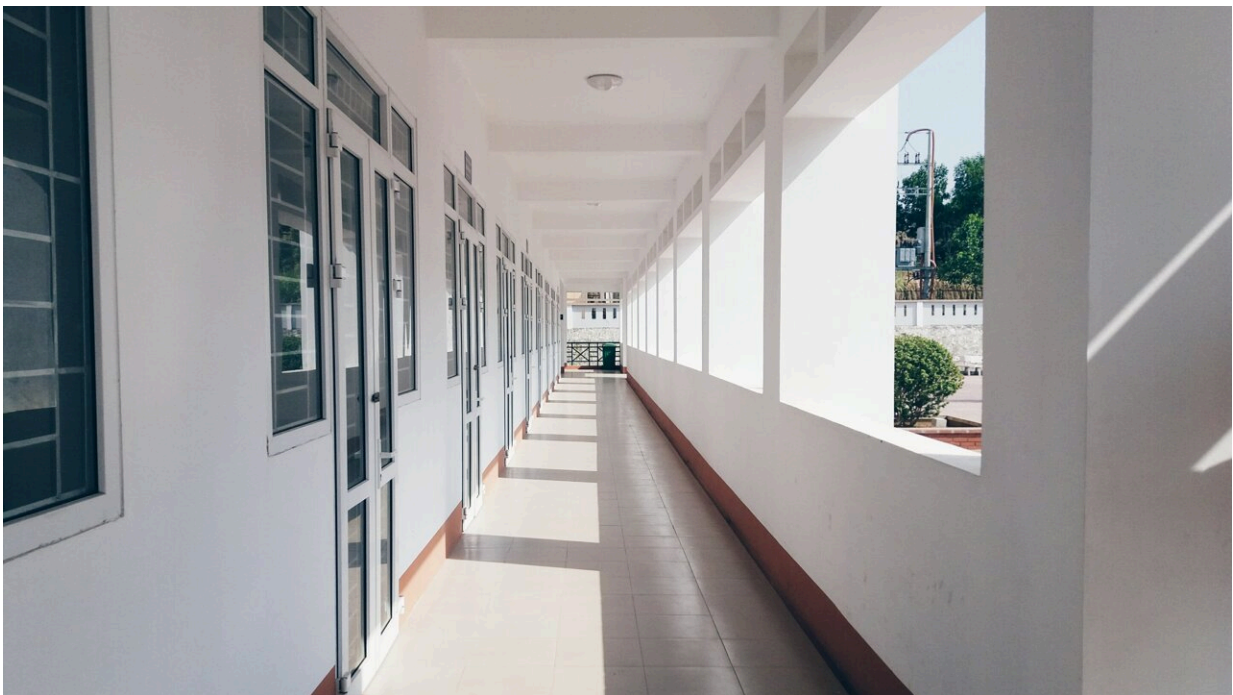


Study shows families making choices that perpetuate segregation in city with school choice policy

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Even though *Brown v. Board of Education* outlawed school segregation in 1954, racially segregated schools have persisted in practice. In recent years, the decades-long trend of white flight to suburbs has reversed in some areas as some white residents are moving to city centers. New

research from the University of Kansas shows that in one such city that also has school choice policy, families are making decisions that perpetuate school segregation despite more opportunities for integration.

Washington, D.C., is a major metropolitan area with a school district policy that allows parents to choose the school their children attend. Data has shown that [white families](#) are returning to the city's core in recent years, and while in theory that could lead to more integrated schools in a city with large minority populations, a new study shows that is not happening.

As families regularly move between schools to get the most desirable one, they do not use their voice in attempt to improve schools and even game the lottery system that is designed to assign to students equitably among systems.

Bryan Mann, assistant professor of educational leadership & [policy studies](#) at KU, was lead author of a study that interviewed nine [white parents](#) about how they chose their children's schools. This was part of a broader study that interviewed 20 parents and triangulated findings with GIS mapping and [quantitative data](#). This portion of the study used Exit, Voice, Loyalty, a framework common in organizational theory and political research. It examines why people choose to stay with or leave an organization.

