

School Choice and Racism: A Myth Devoid of Context

There has been a lot of [recent discussion](#) on the racial impact of school choice. Critics have used [research reports to corroborate their claims](#) that school choice increases racial segregation. While these claims have a factual basis, they are in dire need of context.

School choice can [increase racial segregation](#), but not for reasons anyone should fear.

First, we need to differentiate between [de facto](#) (by choice) and [de jure](#) (under law) segregation. People choose who to openly associate with. This is reflected in the neighborhoods they live in, the clubs they join, and where they choose to work. Forming [groups is natural](#), though occasionally [problematic](#).

As a nation, [we fought hard](#) against legal segregation—a fight school choice advocates have no intention of reviving. Today, it is illegal for public schools or schools that receive public funding to discriminate on the basis of race or disability (among numerous other traits). No credible proponents of school choice want to rollback these basic civil rights.

The documented increase in segregation as a by-product of choice exists in a different context than the [racial issues of the civil](#) rights era. Charter schools in urban minority neighborhoods often offer an alternative to failing traditional public schools. The harsh reality is that the traditional school district model has failed minorities. Therefore, it is not surprising that alternatives designed to offer more choices to parents and students have disproportionately attracted students of color.

In this way, the segregation effect is no more harmful than that of modern [Historical Black Colleges/Universities \(HBCU\)](#). With their traditional mission to serve black students, these institutions are embraced – not criticized – for the outcomes they offer a historically disadvantaged group. Similarly, the segregation effect of school choice should not be seen as an instrument of racism, but rather as progress against a failing of the traditional public school system.

While [there is nothing inherently racist about school choice](#), there is a subtle, unintentional racism espoused by its opponents. In its purest form, school choice seeks to expand the number options available to all parents and students. However, wealthy families already can and often do practice school choice. They can afford to buy homes in areas with high-performing traditional public schools or send their kids to private school. Without school choice, students from low-income households cannot enjoy these same advantages.

There is a subtle racism built into the assumption that poor people should not be allowed to decide what is best for their kids—a luxury the rich already have. There is a subtle racism in demanding poor children, who are often people of color, be locked into schools we know are failing them.

We have a lot of problems to address in our education system, but racism in school choice is not one of them. It is not racist to extend privileges to the poor that the rich have enjoyed for centuries. It is not racist to increase the autonomy of families to make decisions about their children's education. It is not racist to empower underprivileged minorities. School choice advocates do not want to destroy public education, they want to save it. In the various debates surrounding education reform, it is important to remember our shared goal. We want better schools that lead to more opportunities for all of America's children.

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