



FOUR WAYS SCHOOL CHOICE WORSENS SEGREGATION



Done right, school choice can help desegregate schools, breaking the link between often-segregated housing and school enrollment. But this will not happen if the value of choice is placed above the goal of desegregation; the two goals need to work together. Increased options must be combined with constraints that further student integration.

However, this approach, known as “controlled choice,” is the exception, not the rule, in the United States. Most choice programs in our country do not take desegregation into account. In a [recent brief](#) published by the [National Coalition on School Diversity](#), NEPC Fellow [Casey Cobb](#) of the University of Connecticut uses research to answer the question of whether school choice programs resegregate American schools. The answer, he finds, is a resounding “yes.” But this can change.

Here are four ways Professor Cobb finds that choice programs currently contribute to racial segregation.

- 1. Parent Preference:** Given the choice, White parents tend to opt for schools with lower proportions of students of color. For example, a [2016 peer-reviewed study](#) in which White participants were asked to rate the likelihood of enrolling their children in schools with varying characteristics, a high-performing school with more than 65% Black enrollment was found less attractive than a low-performing school with less than 20% Black enrollment. As a result of this and other factors, Cobb notes that multiple studies have found that charter schools are more racially and ethnically homogeneous than surrounding non-charter schools.
- 2. Parent Privilege:** Studies have shown that upper-middle-class and middle-class parents, who are more likely to be White, tend to have resources (financial, social, and

otherwise) that help them navigate often complicated choice programs in such a way that they achieve their desired outcomes, which often involve enrolling their children in schools with higher proportions of White students, thus worsening segregation.

3. **Charter School Choice:** Multiple studies have found that charters are less likely to serve English learners, a situation that can exacerbate segregation. (They're also less likely to serve students with disabilities.) This is not a coincidence. In their book *School's Choice: How Charter Schools Control Access and Shape Enrollment*, Wagma Mommandi and NEPC Director Kevin Welner, both of the University of Colorado Boulder, describe 13 different ways in which charters shape their student bodies, often to the detriment of integration. Their approaches include implementing cumbersome application processes that weed out students the schools would prefer not to enroll, targeting marketing to specific populations, and even by simply stating that they just don't have the ability to provide services such as English language or bilingual instruction.
4. **Lack of Accountability:** Cobb emphasizes the research finding that choice programs are largely unregulated. This lack of regulation is combined with an overall lack of attention to racial integration, which leads to segregation. "[T]he evidence shows that if school choice programs cannot or do not pay attention to social class and race, they generally increase segregation among schools," Cobb writes. For instance, in many states neovouchers (which fund vouchers through tuition tax credits) can be used by even the wealthiest of families to offset the cost of K-12 private schools. Given the correlation between income and race, this exacerbates segregation. Yet even in states such as Louisiana that do limit certain types of vouchers to low-income families, a 2017 analysis found that most voucher users end up increasing segregation in the private schools they chose. These same students had, on average, furthered integration in the public schools they had previously attended.

In unregulated choice systems, these and other factors play out in ways that undermine societal goals. But controlled choice plans offer a way to grant individual choice preferences while also honoring policy preferences. As explained by Penn State professor and NEPC Fellow Erica Frankenberg, *districts with these plans* can use "the racial composition of a small area where a student lives as part of its diversity measure." Preferences then prioritize choices that would likely enhance a school's diversity. While enrollment decisions for specific children would not be based on a child's own race or ethnicity, the school's enrollment would be diversified by neighborhoods, which are often themselves segregated.

NEPC Resources on School Choice

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

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