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NEPC Review: America's Private Public Schools

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Summary of Review

A recent report from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, *America's Private Public Schools*, has received considerable attention and includes some controversial recommendations. The report's authors suggest the existence of what they term "private public schools," and they argue that the existence of these "exclusive" public schools justifies the support of publicly funded vouchers to private schools. While the report's analysis does support the contention that there are public schools with extreme isolation by class, the authors inappropriately use this finding as the basis to argue that private schools should be publicly funded through vouchers or tax credits—a conclusion with extremely tenuous logic and one that is unsupported by their analysis. Ultimately, this report has some utility in providing a point of departure for discussions about how we as a society wish to allocate schooling opportunities to students. However, methodological and data problems and the omission of important substantive contextual information about socioeconomic segregation undermine the report's credibility. In addition, the central findings of the authors are disconnected from their ultimate recommendations. And those recommendations do not provide workable solutions or shed any new light on the difficult problem of *de facto* income segregation. In pursuing such a flawed argument, the authors miss a chance to seriously address this important issue and spur an informed debate on national priorities for public schooling.

Review

I. INTRODUCTION

A recent report, *America's Private Public Schools*,¹ authored by Michael J. Petrilli and Janie Scull and released by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, has received considerable attention and includes some controversial recommendations. The authors purport to bring to light the existence of what they term “private public schools,” so designated because they enroll an extremely small proportion (less than 5% in elementary and middle schools and less than 3% in high schools) of students eligible for free- or reduced-price lunch. They suggest that the existence of these schools within the public realm calls into question the openness of the public system as a whole. Further, they argue that the existence of these “exclusive” public schools justifies the support of publicly funded vouchers to private schools, since the exclusiveness of these public schools serves the public interest no better than exclusive private schools.

The analysis in the report supports the basic contention that there are public schools that show extreme isolation by class (the focus is on wealthy schools, but a comparable report could easily document isolation on the other end as well). The analysis also makes the case that these schools are more prevalent than one might have thought. But the leap from that finding to the authors’ recommendations that publicly funded private school vouchers or tax credits are justified because of this segregation is more tenuous. As discussed below, some serious questions have been raised about the quality of the report’s data, classifications, and calculations. Yet even if one unquestioningly accepts all of the assertions in the report, it is unclear in

what way the recommendations are supported by the analysis.

More importantly, when one looks more deeply into the report and connects the authors’ interpretations of the data to the larger body of research on private and public schooling, income segregation, and school choice, there are many oversimplifications and critical omissions of fact, context and prior research. As a result, the entire premise of the analysis is called into question. These omissions include the following, each of which is discussed below:

- There is no discussion of functional and regulatory differences between public and private schools that make schooling between the two sectors fundamentally different (e.g., admission and reporting), thus making the term “private public school” somewhat misleading.
- There is no discussion of previous research on socioeconomic segregation in public and private schools.
- There is no discussion of methodological choices that omit key factors about the organization of school districts.

Taken together, these concerns cannot be dismissed, and they undermine the connections the authors try to make between the presence of socioeconomically isolated, non-poor public schools and private school voucher/choice policies.

However, despite clear problems with the report, the need to highlight these pockets of socioeconomic isolation within our public school system remains important. Of equal importance is the authors’ implicit call to consider the consistency of the existence of

these isolated schools with the ideal of public schooling.

II. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS OF THE REPORT

The Fordham report is very short (18 pages including 8 tables and 4 figures) and limited in scope, focusing on a single theme—the existence and prevalence of public schools in the United States that are largely devoid of students who qualify for the federal free- and reduced-price lunch (FRL) program. The major finding of the report is that there are approximately 2,800 schools (3% of U.S. schools) serving 1.7 million students in U.S. public schools (about 4% of the public school population) that are exclusive. That is, these schools have fewer than 5% of their students qualifying for FRL at the elementary level or 3% at the high school level (p. 5).² (Nationally, 42.5% of public school students are eligible for FRL.³) The authors term these schools “private public schools,” then go on to show that in these socioeconomically segregated schools, White and Asian students enroll disproportionately when compared with their Black and Latino peers.

The authors then repeat this analysis at the state and metropolitan statistical area (MSA) levels, showing greater variation in their results as the data become more disaggregated. For example, the report’s data show that several states have relatively high proportions of schools with very few poor students attending them (between 12% and 14% for Connecticut, Arizona, New Jersey, and Massachusetts), while more than 20 states have fewer than 0.5% of students attending such schools. Again, in these more “local” analyses, White and Asian students appear to be enrolled in these schools at higher proportions than their Black and Latino peers.