Exit is reflected by those who choose to leave, loyalty is reflected by those who stay, and voice is represented in the choice to advocate for changes and improvements to a system. The study, written with Annah Rogers of the University of West Alabama, was published in the journal *Urban Education*.

"When you think about community-driven school reform, you think about loyalty and how parents use their voice to change things. I was

curious about the school ecosystem in D.C. that has gentrification and if it still tracks with these ideas of loyalty and voice," Mann said. "Here people can exit a school or exit the system altogether and go to a private school. We found those who have the tools to exit or work within the system to move are more likely to move. That's part of what exacerbated school segregation."

The study focused on in-depth interviews with parents who recently moved into the city and whose children attended district schools. [Part of a larger study focusing on gentrification and its effects on school integration and choice](#), it asked parents what they valued in a school and how they behaved in making their choices. Interviewees expressed logistical values such as commute time.

Several said they wanted to avoid schools near downtown as that would exacerbate commute time because of heavy traffic. However, those with the means reported making alternate plans to work around such concerns in ways like flexible work schedules if that allowed them to get their child in a desired school. Parents also said they largely valued schools that feed from one elementary into a prestigious middle school, and they largely valued bilingual curriculum. Low-performing schools were said to be schools to avoid, not improve.

Few parents mentioned racial makeup of schools, though the ones who did indicated schools with large minority populations were to be avoided.

In terms of behaviors, parents frequently reported playing the school system's lottery every year. The lottery is intended to distribute students evenly among schools, based on available seats and where a family lives. But parents reported entering their children each year in hopes they would get selected for the one they wanted most. They even reported gaming the system, which it is set up to avoid, using tactics such as establishing a mailing address close to the school they wanted.

"This shows there is competition between children for spots in schools. This is different than competition between schools for children. Competition for spots undermines improvements and equality for schools," Mann said. "Families showed that with all the ways they compete. It's a lottery system that is supposed to be fair and 'ungameable.' But they still found ways to try to get the schools they viewed as prestigious."

Parents also routinely mentioned the importance of "playing the long game." If their student didn't get the school they wanted one year, they would try again in each subsequent year in hopes of getting their child to a more desirable school to then feed into a better middle school.

The lottery system includes public and charter schools, and when students did not get the school they wanted, they also reported having an easier time changing schools in transition grades such as pre-K/kindergarten, fifth and ninth grades. In addition to manipulating the system, others reported a willingness to move out of the city to avoid schools they didn't want or sending their children to [private school](#).

"Exit is the default, and disloyalty is the norm," Mann and Rogers wrote about the findings that showed parents rarely used their voice in an attempt to improve schools and preferred leaving schools or the system.

The strategies and choices of parents in the study are important to consider, as "the long game remains separate and unequal," the authors wrote. Census data shows that in 1954, D.C. [public schools](#) enrolled 57% Black/minority and 43% white students with complete segregation. The Brown decision led to white flight on a large scale, and by 1990, the percentages were 96% and 4%, respectively.

Gentrification from 2000 to 2019 shows that trend reversing, but not equally, as the authors cite data that shows white enrollment in D.C.

schools was 11.9% in the 2018-19 school year, even though white city population had increased to 39.6% in 2020. [Racial segregation is persisting in the city's schools, the data shows.](#)

The results should be considered as part of the national debate about school choice policy and indicate that it tends to result in continued [school segregation](#) as affluent families and those with means navigate the systems to their benefit instead of working to improve schools viewed as less prestigious. Even when parents voiced concern about other children, communities and schools, the market-based school and housing system encouraged them to advocate for improving choice mechanisms rather than improving the schools themselves.

"If the ideal is a fully integrated school system, it's barely trending in that direction, and it is not reaching the ideal," Mann said. "These lessons are important because policymakers across the country are debating similar ideas, and understanding the outcomes of such policies is vital. This can be an early indicator of what to expect with these types of choice policies."

"People don't often talk about what happens when [parents](#) are competing for spots in schools. Here it resulted in continued segregation, and we were able to get a better understanding of how families made the decisions that led to it."

More information: Bryan Mann et al, The Inequality of the Long Game in a City With School Choice and Changing Racial Demographics, *Urban Education* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/00420859231153415](#)

Provided by University of Kansas

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