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Education Policy Research Unit

DOCUMENT REVIEWED:	<u>“Segregation Levels in Cleveland Public Schools and the Cleveland Voucher Program”</u>
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Summary of Review

The report reviewed here explores the question of whether public schools or private schools are more racially integrated. Using a justifiable measure of racial integration, the report finds that public schools are slightly more racially integrated nationwide, but far less integrated in the city of Cleveland. Though the report is weakened by a tone of advocacy throughout, the methodology and analysis appear sound. Policymakers should pay attention to the two key results of the data analysis and consider the possible implications. First, policymakers approach any nationwide choice schemes with caution as such schemes may well move students into less racially integrated private schools. Second, however, the Cleveland example suggests that policymakers should not be fearful that public-private voucher schemes in city centers would have the deleterious effect of moving students into private schools that are more racially segregated than the public schools that they would leave.

Review

I. INTRODUCTION

This report, like several others, compares the racial composition of public schools to that of private schools. A key motivation for such analyses is the ongoing debate about the potential effects of expanded school choice on racial segregation. Critics of school choice initially raised such questions, claiming that school choice strategies lead to greater racial segregation in schools. Proponents of school choice have responded to such criticisms by arguing that there is no evidence that private schools are more racially segregated than are public schools.

A careful examination of the existing racial landscape in public and private schools can prove useful in predicting the possible impacts of expanded school choice. Simply put, if public schools are better racially integrated than are the private schools, then expanded school choice may well be associated with increased racial segregation. Alternatively, if private schools are superior to public schools with respect to racial integration, the racial segregation criticisms of school choice would be undermined.

The conclusions set forth in this report, however, cannot provide definitive answers as to what might happen in the case of enhanced choice; this would depend on the relative racial makeup of the schools that students leave and enter. Nevertheless, there is a debate ongoing over which sector does a better job of racial integration. This report speaks to that issue.

The big question in much of this work, and the one that leads to much of the debate, is how to define racial integration and racial segregation. The author in this report chooses a “segregation index” that is reasonable given the question of interest. The

index is based on the difference between the racial composition of the schools (in the public and private sector) and the racial composition of the wider metropolitan area. A school in which the racial composition (operationalized here as percentage of White students in the school) is similar to the racial composition within Greater Cleveland metropolitan area would be considered integrated. As the difference in racial composition between the school and metro area increases, the school is considered less racially integrated.

II. THE REPORT’S FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The report describes two separate analyses and comes to two conclusions:

1. Using school level race data for the 116 public schools and 31 private schools in the City of Cleveland in 2003-04, the report concludes that private schools were less segregated than public schools, where segregated is defined by having a racial composition that is different from that of the surrounding metropolitan area. In Cleveland, White students comprise approximately 67 percent of the total student population in the metropolitan area. The average public school differed from that number by 47 percentage points while the average private school differed from that number by only 31 percentage points.
2. Using a national school-level dataset with 47,000 public and private schools, the report concludes that private schools were more segregated than public schools by approximately

2 points on the same segregation index.

The report then concludes that “The daily classroom experience of students in private schools exposes them to better racial mixing than the experience of students in public schools.” (p. 17) Given these data, it seems fair to conclude that the Cleveland voucher program does shift students from racially segregated public schools to private schools that are better integrated. However, the above-quoted conclusion seems too strongly worded because the analysis based on the national dataset actually reveals that the private schools are slightly more racially segregated than public schools.

III. THE REPORT’S RATIONALES FOR ITS FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The primary rationale for the conclusions drawn is that prior measures of integration and segregation have been flawed in various ways. Thus, the report then employs a measure purported to be better than past measures.

The point of comparison for the “appropriate level of racial integration” is asserted to be incorrect. That is, prior studies have used the school district as the point of comparison. However, the author argues that this is not the proper comparison arguing that there are often school districts with markedly different racial characteristics situated right next to each other. As a result, simply “looking like” the district is not a fair indicator of racial integration. Rather, the author argues, a reasonable point of comparison is the wider metropolitan area. In fact, Reardon and Yun, working with the Civil Rights Project at Harvard, appear to be in agreement with this line of thinking, claiming that metropolitan areas provide a useful context for studying patterns of schooling and racial composition. They write, “metro-

politan areas – even more than school districts – probably represent the most reasonable approximation of the housing and schooling market for the vast majority of families” (Reardon and Yun, 2002, p. 38). In my view, this conception of racial integration does seem reasonable, particularly when researchers on different sides of the argument concur. Because this key aspect of the methodology is warranted, the immediate conclusions drawn from the data seem to be reasonable.

