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## REVIEW OF *SEGREGATION, RACE, AND CHARTER SCHOOLS: WHAT DO WE KNOW?*

Reviewed By

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### Summary of Review

Noting the nation's renewed attention to remedying school segregation, *Segregation, Race, and Charter Schools* presents evidence about the extent of school segregation and its relationship with improving student achievement for students of color. The report argues that school segregation has remained flat for decades and also argues that the nation would be wise to instead attend to improving the quality of schools that students of color and low-income students attend. It points to some urban charter schools as exemplars of this latter approach. However, this review finds that the report omits significant research directly related to the topic and includes other studies that are less relevant. Moreover, the report draws questionable conclusions from studies that are included—conclusions that are not reflective of the research consensus. The report's selective interpretation of existing research leads to two erroneous conclusions about improving educational outcomes for students of color: (1) that focusing on school integration is relatively unimportant; and (2) that attending to school quality via school choice, rather than addressing the complex array of policies to combat racial segregation, should instead be pursued. In fact, because most forms of school choice further segregation, the report's recommendation will likely only further segregation and inequality for students.



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# REVIEW OF *SEGREGATION, RACE, AND CHARTER SCHOOLS: WHAT DO WE KNOW?*

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## I. Introduction

During the last year in particular, school diversity received renewed attention from the U.S. Department of Education, which included a new report commissioned by Congress about the extent of school segregation,<sup>1</sup> and the introduction of legislation to support voluntary local integration efforts.<sup>2</sup> School integration was even the focus of a recent HBO comedy episode.<sup>3</sup> These have each highlighted growing segregation and the implications of segregation for our society as well as for students, the latter of which is buttressed by findings repeatedly indicating gaps in opportunities and outcomes for students from different racial/ethnic groups. Some analyses have also linked this growing segregation with racial violence in many communities.<sup>4</sup>

Despite this renewed focus, questions persist about the extent to which policy should focus on integration as opposed to improving the segregated schools that students of color attend. Indeed, this has been a long-running question before and since the U.S. Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954. *Brown* declared racially segregated schools to be inherently unequal because of the lower quality of schools that black students attended. As school districts resisted fully desegregating schools or as new means of avoiding integration arose through school choice or within-school segregation, some advocates have suggested the focus on integration is misguided. Examples of charter schools overwhelmingly serving students of color and from low-income households have prompted calls for expanding their numbers to serve more students, as a means to improve outcomes of lower-performing students.

In *Segregation, Race, and Charter Schools: What Do We Know?*, a report published by the Center on Children and Families at Brookings,<sup>5</sup> Grover J. "Russ" Whitehurst, Richard V. Reeves, & Edward Rodrigue review a range of studies to ascertain what conclusions can be drawn about racial segregation, poverty segregation, and student outcomes overall and specifically in charter schools.<sup>6</sup> This review assesses the claims of this new report about whether educational policy should continue to focus on school integration as a means to improve the educational outcomes of students of color as compared to market models.

## II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report is a review of research seeking to answer several questions, with the ultimate aim of understanding whether racial segregation of schools impacts student outcomes. The report has four substantive sections alongside an introduction and conclusion.

The first section (section 2, after the introductory section 1) examines different ways to measure racial and economic segregation, reviewing various statistical measures and the scale for such measurements. The report considers four different measures of segregation,<sup>7</sup> using hypothetical examples to explain each's use. The section also includes a general discussion of how choosing a particular geographic scale for analysis of segregation might lead to different conclusions than using another scale. The report concludes that there is no "right or wrong" approach or scale but that "apparently technical methodological choices often reflect a specific kind of concern with segregation, and can weigh heavily on results."<sup>8</sup>

The next section examines school segregation trends.<sup>9</sup> The report concludes that there was a decline in black-white segregation after the Civil Rights Era, a slight rise in segregation between districts in the 1970s, and that segregation has remained the same since the 1980s. The report explains contrasting findings showing increasing segregation by noting, "The national figures, however, mask significant variation across places."<sup>10</sup> The section also describes how black and Hispanic students are much more likely than white students to be in schools with concentrations of low-income students.<sup>11</sup>

The third substantive section examines the segregation of students attending charter schools. The report's conclusion about the findings of studies utilizing either student-level transfer data or comparing the segregation of charter schools with nearby traditional public schools are somewhat tentative: "there are signs that charters may be more segregated than comparable traditional public schools (TPS)."<sup>12</sup> The report concludes that charter schools are most likely to be more segregated for black students, but notes that this conclusion varies considerably by context.

