

Education Issue Brief

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How Does School Choice Affect Racial Integration?

Access to a high quality education is heavily tied to where families reside, which can exacerbate educational inequities for disadvantaged families. School choice options enable parents and families to send their children to schools outside their neighborhoods, which can influence the racial and economic composition of schools—potentially increasing or reducing integration in schools depending on who exercises choice and how they exercise it. The range of school choice options has grown over the last several decades across the country, igniting a debate about the way these options influence patterns of racial and economic integration. This brief examines how school choice options, including charter schools, vouchers, magnet schools, district-wide choice, and inter-district choice, affect the racial and economic integration of students.

In principle, school choice can increase integration or reduce it. On one hand, choice can improve integration by breaking the link between neighborhood residence and school enrollment, providing low-income and minority students the opportunity to attend schools with students from more affluent backgrounds. But on the other hand, school choice could reduce integration by allowing students to self-segregate. Effects might differ depending on the design of the program or the existing level of integration in schools.

Although there are strong views on both sides of this issue, the research on school choice has not been comprehensively examined to determine how different choice options influence racial and economic integration. The goal of this brief is to summarize the evidence on the effect of school choice on racial and economic integration. This brief reports on the findings from causal studies conducted over the past 20 years that have examined the link between a range of school choice options on the racial and economic compositions of schools. Based on the review, this brief discusses potential implications for policy. It then provides guidance on future directions for research on school choice, making concrete suggestions about the areas that have not been examined—particularly on research that can inform school choice policy.

Key findings on the effect of school choice on integration

This review focuses on studies conducted over the last 20 years that plausibly measure the causal impact of school choice on integration using one of two methodologies. The first type of study used student-level data to compare the level of integration for students before and after they transfer to their school of choice. These studies used longitudinally linked student-level data to follow students before and after they transfer. The second type of eligible

This brief was created by Mathematica through a grant from the Walton Family Foundation to develop a systematic literature review on topics related to school choice.

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study used school-level data to see how integration across schools changes over time as the amount of school choice changes over time. Although none of the studies used randomized experimental research designs, considered to be the gold standard, all of them exploit changes over time quasi-experimental approaches, considered to be the next-best design.

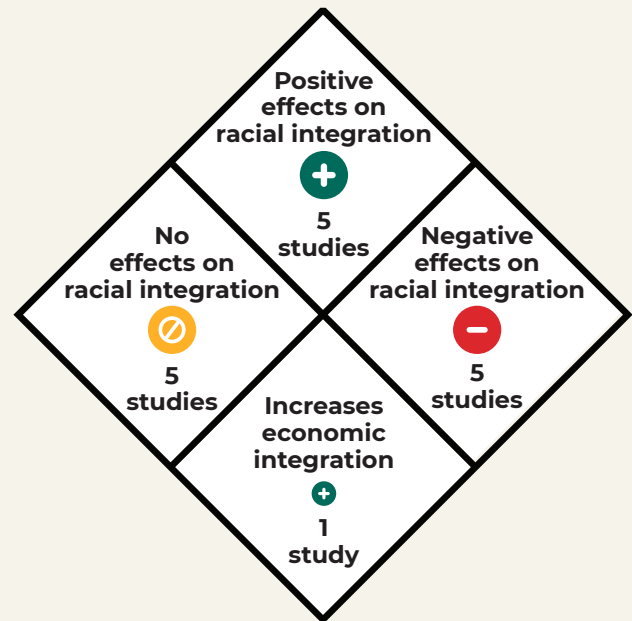
Eight papers meeting these criteria addressed the effects of school choice policies on racial or economic integration, and, because some of the papers examined multiple school choice policies or multiple locations, they produced 15 sets of findings on the effects of school choice. For ease of exposition, we refer to each set of impact estimates as a study.

Overall, the studies find mixed impacts of school choice on racial integration, varying across policies and locations. Specifically, among the 15 causal studies, 5 find no effect on racial integration (Chingos 2013; Zimmer et al. 2009b, c, e, f), 5 find that racial integration decreases (Bifulco et al. 2009a; Zimmer et al. 2009d, g) and 5 find improvements in racial integration (Bifulco et al. 2009b; Egalite et al. 2017; Koedel et al. 2009a; Ritter et al. 2016; Zimmer et al. 2009a).