The authors use this variation among states

and metropolitan areas to suggest that some places are engaging in policy approaches (largely school choice) that are purportedly conducive to less socioeconomically isolating schooling environments. For example, by way of exploring the relatively low numbers of highly segregated schools in Minnesota and Florida, the authors offer only vague rhetorical questions in lieu of actual evidence.

...why does Minnesota in general, and the Minneapolis metro area in specific, have so few “private public schools”? Do Minnesota’s public school choice programs—especially its “open enrollment” law that allows kids to cross district boundaries—make it easier for low-income children to access affluent schools? Why do just 1% of Florida’s white students attend “private public schools”? Is there something the Sunshine State could teach others? And why do the New York City and Phoenix metro areas have so many of these schools? (p. 18)

Yet the report brings to bear no evidence beyond these sweeping associational implications to support its key school choice contentions. In addition, there is very little discussion of the large numbers of states and metropolitan areas that have very low numbers of these isolated schools and no active, wide-spread school choice plans. Nor is there a discussion of areas (including Phoenix, mentioned in the above quote) with many “private public schools” where choice policies are extensive.

Finally, there is no discussion of alternative explanations for this variation within and between states and metropolitan areas. For instance, the report never notes or explores the structural legacies present in many of the

high-segregation states and metropolitan areas, such as the high degree of fragmentation (many small districts within a metropolitan area) in Northeast cities as contrasted with the low fragmentation in the county-wide Midwestern and Southern districts. This factor may explain why there are such high and low levels of socioeconomic segregation in the areas identified in the report.⁴ This is a critical point, since segregation between fragmented districts is largely due to the sort of housing and schooling decisions made by families that are not subject to school district control or regulation.⁵ In fact, there is relatively strong evidence suggesting that families use the racial compositions of neighborhoods and schools to make their housing decisions.⁶ Thus, the idea that the bulk of the socioeconomic segregation illustrated in the report is due to poor school assignment policies rather than the choices made by families is, at best, an unsupported overgeneralization.

III. THE REPORT'S RATIONALE FOR ITS FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

It is difficult to clearly follow the rationale connecting the report's conclusions to its findings. However, the thread of the argument appears to be that since we already have quite a few "elite" public schools, supported by public funds, there is no reason why we should not use public funds to send children to private schools. But there are several key problems with this rationale.

First, private schools have different responsibilities than public schools, making the nomenclature of "private public schools" somewhat misleading. Public schools, including those in non-poor districts, differ from private schools in ways that do not hinge on the extent of their low-income enrollment. For example, conventional public schools must educate all students who

live within their district boundaries regardless of their income, English fluency, ability or disability status. Private schools may reject any applicant they wish, and, even if offered vouchers, many may deny admission to such challenging students. In addition, private schools are free from most reporting requirements (including FRL eligibility numbers); thus our ability to even understand how private schools compare to public schools is somewhat limited. Finally, private schools are not subject to the same accountability systems as public schools; by contrast, even wealthy public schools are generally accountable to the public for programs, outcomes, finances and general operations.

Second, the authors did not examine the private school sector for this report. Thus, their assertions about the "elite" nature of these public schools are lacking the key comparison and appear to be unsubstantiated opinions. Because the nature of private schools is simply assumed, the report's recommendations are offered without an understanding of the sector the authors are suggesting should be supported by public funds. If taxpayers are unhappy supporting elite public schools, why should they be happy to support even-more-elite private schools?

While the private school sector has been difficult to examine due to the lack of reporting requirements discussed above, there are some findings from nationally representative datasets and census data. First, notwithstanding the large numbers of low-income families served by Catholic schools, private school students are generally more affluent than their public school counterparts. In fact, a National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) study that examined public and private school students with FRL eligibility found that 98.8% of public schools had at least one eligible student compared to just 49.5% of private schools. The public sector

had 42.5% of enrolled students eligible and private schools had 10.4% of students eligible.⁷ In addition, data from the 2005 Current Population Survey showed that 62% of students in private schools lived in households that made more than \$50,000 per year, compared with 41% of public school students. Thirty-six percent of private school students lived in households making more than \$100,000 per year, compared with 13% of public school students.⁸ While policymakers should indeed engage with the issue of elite, secluded public schooling, shifting more students into a private sector that is even more stratified does not appear to offer a wise solution.

Further, given the income distributions for public and private schools and the relatively low income levels needed to qualify for FRL status (income less than \$38,000 a year for a family of 4 in 2007⁹), it is possible or even likely that many of the public schools with very low percentages of FRL eligible students are populated by more students from middle-class families than the comparable private schools. That is, a full examination of the continuum of wealthy to poor would provide greater insights into the underlying issues highlighted by the Fordham report.