IV. REVIEW OF THE REPORT’S USE OF RESEARCH LITERATURE

In the literature review, the author successfully makes the case that many of the previous studies delving into this question have been hindered by flawed measures as well as other important methodological flaws:

- Some analyses have used an improper point of comparison for the “appropriate level of racial integration.” For example, some prior studies have used the school district as the point of comparison. Others have used national racial composition as the point of comparison. That is, if private schools across the nation were roughly 80 percent white, an integrated school would also be 80 percent White. Similarly, I published a study in 2002 that measured the integration level within kindergarten classrooms based on the extent to which those classrooms reflected national racial composition of kindergarten students (37 percent were minority students).¹ The author rightly notes that measures such as this ignore the fact that racial compositions differ from one locality to another.

- Some analyses of integration pool all levels of schooling into a single dataset. These studies are problematic because elementary schools and secondary schools differ in terms of racial integration and in terms of the likelihood of being a private school. Specifically, private schools are more likely to be elementary and elementary schools are more likely to be racially segregated. As a result, analyses that fail to control for the level of schooling will be biased against private schools. This argument also makes sense.
- Finally, the author argues that studies focusing on students in kindergarten or pre-kindergarten are not relevant as these grade levels, essentially, are not representative of elementary or secondary grade levels. (Full disclosure: In this case, the author is referring to a study I conducted in 2002.²) This argument is plausible, but it does not hold up, as I conducted the analysis one year later with students in grade 1 and unearthed similar results.³

The author then describes two studies that do not fall “afoul of the methodological problems described above” (p. 12) and concludes that, in fact, private schools are better integrated than public schools. In contrast to the good critiques offered of studies favoring public schools, the author overlooks important flaws in these studies favoring private schools. One study focuses on a national sample of students in 12th-grade classrooms. The study is strong in that it uses the classroom rather than the school as the unit of analysis—it is reasonable to argue that a student’s daily experience with racial mixing is more likely to be defined by his classmates than by all students in the school. However, this study also employs a

flawed measure of integration by focusing on the racial balance of the national student population of twelfth graders, which is exactly the comparison criticized by the author when used in the other studies. The second study highlighted as strong in the literature review has the benefit of employing a very interesting measure of integration – the authors observed student seating patterns in lunchrooms. However, this study is hampered by the fact that it is based on schools in only two cities in Texas.

Finally, the author concludes the literature review by describing studies of schools in the central part of the key voucher cities of Cleveland, Milwaukee, and Washington DC. In these studies, the authors found that public school students were more likely to attend school in racially homogenous settings—with more than 90 percent White students or more than 90% minority students. The findings of these city studies are presented fairly, do make intuitive sense, and lead to an important point in this discussion of racial balance in public and private schools. I will discuss this in detail in my conclusions below.

V. REVIEW OF THE REPORT’S METHODS

The report presents the methodology with clarity and presents a strong justification for appropriateness of the methods employed. There are only a few questions the reader might ask.

First of all, the analysis only includes the voucher-participating private schools rather than all private schools in the city. While one could argue that voucher-participating private schools are the relevant schools given the overarching discussion of school choice, more information would have been helpful. In a follow-up communication with the author, I discovered that 13 private

schools were excluded from the analysis by virtue of not participating in the voucher program. The author informed me that the analyses (not included in the report) were in fact conducted with all private schools, and these analyses resulted in the same outcome. Private schools received more favorable scores on the segregation index, by nearly 20 percentage points.

Second, the integration measure relied on here is based on school-level data. As the author makes clear in the literature review, the methodology would be stronger and more consistent if classroom-level data were available. Finally, the report would benefit from a more thorough presentation of the descriptive statistics, in addition to the regression results, for each of its two analyses. That is, it would have been helpful for the report to present the average racial composition in the private and public sectors in each analysis as well as the average scores for the schools in each sector on the segregation index calculated by the author.

VI. REVIEW OF THE VALIDITY OF THE FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Based on the literature review and the two analyses presented in this report, it should have drawn more cautious conclusions. Recall that the author concludes: “The daily classroom experience of students in private schools exposes them to better racial mixing than the experience of students in public schools.” (p. 17)

This conclusion overreaches the data presented. Of the two analyses presented by the author, the analysis based on only students in center city Cleveland finds in favor of private schools and the national analysis finds slightly in favor of public schools. This “overreach” represents the primary weakness with the report.

