greene and Nicole Mellow, "Integration Where It Counts," *Texas Education Review*, Spring 2000.

²³ Forster, "Segregation Levels in Milwaukee Public Schools and the Milwaukee Voucher Program"; see also Forster, "Segregation Levels in Cleveland Public Schools and the Cleveland Voucher Program."

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