

FAQs

Can a school choice program lead to more integrated schools?

Yes. The research shows that students in school choice programs attend more integrated schools than their public school counterparts. All the available empirical research finds that vouchers are moving students into private schools that are substantially less segregated than public schools.

Private schools in voucher programs are less racially segregated than their public school counterparts. Vouchers break down neighborhood barriers and draw students together, providing a more integrated school experience. The empirical research shows that vouchers put students into less segregated schools.

On average, private school classrooms are more integrated than nearby public school classrooms. Our nation's public schools and districts are heavily segregated. Public schools are so segregated primarily because of residential segregation. Attendance at public schools is largely determined by where people live, which guarantees that segregation in housing patterns will always be reproduced in public schools. Desegregation efforts have largely failed because they are geographically limited; white families who move to the suburbs cannot legally be forced to bus their children across municipal lines. Private schools, by contrast, can draw students with no limitation to geography. In fact, private schools typically draw from a much larger geographic area than public schools. That means private schools can mitigate the effects of residential segregation in a way public schools cannot match.

Myth: Vouchers Will Lead to Increased Segregation

Opponents often claim that vouchers will lead to racial segregation. They argue that white parents would use vouchers to choose segregated schools. Many believe that private schools create a segregated environment compared to public schools, and perpetuate a system of inequality.

Unfortunately, some research uses flawed methods to measure segregation. Under one common research method, a school that is 98 percent white is considered perfectly integrated if it is in a school district that is also 98 percent white. This is regarded as complete integration even if its neighboring district is 98 percent minority.

For some, the idea of vouchers

leading to racial segregation dates back to southern segregationists in the 1950s. Then, educational vouchers were briefly viewed as a way to maintain segregation in the classroom. Though the idea quickly fizzled out, the stigma that vouchers will divide schools by race continues in the minds of many Americans.

Facts: Private Schools Break Down Racial Barriers

The modern school choice movement has no connection to segregationists—quite the contrary. School choice is now disproportionately a minority-supported issue.¹ Private schools in voucher programs are required not to discriminate.

Public schools are heavily segregated. In the current government school system, school attendance is

determined by where students live. As a result, it is difficult for public schools to avoid reproducing the segregation that arises from housing patterns.

Efforts to desegregate public schools, such as busing students to different districts or the establishment of magnet schools, are unpopular with families and have been unsuccessful in substantially reducing racial segregation in public schools. As a result, it seems unlikely that desegregation will be a reality in public schools in the near future.

While public schools must adhere to district lines, private schools are able to draw from a much wider range of students. And parents are more likely to trust private schools to handle the challenges of a multiracial environment; federal data confirm that *racial disruptions are less common*

in private schools than in public ones.² This gives private schools an opportunity to create a more diverse student body. Indeed, studies have shown that private schools are pulling ahead of public schools when it comes to integration.

Evidence: Research Shows Private Schools in Voucher Programs are Less Segregated than Public Schools

To get an accurate measurement of segregation in schools, segregation must be defined in a way that measures the racial composition of the school by an objective standard. One method is to compare each school to its metropolitan area rather than to its district or municipality (which may itself be drawn with segregated boundaries). Another method is to measure racial homogeneity—for example, measuring the percentage of schools that are at least 90 percent white or minority. Research based on these methods shows that private schools in voucher programs are less racially homogenous and more closely resemble their metro areas than public schools.

In Cleveland, 19 percent of voucher recipients attended schools that fell within ten percentage points of the racial makeup of the metropolitan area. Only 5 percent of public schools met this criterion. Furthermore, 61 percent of public school students attended racially homogenous schools, compared to only 50 percent of private school students.³

In Milwaukee's public schools, 58 percent of elementary school and 44 percent of secondary school students attend racially homogenous schools.

At participating private schools, this number was reduced to 50 percent, and 29 percent, respectively.⁴

In Washington, D.C., 85 percent of public school students attend racially homogenous schools, compared to 47 percent of students at participating private schools.⁵

In 2006, Greg Forster calculated a "segregation index" by measuring the difference between the racial composition of each school and the racial composition of the area's school-age population. Using these data, he used statistical analysis to compare segregation levels between voucher-participating private schools and public schools. He found that these results showed less segregation in private schools. In Milwaukee, private schools were 13 points less segregated than public ones. In Cleveland, the difference was an 18-point drop in segregation from public to private schools.

Many studies that purport to measure segregation in schools use inadequate methods, such as failing to adopt an objective standard of what counts as segregation.

Seven studies have compared segregation in voucher-participating private schools to segregation in nearby public schools using valid empirical methods. All seven find that students using vouchers are attending private schools that are less segregated than nearby public schools:

- Greg Forster (Foundation for Educational Choice, 2006) found that private schools participating in the Milwaukee voucher program are 13 points less segregated than Milwaukee public schools on a "segregation index" that compares

the racial composition of each school to the composition of the greater metro area.

- Greg Forster (Foundation for Educational Choice, 2006) found that private schools participating in Cleveland's voucher program are 18 points less segregated than Cleveland public schools on the segregation index.
- A 2005 Manhattan Institute (Jay Greene and Marcus Winters) found that Washington, D.C. public schools differ from the racial composition of the metro area by a greater amount than private schools participating in the city's voucher program (40 v. 34 percentage points) and that public school students are more likely to attend racially homogenous schools than voucher students (85 v. 47 percent).
- Howard Fuller and Deborah Greiveldinger (Marquette University, 2002) learned that Milwaukee public school students were more likely to attend racially homogeneous schools than voucher students, both in elementary schools (58 v. 50 percent) and high schools (44 v. 29 percent). This result confirmed Marquette University studies in 1999 and 2000 that produced similar findings.
- Jay Greene (then at the University of Texas-Austin, 1999) found that among Cleveland elementary and middle school students, public school students were less likely than voucher students to attend schools whose racial composition was similar to that of the metro area (5 v. 19 percent) and more likely to attend racially homogeneous schools (61 v. 50 percent).

¹ The Foundation for Educational Choice conducted sixteen statewide surveys over a three-year period, 2007 - 2009, and surveys consistently indicated greatest levels of voucher support among minority and disadvantaged demographic communities.

² See Jay P. Greene, "Civic Values in Public and Private Schools," in *Learning from School Choice*.

³ Jay Greene, "The Racial, Economic and Religious Context of Parental Choice in Cleveland," paper presented at the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management meeting, November 1999.

⁴ Howard Fuller and Deborah Greiveldinger, "The Impact of School Choice on Racial Integration in Milwaukee Private Schools," American Education Reform Council manuscript, August 2002.

⁵ Jay Greene and Marcus Winters, "An Evaluation of the Effects of D.C.'s Voucher Program on public School Achievement and Racial Integration After One Year," Manhattan Institute, January 2005.