



School Choice and Segregation by Race, Class, and Achievement

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This chapter summarizes the empirical literature on the growth in school choice options, the increasing diversity of the school-aged population, and the segregation of America's schools by race, socioeconomic status, and student ability. Research findings suggest choice schools and programs are as segregated, and in some instances, more segregated by race and socioeconomic status (SES) than the other schools in their local community. Moreover, many forms of choice also segregate students by ability and achievement levels. The ways that school choice options are designed and implemented result in very little desegregation. The exceptions to this generalization are intradistrict full magnet programs that operate under conditions of controlled choice, interdistrict desegregation plans, and some secular private schools.

The reasons that most choice options are segregated by race, SES, and in some cases by ability, are complex. Four principal reasons emerged from the research findings, however: (1) many choice programs are designed to provide education to selective student populations, such as the gifted or special-needs students; (2) choice programs formally and informally allow schools to select students, thereby including some youth while excluding others; (3) there is a scarcity of interdistrict choice options that could capture the diversity in larger metropolitan communities; and (4) parents exhibit preferences for schools with student bodies similar to their own demographic backgrounds.

The preponderance of social science research indicates that students who participate in almost all forms of choice attend schools that are segregated but this need not be the case. If policy makers are interested in promoting choice schools that are diverse, they can design programs that support and encourage integrated schools.

Policymakers can restructure existing choice plans and design new ones that create genuine and realistic opportunities for diverse education. To that end, it is recommended that policymakers:

- Redesign current choice policies to ensure diversity.

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- Provide more transportation to students and information about diversity and choice options to parents.
- Increase and enforce accountability among choice schools.
- Redesign public/private sector relationships to ensure diversity.