The longest and fourth section examines the relationship of school and neighborhood composition with student outcomes. This section is the heart of the report. It starts with a description of student assignment policies that districts might use to create more diverse schools. After describing their work and a limited set of studies, they conclude 1) school demographics (but neighborhood and district demographics less so) have a substantial impact on educational outcomes; 2) racial gaps in student achievement are due to differential exposure to poverty at the school level; and 3) there are some non-achievement benefits for students who transfer to schools in low-poverty neighborhoods. The report also reviews selected charter studies and summarizes that charter schools can provide high-quality school opportunities in urban settings to benefit students from traditionally disadvantaged settings.

The report's overall conclusion to the fourth section and indeed the larger report is that students of color have lower achievement outcomes because they are more likely to attend

high-poverty schools, and these schools are less likely to be high quality. Thus, citing the examples of charter schools that provide high-quality educational environments, they write, “[these findings] provide evidence that supports a focus on quality schools for students and suggest that economic and racial integration of schools is an indirect route to that goal, and not necessarily essential to its achievement.”<sup>13</sup> While the authors write that they do not “support an argument for more racially and economically segregated schools,”<sup>14</sup> in the conclusion they outline exactly that. If policy can’t accomplish all goals, the report suggests it should focus on improving school quality for minority students, *not* on trying to reduce school segregation.

### III. The Report’s Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The report primarily analyzes other studies and their data to support their findings regarding segregation, student outcomes, and charter schools. At times, the report also includes the authors’ descriptive analysis of demographic data.

### IV. The Report’s Use of Research Literature

The report does not contain any description of how it included or excluded studies that it assesses. As described, the report primarily relies on other studies to justify its conclusions; some studies are peer-reviewed while others are reports not subject to such rigorous analysis. In fact, the report cites only 13 peer-reviewed journal articles, along with a book from a peer-reviewed university press and a law review article.<sup>15</sup> Some of the non-peer-reviewed pieces have subsequently been published in peer-reviewed journals (but aren’t cited as such), and there are some citations for which there is not complete information to ascertain whether it is peer-reviewed or not. The report includes statements that have no research citations at all; others ignore some of the most recent studies, and in some cases, include studies that are less germane to the topic. Taken together, this uneven treatment of relevant literature is reflected in their conclusion about the relative lack of importance of focusing on school integration efforts, a conclusion supported by cherry-picking studies rather than a thorough examination of the literature on this topic.

One example of not including citations despite a fair amount of research is the report’s description of various types of policies that influence school composition.<sup>16</sup> While contrasting controlled choice policies (described as putting a “thumb on the scale” of parents’ choices in order to achieve integration<sup>17</sup>) with open enrollment policies, the report claims, without citing evidence, “There are costs associated with interfering with parental preference in a choice system in order to achieve more integrated schools.”<sup>18</sup> This claim ignores research on open enrollment systems finding that, they advantage certain families in terms of access to desired schools.<sup>19</sup> It also ignores research on the extent to which each type of policy (e.g.,

controlled choice or open enrollment) relates to racial and/or socioeconomic composition of schools.<sup>20</sup>

In the charter school segregation section, the report ignores some of the more recent and prominent longitudinal studies—such as Ni’s 2012 study in Michigan, Kotok et al.’s 2015 study of Pennsylvania schools, and Stein’s 2015 study of Indianapolis—even as they criticize the time lag of such studies. The new longitudinal studies confirm older studies that as charter schools grow they continue to be more segregated for students.<sup>21</sup> Their conclusions are more tentative than the literature they cite, describing the trend of segregation in charter schools as “slight” and primarily pertaining to black students. In fact, a number of longitudinal studies find that white students also make segregative moves to charter schools but only one of these studies is referenced.<sup>22</sup> In this section, when describing a set of studies comparing traditional public schools (TPS) and charter school segregation the report also leans heavily on one report from the American Enterprise Institute to conclude that charters are slightly segregated but also reiterating that there is wide variety when, in fact, the research consensus is that, across geographic contexts and scale, charter schools are considerably more segregated.<sup>23</sup>