In addition, the report is weakened to some extent by its one-sided tenor. The author definitively states early in the report that “private schools offer a superior education” (p. 10), despite the fact that researchers in this area have come to no clear conclusion on this question. Finally, in the literature review, the author appears to be more forgiving of the methodological weaknesses in studies that find in favor of private schools.

Nonetheless, a tone of advocacy in this report does not undermine the results of the analysis. The methodology is appropriate and the analysis is sound. It seems appropriate and fair to conclude that private school environments are not markedly more segregated than are public school environments. Moreover, public schools are likely to be more segregated than private schools in central cities.

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

The big question here is what these data, and other data on this question, mean for policymakers. They certainly touch on some important questions implicated by school-choice policies. But authors engaged in this discussion should be, and generally are, careful not to predict the future with respect to how enhanced school choice will affect racial integration in either sector. Instead, researchers can and should carefully describe the current landscape of public and private schools.

Based on such analyses, it does make sense for researchers to make cautious projections about the possible impacts of enhanced school choice with respect to racial integration. For example, if we find that private schools are heavily racially segregated as compared to public schools, this would be a reason to worry about the effects of in-

creased choice. Alternatively, if we find that private schools are more racially integrated, there may be less reason to worry about the effects of increased choice.

So, when we compare the public and private sector, what do we find? Overall, the answer is not perfectly clear. My take, based on my own work, my read of the research, and a review of this report, is that public schools across the United States are better integrated than private schools. However, the unfortunate fact is that both sectors are heavily segregated; students in both public and private schools are very likely to sit in classes with students who look like themselves (for example, based on my analysis of first grade students in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey published by the US Department of Education, 60 percent of private school students attended school in 1999 in racially homogenous classrooms, as did 47 percent of public school students⁴).

If my assessment is accurate, then I believe that policymakers should be cautious in promoting any nationwide public-private voucher programs, as such programs may well encourage students to move into even more segregated classrooms.

On the other hand, the existing public-private voucher programs are geared toward specific types of students, either in center cities or in failing schools or from economically disadvantaged households. Reflecting on the implications of such programs requires analyses of subgroups of students. The report in question is useful here in reviewing the evidence from Cleveland, Milwaukee, and Washington DC as well as presenting results from a new analysis of Cleveland. While each of the analyses described would be stronger were they based on classroom data, they nonetheless present strong evidence that, in central cities, public

schools are more segregated than private schools. A reasonable inference to be drawn from this evidence is that public-private voucher schemes in these cities are unlikely to have the deleterious effect of moving students into private schools that are more racially segregated than the public schools that they would leave.

Furthermore, this result is predictable given the racial dynamics in metropolitan areas and cities across the country. In most major metropolitan areas, the center cities have very low percentages of white residents as compared to the entire region. It is also true that, since public schools educate roughly 90 percent of students, the racial composition in the public schools closely resembles the composition of all residents within the confines of the school district. Finally, it is the case that private schools are disproportionately attended by White students; this difference is most often attributed to the tuition charged by private schools along with the fact that White students are less likely than their peers of other ethnicities to be economically disadvantaged.

As a result, when we define racial integration as having a racial balance near that of the surrounding metropolitan area, we create a predictable outcome. That is, for a school in a center city to be integrated, it needs to enroll more White students since the surrounding metro area generally has a greater concentration of Whites than the center city. Since private schools are generally “whiter” than public schools, the predictable result is that, in center cities, private schools are more integrated than public schools.

That the result is predictable does not decrease its importance. In the end, this report finds private schools in center cities are better integrated than are public schools in the same cities. This finding is believable as it

is consistent with the intuition described above and is important for policymakers as they consider the potential positive or negative effects of expanded school choice in center cities across the United States.

NOTES & REFERENCES

- ¹ Ritter, G. W. & Lauver, S. C. (April 2003) *Racial integration for young students in public and private schools: New evidence from the ECLS-K*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL, April 21-25, 2003.
- ² Ritter, Gary W., Rush, Alison, & Rush, Joel. (2002) How Might School Choice Affect Racial Integration in Schools? New Evidence from the ECLS-K. *Georgetown Public Policy Review*. 7, 2, 125-136.
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- ⁴ Ritter, G. W. & Lauver, S. C. (April 2003) *Racial integration for young students in public and private schools: New evidence from the ECLS-K*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL, April 21-25, 2003.

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