Finally, Private School Survey data from 1998-1999 show that racial and economic segregation in the private school sector is higher across the board when compared with public schools. On average, on both counts (income and race), students who enroll in the private sector are more likely to be isolated when compared with their public school peers.¹⁰ Thus, data that may appear compelling in the report when offered without the private school comparison becomes less compelling when considered along with contrasting information.

Given these findings it is difficult to understand how providing vouchers for students

to leave an unfair, segregated public school system to enter an even more unfair (using the report's standards) and more segregated private school system would meet, as the authors state, "Horace Mann's ideal of the 'common school': a place where doors are open to everybody and where all children, regardless of social class or race or ethnic heritage, can come to learn and play and grow up together" (p. 3).

IV. THE REPORT'S USE OF RESEARCH LITERATURE

The absence of any literature review is particularly difficult to understand given the statements in the report that the examined phenomenon of socioeconomic segregation was "little-known" (p. 18) and "sorely understudied." In fact, this phenomenon has been very well documented by numerous researchers, both in the form of general socioeconomic segregation¹¹ and in the form of studies that explicitly use percent FRL eligibility as a criterion.¹² "Understudied" is, in fact, an odd term to apply to the massive literature on socio-economic effects in education, finance, political science, history and economics.

If the report had included a meaningful discussion of such earlier research, readers would have been provided with more context and bases for comparison between the public and private sectors. A solid literature review might also have helped to provide support for a clear link between the finding that elite public schools exist and voucher or tax credit policies. Conversely, a more critical look at the literature would certainly have uncovered rival solutions to extreme socio-economic segregation that would have challenged the report's final conclusion about vouchers and tax credits as a viable response to this problem.

V. REVIEW OF THE REPORT'S METHODS

The basic methodological approach of this analysis is quite straightforward. Using the Common Core of Data for the 2007-2008 school year, the authors create descriptive tables of the total number of schools enrolling few FRL-eligible students. The report uses a 5% threshold for elementary schools and a 3% threshold for middle and high schools. However, this simple analysis belies the complexity that actually exists when describing a national snapshot of school composition. Reports purporting to state FRL numbers cannot always be taken at face value, and the simple composition of schools at any level is not sufficient information in and of itself to make judgments about the meaning of that composition. To make these types of decisions, more needs to be known about the context and causes of the reported numbers and of the distribution of students and the specific data decisions driving the analysis.

On his blog,¹³ Rutgers Professor Bruce Baker gives a good example of how data and knowledge of context can change the interpretation of identical data. He re-examined the assumptions that the Fordham authors used to create their measures of extreme socioeconomic segregation (schools with few FRL students). This examination found many schools that the Fordham study chose to omit due to zero FRL counts, on the apparent assumption that the reported data were invalid. But these schools were actually in very low-poverty areas and should possibly have been counted as “private public” schools under the report’s definitions. Thus, if Baker’s reanalysis is correct, the problem of extreme socioeconomic segregation in public schools is underestimated.

In addition, Baker’s analysis points out (as is

discussed above) that segregation between districts drives the problem of these elite public schools, and that these situations are created by housing and schooling choices made by parents, as well as by the drawing of district boundaries. As an illustration of how completely this is an issue of parental choice and not school assignment, he maps part of the Newark Metropolitan Area (part of the rather high proportion of schools in New Jersey that enroll very few poor students). It is easy to see that this type of extreme socioeconomic segregation is largely a between-district, not within-district problem.

Finally, a quick check of the schools in the Phoenix metropolitan area listed on the Fordham website as meeting the authors’ “private public” criteria¹⁴ shows widespread discrepancies with the numbers published by the state of Arizona. For example, El Mirage school, located in the Dysart Unified School District, is listed by Fordham as having only 4.2% FRL students. However for the same school year (2007-2008) as of October 2007 the state website has this school listed with 74.5% of their students receiving FRL services. Unfortunately, based on the information at Arizona Department of Education website,¹⁵ this is not an isolated case. Of the 77 schools on the Fordham list as being under 5% FRL, 44 have FRL percentages—according to Arizona records—that are over the 5% level. In fact, 29 of the 44 have greater than 50% of the students FRL eligible—definitely not “private public schools.” These discrepancies appear to be errors in the Common Core of Data¹⁶ and appear to only be for the 2007-2008 school year. While the CCD source of the mistake means that these data errors are not the responsibility of the Fordham Institute, the Fordham use of those numbers does call into question the overall results of the analysis and suggests the need for a reanalysis with appropriate, correct data.

