

School choice does not achieve social mix across schools

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Larkmead School. Credit: CC-BY-SA-2.5,2.0,1.0

A new study has found that school choice is associated with higher levels of segregation among school children from different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds.

Research by the University of Bristol and Cardiff University, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, shows that far from encouraging integration and equal opportunity, choice-based systems are associated with higher levels of pupil segregation; potentially leading to schools that are more homogenous in their social composition. This is a consistent finding across different [school choice](#) systems internationally, which researchers

say highlights the need for policymakers to reconsider the effects of [school](#) admissions policies.

Deborah Wilson, Professor of Public Policy and Management at the University of Bristol and co-author of the study, said: "We already know that children's [school years](#) are a major determinant of their future life chances. The mechanisms by which students are allocated to schools play a fundamental part in determining access to educational opportunities. What our study shows is that school choice, while politically popular, is not the policy instrument by which greater integration of pupils across schools can be achieved."

Parental choice of school has been part of the education system in England and Wales since 1988 and is similarly well established in countries such as the United States, Chile and across Europe, where choice-based mechanisms are now frequently part of school admissions policies.

The aim of this study was to contribute to the debate on the effects of choice-based admissions mechanisms on [pupil](#) allocation and school composition by conducting a systematic, international, cross-disciplinary review.

Researchers mapped the evidence that relates parental exercise of choice to the institutional context in which it takes place (admissions policies), and to the outcomes of that process in terms of the resulting allocation of pupils to schools.

One of the study's key findings was that school choice is consistently associated with higher levels of segregation of pupils between schools, in different countries and across choice systems that have been in place for different lengths of time.

Another of the study's key findings was the impact of localized factors such as the social composition of the neighbourhood, the size of the school district and the number of schools in an area, all of which affected how different types of pupils were allocated to different schools.

Gary Bridge, co-author and Professor of Human Geography at Cardiff University, cautioned that there are many factors at play in different geographical contexts that make it difficult to generalise the findings: "The reasons for the observed segregation patterns are highly contextual, and include the mix of schools, socio-demographic patterns and specific [choice](#) mechanisms as well as parental preferences, and policymakers need to be sensitive to these contextual issues."

A further recommendation is that admissions should be coordinated at urban municipal/local authority, or equivalent level, rather than being at the discretion of individual schools.

More information: School choice and equality of opportunity: an international systematic review. www.nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Wilson%20and%20Bridge%20report%20April%202019.pdf

Provided by University of Bristol

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