



Fear of Segregation Is No Argument against School Choice

by Anita Nelam

Summary

Defenders of the status quo in education often argue that school choice will lead to racial and economic segregation of students in American schools. But the evidence suggests that student populations in private schools are already more diverse than those in public schools—and that school choice will encourage greater diversity in all schools.

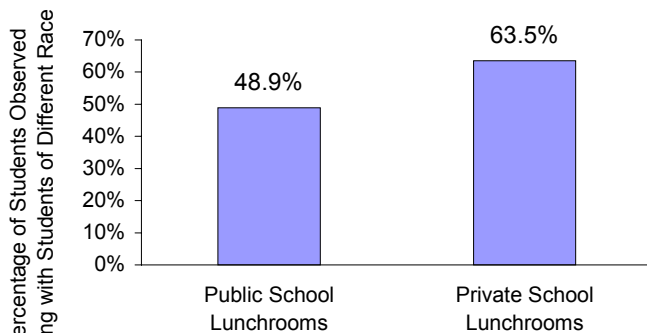
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Many opponents of school choice say that parents should not be given more freedom to choose which schools their children attend because that will lead to the segregation of students by race and income. This argument, however, displays a serious lack of confidence in the people of Michigan that cannot be supported by the evidence.

Two important facts largely refute the argument. First, Michigan's public schools are already among the most segregated in the country—in fact, it would be difficult to make them more so. Second, private schools—where school choice opponents fear students will go—are far more racially integrated than public schools.

In *Resegregation in American Schools*, a June 1999 study, the Harvard University Civil Rights Project ranked Michigan schools as among the most segregated in the nation. For the 1996-97 school year, the percentage of African-Americans who attended majority-white schools in Michigan was 17.5 percent—third lowest in the nation. Conversely, the percentage of African-Americans who enrolled in primarily minority schools was 61.6 percent—the highest out of all 50 states. Only 19.8 percent of white students—the second lowest percentage in the nation—attended schools that were typically black.

Racial Integration in Public and Private Schools



Source: Greene and Mellow, *Integration Where It Counts*, August 1998.

Research suggests that parentally chosen private schools offer a more racially integrated environment than do government-assigned public schools.

So whether you are a white or an African-American public school student in Michigan, the majority of your classmates probably look just like you. Add the fact that predominantly African-American schools also have high concentrations of students whose parents are poor, and you have precisely the situation opponents of school choice say will be “caused” if school choice moves forward.

U. S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley once expressed a romanticized view of public schooling. “Quality public schools are the foundation of a democracy and a free-enterprise economic system,” Riley opined. “The ‘common school’—the concept upon which our public school system was built—

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teaches children important lessons about the commonality and diversity of American culture. These lessons are conveyed not only through what is taught in the classroom, but the very experience of attending school with a diverse mix of students.”

Riley’s description is more fantasy than reality. As an African-American high school student in New York City in the late 1960s, I was assigned to one of the worst public schools in the system. I had to pass by one of the best public schools in order to get there. Why? Because the school to which I was assigned was for African-Americans and the school I had to bypass was for whites.

Contrast this with my experience as an elementary school student at a parochial school in the South Bronx. I attended school with Irish, Italian, and Puerto Rican students in addition to other African-American students. This school took all comers, as most religious schools do today. Did I learn about the commonality and diversity of American culture at that school? Yes, I did.

Secretary Riley is partially correct. You do learn more when you choose to attend school with a diverse mix of students. As a child I learned to love Salsa music when Salsa wasn’t cool. I learned to love pasta cooked the way they do it in Northern Italy. I learned that not all Irish can sing. But most importantly, I learned that underneath the color of our skin, we’re not all that different.

In *Integration Where it Counts: A Study of Racial Integration in Public and Private School Lunchrooms*, author Jay P. Greene of the University of Texas confirmed that “private schools tend to offer a more racially integrated environment than do public schools.” Public schools replicate the segregation found in their attendance areas, while private schools draw from a variety of neighborhoods. In another study, *Civic Values in Public and Private Schools*, Greene found that all but a few private schools are not only more racially integrated, but also “display greater racial tolerance and generally convey stronger democratic values than do public schools.” The work of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy suggests Michigan schools mirror these national trends.

Sadly, the average public school student in America, particularly in our inner cities, does not have the opportunity to learn in a racially and economically diverse classroom. America’s truly integrated schools are not the public, but rather the private or independent schools, chosen freely and supported by parents.

Once again, actual experience disproves a myth. Fear of segregation is no reason to oppose school choice. It is a reason to champion it.

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(Anita Nelam is a Detroit-based education reform activist. From 1995 to 1998 she served as director of admissions for the Friends School in Detroit, Michigan’s only Quaker school. More information on education reform and school choice can be found at www.mackinac.org. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided the author and her affiliations are cited.)

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