Research about the extent of school segregation is also selectively cited in the report, leading to an erroneous perception that school segregation has been stable for decades.<sup>24</sup> This conclusion of stability in segregation is counter to one of the few peer-review articles cited and quoted from in this section of the report that found increasing segregation in recent years in school districts released from court oversight. The report also mentions other specific examples of resegregation (although none of the peer-reviewed studies on the latter point are cited).<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, the report immediately follows this description by concluding that “racial segregation trends were relatively flat,” ignoring these and other examples.<sup>26</sup>

*Research about the extent of school segregation is also selectively cited in the report*

Finally, in the section examining the relationship of school composition to educational outcomes, the report describes a number of studies that are not directly on point for this relationship but instead are more focused on school quality or neighborhood characteristics while overlooking studies that would be more central to their conclusion.<sup>27</sup> For example, the report describes a study that shows that parents in Charlotte are more likely to select schools based on students’ achievement test scores, but this comparison does not include information on school racial/economic composition. Likewise, nearly two pages of the report are devoted to describing a recent analysis of a federal housing mobility program that finds higher long-term outcomes (e.g., higher earnings, college attendance) for adults who moved to low-poverty neighborhoods when they were under 8 even though there is no description in the report or cited paper about what types of K-12 schools these children attended. Another article by the same lead author was described in a fair amount of depth as one of three “high-quality” observational studies even though the segregation measures used only existed at the neighborhood and not the school level.<sup>28</sup>

## V. Review of the Report's Methods

As described in the prior section, the report's analytic choices are not clearly explained, and result in selectively analyzing studies that reach misleading and unrepresentative conclusions.

Section 2 provides a helpful description of the various metrics to measure school segregation, including the tradeoffs of using any one metric, although such a methodological discussion is unrelated to the remainder of the report in which there is largely no discussion of how segregation is measured or conceptualized by the various studies. In fact, this section reaches no conclusion about how to assess school segregation, and ominously warns without discussion that “we should be keenly aware that apparently technical methodological choices often reflect a specific kind of concern with segregation, and can weigh heavily on results.”<sup>29</sup> Likewise, though the point about which geographic scale to use to measure segregation is valid, scale matters differently depending on which segregation measure is used. Scale is quite important for dissimilarity (and, for this reason, is sometimes less used in the educational context) while for exposure and isolation, it is less important.

There are a number of errors in the report that raise questions about the authors' interpretations. In the report's description of the complexity of segregation analysis given a number of racial/ethnic groups, they describe racial categories as “hav[ing] a social as well as biological dimension.”<sup>30</sup> The biological basis of race has long been discredited.<sup>31</sup> In this same section, to support their conclusion that segregation isn't “quite as bad”, the report misleadingly describes an analysis as exposure when in fact it would be more appropriately described as measuring concentration.<sup>32</sup>

In their interpretation of the research about student composition and student outcomes, the report helpfully clarifies that “poor children get poor schools rather than poor children produce poor schools.”<sup>33</sup> Instead, by this reasoning, the report concludes that by improving the poor quality of the schools, it will improve the poor outcomes of low-income students and therefore students of color. One such example of this rationale is its conclusion about a new study finding that schools with high concentrations of black students have lower achievement by all students. Yet, the report notes, this lower achievement is “due to correlates of race, including weak schools and the low socioeconomic status of the families of the student body, rather than the concentration of minority students itself.”<sup>34</sup> Yet, even when controlling for characteristics of teachers and students, achievement scores are significantly lower in schools with the highest percentage of black students than in those schools with less than 20% black students.

