

How policies that promote school competition and choice are linked to school segregation.

*The past decade has seen growing concerns about the resegregation of American schools after years of effort to end their segregation. In new research, **Jeremy Fiel** argues that much of this trend is down to new policies which give families the opportunity to take advantage of schools they see as being ‘better’. Using school system data from 1993 to 2010, he finds that school segregation in cities was highest when school resources were distributed unequally across schools and districts and when families had more choice to send their children to private or charter schools.*



The shift away from the school desegregation policies of the late 20th century toward market-based reforms has raised controversy and concern about the resegregation of American schools. To understand the consequences of these changes, we must understand the more fundamental causes of segregation. Racial school segregation is a result of a common and general form of social behavior: status group competition. Individuals seek to acquire and maintain status, and group membership and out-group exclusion often serve as tools in these pursuits. The competition and conflict arising from these behaviors is also regulated by institutions, which place constraints on the form and degree of competition.

These ideas come from Max Weber’s sociological theories of social closure and status groups, and they can help us understand contemporary racial school segregation amid important demographic, social, and institutional changes.

In recent research, I argue that racial school segregation arises when school systems provide families’ incentives and opportunities to compete for school-based status and resources by sorting across schools, and when racial and ethnic identification shape families’ abilities to take advantage of these opportunities in gaining access to “better” schools. These incentives and opportunities emerge when schools are viewed as unequal—either with respect to symbolic status, perceptions of quality, or more tangible and observable resources like funds and teacher-pupil ratios—and when school systems provide families more opportunities to sort across schools and organizational boundaries.



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I examined these hypotheses using data on school systems nationwide from 1993 to 2010. Over this time period, school segregation within metropolitan areas and nonmetropolitan counties was highest when and where resources such as teachers and expenditures were more unequally distributed across schools and school districts within these areas. Segregation was also highest when and where local school systems were fragmented into more districts and provided more choice to families beyond traditional public schools (in the form of private or charter schools). Not surprisingly, district-level mandatory desegregation policies reduced segregation by regulating sorting across schools.

These patterns were exacerbated when the two focal groups approached each other in population size—this is a common proxy for racial threat or the salience of race. There is also, however, what sociologists call a “buffering effect” of overall diversity, where the presence of other groups appears to weaken racial competition and reduce segregation between any two particular groups. The increasing diversity of the student population over the past few decades may help explain the declines in segregation among most groups, despite the rollback of desegregation efforts.

None of these findings were explained by accounting for residential segregation, region, or socioeconomic characteristics of these areas. Moreover, these findings are not unique to the segregation of whites from minorities. There are similar patterns for segregation between blacks and whites, Hispanics and whites, and blacks and Hispanics. This supports the notion that similar forms of social behavior, in interaction with institutional arrangements, drive segregation as a general social phenomenon.

This all suggests that policies and institutional arrangements that promote competition for schools through decentralization and choice may have the unintended consequence of heightening segregation—particularly in areas with tenuous racial/ethnic relationships. Conversely, efforts to reduce disparities in resources or quality between schools and school districts could attenuate the competition that fuels segregation. More generally, policymakers must be attuned to the social context in which they implement educational policies, as many changes that do not directly address school segregation will still influence the way families sort across schools.

This article is based on the paper, ‘Closing Ranks: Closure, Status Competition, and School Segregation’ in the American Journal of Sociology.

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