VI. REVIEW OF THE VALIDITY OF THE FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Even setting aside errors in data collection, classification, or calculation, the report is on its most solid ground with its basic analysis and findings that demonstrate that many schools remain segregated based on housing and income patterns. In their conclusion, however, the authors quickly and inexplicably deviate from any immediate or clear implications of the data and call for publicly supported private school tax credits or vouchers.

This conclusion is completely unsupported by the data offered in the report, and in fact, has no basis of support in the larger literature as a solution to the problems of extreme socioeconomic segregation. Given the complexities that such a program of publicly funded vouchers or tax credits would entail and the numerous factors that go into parental decisions, the income-sorting implications of such an open system of choice are currently unknowable. Thus, advocating it as a solution to the problem of extreme socioeconomic segregation is ill advised at best.

VII. USEFULNESS OF THE REPORT FOR GUIDANCE OF POLICY AND PRACTICE

This report has some utility in providing a good point of departure for discussions about how we as a society wish to allocate schooling opportunities to students. However, as highlighted above, the data, the calculations, the term “private public schools,” and the general lack of clarity about the between-district nature of socioeconomic segregation are all problematic. In addition, these aspects of the report are disconnected from the report’s ultimate recommendations. And those recommendations neither provide workable solutions nor shed any new light on the difficult problem of *de facto* segregation. In pursuing such a flawed argument on such an important topic, the authors miss a chance to seriously address this critical issue in favor of making an unsupported recommendation for a private school voucher policy that has very little hope of addressing *de facto* socioeconomic segregation in any substantive way.

Notes and References

- ¹ Petrilli, M. J. & Scull, J. (2010). *America's Private Public Schools*. Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute. Retrieved March 2, 2010, from http://www.edexcellence.net/index.cfm/news_private-public-schools
- ² The authors state that the differing thresholds of free/reduced lunch eligibility is due to the relative under-reporting of free and reduced lunch eligibility at the middle and high school levels (p.4).
- ³ National Center for Educational Statistics (2002). *Findings from the condition of education 2002: Private schools, a portrait*. NCES 2002–013. Washington, DC: US Department of Education.
- ⁴ High fragmentation leads to more segregation in metropolitan areas because any given district cannot control school assignment across district lines. Influence of this fragmentation factor is consistent with the high-private-public numbers found in Connecticut, New Jersey, and Massachusetts. Conversely, the report sets forth low numbers of non-poor schools for all of the Southern states and metropolitan areas with countywide districts.
- ⁵ Reardon, S. F. & Yun, J. T. (2001). Suburban racial change and suburban school segregation, 1987–1995. *Sociology of Education*, 74(2), 79–101.
- ⁶ Lankford, H. & Wyckoff, J. (2006). The Effect of School Choice and Residential Location on the Racial Segregation of Students. In T. Gronberg & D. Jansen, eds., *Advances in Applied Microeconomics, Vol. 14: Improving School Accountability*. Amsterdam: Elsevier Science Press.
- ⁷ National Center for Educational Statistics (2002). *Findings from the condition of education 2002: Private schools, a portrait*. NCES 2002–013. Washington, DC: US Department of Education.
- ⁸ Author's tabulation from October 2005 Current Population Survey, retrieved February 27, 2010, from <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/school/cps2005.html>.
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- ¹¹ Kahlenberg, R. (2001). *All together now: Creating middle-class schools through public school choice*. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution.
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- ¹³ Baker, B. (2010, Feb. 18). Private Public Schools – OK Idea – Bad Calculations. *Schoolfinance101's blog*. Retrieved February 27, 2010, from <http://schoolfinance101.wordpress.com/2010/02/18/private-public-schools-ok-idea-bad-calculations/>.
- ¹⁴ For a list of schools identified by the authors, see the chart “Phoenix Metro Area ‘Private Public Schools.’” Retrieved February 27, 2010, from http://edexcellence.net/201002_Private_Public_Schools/2010_PrivatePublicSchools_Phoenix.pdf.
- ¹⁵ See data at Arizona Dept. of Education (n.d.). *Academic Achievement Division, Health and Nutrition Services, Child Nutrition Programs, Percentage of Free and Reduced Reports*. Retrieved March 5, 2010, from <http://www.ade.az.gov/health-safety/cnp/frpercentages/>
- ¹⁶ The common core has vastly lower FRL counts for many of the schools on the list for ONLY the 2007-2008 year when compared to 2005-2006 and 2006-2007 CCD. It is hoped that future revisions of the 2007-2008 data will correct these data problems.

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