

BROOKINGS

Report

Segregation, race, and charter schools: What do we know?

Grover J. “Russ” Whitehurst, Richard V. Reeves, and Edward Rodrigue Monday, October 24, 2016

In “Segregation, race, and charter schools: What do we know?” Brookings Senior Fellows Grover J. “Russ” Whitehurst and Richard Reeves, along with Senior Research Assistant Edward Rodrigue, find that poverty—not race—is the real challenge for segregated schools, and that improving school quality is key to closing racial achievement gaps.

Examining empirical research that measures the effect of interventions to provide low-income and minority students with access to higher-performing and more racially heterogeneous schools, the authors conclude that positive impacts on student achievement are driven by school quality.

Looking at trends in racial segregation over time, the authors find that changes in schools’ racial makeup in recent decades have been driven largely by the increase in the Hispanic and Asian American populations. While black and white students have become much more likely to share classrooms with Hispanics, blacks and whites are not more likely to share classrooms with each other than they were decades ago—the original intent of the *Brown v. Board of Education* landmark Supreme Court ruling that desegregated schools 60 years ago.

But while many school districts are less racially segregated, school segregation by family *income* has increased since 1990 both within and between school districts. The authors note that race and economic status are of course highly correlated, with black

students four times as likely to be in a high-poverty school as a low-poverty one; for whites the ratio is the other way round.

The authors also focus on how charter school systems influence segregation, finding that while national averages show that charters serve almost equal numbers of white, black, and Hispanic students, individual charter schools are generally more racially segregated than traditional public schools that serve the same geographical area. In urban areas, the charter schools into which black students transfer from traditional public schools are substantially more segregated racially than the traditional public schools from which they exit. Despite that segregation, studies of urban charter schools present compelling evidence that high quality urban charters can overcome the effects of school segregation on student achievement.

The authors conclude, “The U.S. is an increasingly diverse nation, but remains a highly segregated one. Our schools reflect both our separateness and our inequality...The desire for more integrated schools is understandable. But it is helpful to be as clear as possible about what lies behind that desire. If the main objective is to narrow racial achievement gaps, we need to understand to what extent, and in what way, segregation influences those gaps. The weight of evidence suggests that, at least in the context of the education system, the worse educational outcomes for minority students are the result not of the racial composition of their schools, but the economic backgrounds of their fellow students, and the quality of the school itself—both of which are strongly correlated with race.”

To learn more, [read the full paper here](#).

Report Produced by **Center on Children and Families**