

School choice policies may impact segregation and diversity of public schools

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Despite decades of educational reform and legal efforts, many U.S.

schools are experiencing increasing segregation, with 16 percent of public schools serving both minority and high poverty students. A Supreme Court decision a decade ago eliminated the use of certain types of district policies that had been voluntarily adopted by some school districts to address rising segregation. Now, a Penn State researcher is looking at how student assignment policies may be impacting the diversity of public schools.

According to Erica Frankenberg, associate professor of education and demography and co-director of the Center for Education and Civil Rights at Penn State, the new generation of school choice policies adopted in response to legal decisions may actually be increasing school inequalities, despite their goals of maintaining integrated schools.

"The current [student](#) choice policies do not take race into consideration, but it is unclear whether or not they are creating diverse schools," Frankenberg explained. "In order to avoid many of the perceived legal risks in adopting policies based on race, many school districts now use socioeconomic status in assigning students, which may not be as effective for racial integration."

Historically, student assignment policies were meant to reduce segregation and enhance diversity; however, current student choice policies and how they affect diversity in an era of increasing segregation haven't been analyzed.

"Maintaining and improving school integration is important, as previous research has shown that students of all races who attend diverse schools demonstrate higher academic achievement in reading, language, mathematics and science," reported Frankenberg.

In order to assist some districts in pursuing integration, in 2009 the federal government funded 11 school districts to restructure their student

assignment policies, including Jefferson County, Kentucky. In her study, Frankenberg analyzed the use of a new race-conscious, student-assignment policy being used in Jefferson County.

The 100,000-student school [district](#) was previously comprised of mostly black and white students, but in the last decade, Jefferson County doubled in Latino student enrollments. The district also includes students from both low-income and wealthy households and also is one of the nation's most desegregated systems, a product of a 1970s court-order merging of city and suburban districts to further desegregation.

At the same time, analysis of Census data demonstrates relatively high segregation of black, white and Latino populations in the district.

"Because of their racial and socio-economic composition and strong policy design, the school district is the best-case scenario for this type of analysis. If we found that Jefferson County was failing to create racially and economically diverse schools, chances are these types of policies wouldn't be able to achieve diversity goals in any school in the country," Frankenberg said.

Frankenberg evaluated data from the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data from 2006 to 2013, which provides annual school-level information about student's race and ethnicity, as well as free- and reduced-lunch data. Frankenberg supplemented this information with data from the school district for the years 2013 to 2015, along with information provided by the students' kindergarten applications.

She found that Jefferson County's newer approach to school assignment has resulted in steady enrollment growth with no evidence of flight by white or affluent students to private schools or neighboring school districts. The schools in the district remain considerably diverse, and while there is evidence of a slight growth in racial segregation, Jefferson

County's policy is more effective than most, with segregation levels remaining considerably lower than most large school districts.

"I found that white and Latino student integration in the district was increasing, while black student integration fell. Integration of low-income and middle-class students remained stable as well," Frankenberg explained.

Frankenberg suggested that along with Jefferson County's student assignment policies, the history of the school district may have also played a role in her findings. "Jefferson County has a long history of integration. It is part of the Supreme Court's legacy of *Brown vs. Board of Education* and the implementation of school desegregation. Although Jefferson County fiercely fought school desegregation in the 1970s, they voluntarily continued their integration plan once court oversight ended in 2000."

Using student application data from 2014, Frankenberg also compared the segregation of students under the existing policy, along with several other common methods of assigning students that are not necessarily focused on diversity. She found that students were less segregated in the district's managed-choice policy than under alternative assignment scenarios such as neighborhood schools or granting every child's first choice of school.

"Such a simulation provides real-time evidence about how district [policy](#) design relates to student composition, and was especially valuable this past school year when the state of Kentucky was threatening to pass a neighborhood schools bill that would have required the district to go back to neighborhood schools," noted Frankenberg.

According to current population projections, there will be no racial or ethnic majority in the U.S. in a few decades, so it is important to that the

new student assignment policies lead to improved student outcomes in the midst of this diversity. "Educators will need to understand how to attend to the development of children and youth in a multiracial setting," Frankenberg said. "If schools cannot facilitate such development, young people are likely to have increased prejudice and higher dropout rates, with significant implications for the United States' social and economic health."

In the future, Frankenberg plans to analyze student assignment policies in other [school districts](#), and compare [school](#) histories and how they might be affecting policies. She is helping to organize the Center for Education and Civil Rights' "[Furthering Diversity in K-12 Schools Through Student Assignment](#)" conference, taking place June 1st at the Georgetown Law Center in Washington, D.C. This meeting will include new research about what diversity efforts districts are undertaking and what is known about the effectiveness of these models.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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