Moreover, though the report suggests that the effect of racial segregation is instead explained by socioeconomic composition of the student body and school quality, the fact is that much research shows that racial segregation overlaps with economic segregation<sup>35</sup> and that many of these segregated schools lack resources. In other words, while they cite examples of some urban charter schools that have succeeded, there is little to suggest this has been done at scale.<sup>36</sup> And, though not the focus of the authors' analysis, the studies reviewed do find a

strong relationship between student racial composition and academic outcomes.

Although central to the report's conclusion is that urban charter schools provide evidence that policy should focus on school quality instead of segregation, the report devotes less than two of its forty-eight pages to describing seven studies of charter school effectiveness, none of which were peer-reviewed sources. In a national study relied upon in this section of the report, the effect sizes of students in urban charter schools to their peers in segregated urban traditional public schools is quite small.<sup>37</sup> All told, this is rather scant evidence to suggest that charter schools in urban areas are the way to achieve quality schools for students of color.

## **VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions**

The report is incomplete and unbalanced in its selection and analysis of research, erroneously suggesting that integration is not a primary mechanism that can help improve student outcomes. Moreover, the rationale for school integration is not solely or even primarily limited to improve students' academic achievement scores.<sup>38</sup> While this report describes a few non-achievement outcomes, it does not focus on the longer-term outcomes that are important for the health of communities and our larger democracy.

## **VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice**

This report aims to provide the best evidence about how to achieve desired policy goals, but its selective review and interpretation of the literature limits its utility for policymakers—who, after all, have limited means to ameliorate the many ways in which race and poverty affect students, their families, and the schools they attend. Its conclusion that attending to school quality via school choice rather than address the complex array of policies to combat racial segregation may appeal across the political spectrum. But this portrays a false choice between integration and high-quality schools that belies decades of research. This report's conclusion is unlikely to be one that is useful for communities and their families.



## Notes and References

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- 6 The report was funded by the Walton Family Foundation. According to their website, the Foundation is “working to expand opportunities and empower children and families with choice. Since 1992, we have invested more than \$1.3 billion in K-12 education and supported a quarter of the 6,700 charter schools created in the United States.” Retrieved November 23, 2016, from <http://www.waltonfamilyfoundation.org/our-impact/k12-education>
- 7 The isolation and exposure indices are both forms of the interaction index, so although the report analyzes each separately, I consider them as one index because they measure the same dimension of racial segregation.
- 8 Whitehurst, G.J., Reeves, R.V., & Rodrigue, E. (2016, October). *Segregation, Race, and Charter Schools: What Do We Know?* Washington, D.C.: Center on Children and Families at Brookings. Retrieved November 5, 2016, from <https://www.brookings.edu/research/segregation-race-and-charter-schools-what-do-we-know/>, page 20.
- 9 Although not related to the conclusions drawn in this section or the larger report, the brief historical account of segregation reflects numerous factual errors. For example, on page 21, the authors write, citing a report that I co-authored, “Before the late 1960s, American schools were almost completely segregated by race. In 1964, only 2.3 percent of black students attended schools that were majority-white, despite the fact that white students comprised more than 80 percent of total public school enrollment.” In fact, these data pertained only to students in schools in the South, the region of the country that had legally mandated school segregation challenged in the *Brown* decision. Likewise, it was President Johnson's administration that enforced compliance with the Civil Rights Act in order to receive federal education funding; Nixon's Administration ended active enforcement. See Frankenberg, E., & Taylor, K. (2015). ESEA and the Civil Rights Act: An interbranch approach to furthering desegregation. *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 1, 32-49.
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- 15 One such piece is listed as “forthcoming” even though it was published well in advance of this report’s publication date.
- 16 The report describes these types of policies more broadly as “Policy decisions that may be impacted by an understanding of the relationship between segregation and achievement” but five are common educational policies that may further or remedy segregation and the sixth is a housing policy that may produce integrated schools as a byproduct. Page 36.
- 17 This framing is concerning because there are not similar descriptions in the other types of policies as to how there is intervention to achieve desired outcomes. An open enrollment policy prioritizes students who live close to the school or who are not transient or the drawing of attendance boundaries are both examples of policies that also intervene to achieve desired outcomes.
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