

Private choices, public consequences: Magnet school choice and segregation by race and poverty.

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Private Choices, Public Consequences: Magnet School Choice and Segregation by Race and Poverty

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Abstract

Little is known about the influence of school choice programs on race and economic segregation in public schools. Studies of housing segregation suggest that small differences in the preferences of particular race or socioeconomic groups have the potential to produce large-scale patterns of segregation. In this study, I raise three questions regarding the link between individual choice and educational segregation: first, are the school choices of higher status families driven by a desire to avoid schools populated by students they consider to be of lower race or class status? Second, can other school features, such as safety, appearance, and educational quality, explain apparent race or class-based choices? Third, can families' choices of schools be linked directly with segregation patterns independent of school district policies that may interfere with (or galvanize) the ability of people to exercise their choices? To answer these questions, I analyze magnet school application data from a large city to explore the choices of families for schools that vary in racial and economic composition. Findings show that white families avoid schools with higher percentages of non-white students. The tendency of white families to avoid schools with higher percentages of non-whites cannot be accounted for by other school characteristics such as test scores, safety, or poverty rates. I also find that wealthier families avoid schools with higher poverty rates. The choices of white and wealthier students lead to increased racial and economic segregation in the neighborhood schools that these students leave. Moreover, the link between choice and segregation cannot be explained by school district policies. Findings suggest that laissez faire school choice policies, which allow the unfettered movement of children in and out of schools, may further deteriorate the educational conditions for disadvantaged students left behind in local public schools.

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