

VOUCHERS WILL LEAD
TO INCREASED
SEGREGATION

Opponents of school choice often claim that vouchers lead to racial segregation, arguing that white parents 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.

85%

...of Washington D.C. students
attend racially homogeneous
public schools.

47%

...of students in the D.C.
voucher program attend
racially homogeneous public
schools.

The Facts: Private Schools Break Down Racial Barriers

Private schools participating 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 research shows that vouchers put students into less segregated schools.

The modern school choice movement has no connection to segregationists. In fact, school choice is now disproportionately a minority-supported issue. Private schools in voucher programs are required not to discriminate.

Public schools are heavily segregated, as 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. Parents are also 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. 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.

The Evidence: Private Schools In Voucher Programs Are Less Segregated Than Public Schools

In order to accurately measure 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. Studies in Cleveland, Milwaukee and Washington D.C. all found that private schools were more homogeneous than the public schools.

More recently, Greg Forster of the Friedman Foundation 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. He compared segregation levels between voucher-participating private schools and public schools and found that the 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.

The Bottom Line

Public schools are heavily segregated because they reproduce segregated housing patterns. Empirical research shows that vouchers break down racial barriers, putting students in less segregated schools.