

# Understanding segregation and school choice

June 8 2022, by Jaclyn Severance

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Are school choice programs contributing to segregation in American schools?

The answer is undoubtedly yes, according to a recent research brief published by the National Coalition on School Diversity and written by

Casey Cobb, the Raymond Neag Endowed Professor of Educational Policy in UConn's Neag School of Education.

But so-called "controlled choice" programs that consider a variety of student and school characteristics and seek to balance school enrollments by race, wealth, and achievement may offer opportunities to promote more equitable school environments.

"There's been a lot of research on the benefits of integrated schools," says Cobb, who studies [school choice](#), accountability, school reform, and educational equity and inequity.

"For one thing, it fosters greater cross-racial understanding," he explains. "But we've also seen that it improves [student learning](#) and improves the [academic achievement](#) and critical thinking skills in students of all backgrounds."

On the flip side, he says, are the pronounced negative consequences of hyper-segregated schools, where concentrations of poverty within historically minoritized populations—particularly in [urban environments](#), where school demographics are often reflective of housing segregation—lead to significant harms to students.

"They are further marginalized, more than they already are," Cobb says. "Schools located in high-poverty areas can't seem to get the resources that are on par with schools that are located in more affluent communities. They have more difficulty attracting and retaining high quality teachers and administrators."

School choice programs are often touted as a means to addressing systemic inequities in schools, but in the United States, they largely operate as unregulated "open enrollment" programs, where students and their parents are allowed to choose which school they attend. Without

regulation, and without an explicit focus on the goal of better integrated school environments, segregation becomes more pronounced.

Studies have shown that [charter schools](#), for example—which in an unregulated system are essentially free market startups—end up more racially, ethnically, and economically homogenous than the surrounding traditional public schools.

"I've done some of the primary research myself," says Cobb, "but I've also reviewed dozens and dozens of studies, and the overall conclusion is that the unregulated programs will exacerbate already existing stratified systems. It's not like the systems aren't stratified to begin with, but these unregulated programs tend to actually make it worse."

While there are some instances where states have tried to incentivize charter schools to consider the racial and economic balance of their enrollment, it's not highly enforced, he says. And even regulated systems still rely on voluntary participation—people applying to certain schools and then accepting offers and ultimately enrolling.

"The regulations are trying to incentivize and to guard against further exacerbation of social stratification," says Cobb. "There are great challenges, I think, for policymakers, because there's only so many levers that they can pull, or have at their disposal, because they rely on voluntary choice programs to meet their goals."

Ultimately, controlled choice programs do offer a way to grant individual school preferences while also honoring policy goals—but those goals can't be achieved without targeted focus and explicit emphasis on breaking the persistent links between segregating housing and school enrollment.

**More information:** Research brief:

[www.school-diversity.org/ncsd\\_rb15/](http://www.school-diversity.org/ncsd_rb15/) Jaclyn Severance

Provided by University of Connecticut

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