The majority of the research we reviewed focused on the effect of charter schools on racial integration. Most studies (10 of 15) focused on charter schools. Among the studies with charter schools, 2 studies found that charter schools increased integration, 5 found no effect on integration, and 3 found that they decreased integration. Most studies we reviewed that found effects on integration tended to report small effects.

There is little rigorous evidence on the effect of private school vouchers, district-wide choice, or inter-district choice programs on integration. One study of vouchers and two studies of magnet schools found that they increased integration, and one study of district-wide choice and one study of inter-district choice found that they decreased integration. It is important to note that this review only identified two causal studies that examined impacts on racial integration for magnet schools. Because

Figure 1. Summary of findings on the effect of school choice on racial and economic integration



one of the primary motivations of magnet schools has been to promote diversity, we would expect to see more research that focuses on this particular school type. And because this review focused on studies conducted within the past 20 years, the bulk of the existing research on magnet schools might be out of the timeframe of this review.

One study that we reviewed measured the effect of school choice on economic integration and found a positive effect on the economic integration of magnet schools (Bifulco et al. 2009b). The other studies we reviewed did not measure economic integration. Some of the eligible studies examined other aspects of integration, such as integration of students by test scores, parental education levels, language status, and class (Bifulco et al. 2009a; Koedel et al. 2009). Most of the studies we identified that examined economic integration did not provide causal evidence or did not use an appropriate comparison group.

Most studies focused on the effects of school choice within a given community. The study with the largest scope, however, examined the effect of charters on integration nationwide and found no effect on average (Chingos 2013). This study examined changes in the integration of schools over time relating to growth of the charter sector, and it indicated that on average, charter schools are not changing the racial composition of schools that students attend.

Additional related research published since the systematic review was conducted aligns with these findings. Most notably, in a national examination of charter effects on integration, Monarrez et. al (2019) found a small decrease in integration. The authors note that while they found that the average effect of charters was statistically significant, the magnitude of the effect was modest. According to Monarrez et. al, this is likely because charters represent a small portion of overall student enrollment and there is wide variation in the effects of charters across different types of school districts.

Policy implications of the research

Local context and policy design are critical when designing school choice initiatives to address integration.

Although the impacts of school choice on racial integration demonstrate a mixed pattern, there are implications for policymakers considering how school choice policies could affect the composition of schools. The evidence on charter schools is the most comprehensive and quite mixed, suggesting neither positive nor negative effects on average. Given this evidence, policymakers should recognize that, on average, charter schools are unlikely to substantially improve integration—an unsurprising result given that integration is rarely viewed as a primary aim of charter-school policies. By the same token, however, there is little evidence that charter schools will substantially worsen integration in most communities.

The scant evidence on the integration effects of other forms of school choice provides little guidance

for policymakers. In the case of magnet schools, the only two recent studies that examined integration effects found favorable results, which is also unsurprising given that magnet programs are often expressly intended to promote integration. School choice efforts intentionally designed to improve integration might be able to succeed in that aim. For example, students are highly segregated across certain districts in Connecticut. The state increased integration by using inter-district magnet schools that gathered students from multiple districts. In addition, there are some diverse by design charter schools that serve economically disadvantaged, minority students in a more integrated environment, such as Citizens of the World, Rhode Island Mayoral Academies, and the Capital City Public Charter School (Potter and Quick 2018).

Vouchers for private schools could in principle improve integration by bringing economically disadvantaged and nonwhite students into private schools attended by more-advantaged tuition-paying classmates. The sole study we found that examined the effect of vouchers on integration found a favorable impact (Egalite et al. 2017). But the designs of voucher programs vary enormously, and effects on integration could vary enormously with them. A voucher that is universally available rather than targeted to disadvantaged students could have very different effects on integration; policymakers who are interested in integration effects should carefully consider the details of voucher policy design.

Considering the local context, including the extent of racial and ethnic diversity in a district, is critical when designing a school choice initiative intended to improve integration. Specifically, the amount of integration in schools before school choice policies take effect is important context for understanding how school choice policies might affect integration. For example, Louisiana's voucher program increased integration, in part, because students transferred out of heavily segregated schools into schools that were more integrated (but not fully integrated). It is likely easier to move the needle on integration when schools are heavily segregated at the start.

Recommendations for research to inform school choice policy

To further the conversation on school choice policy and understand the impacts on integration, we recommend the following necessary types of research:

Examine effects on economic integration. Limited research has examined how school choice influences the economic background of students within schools. Critics have raised concerns that students from affluent families might be more successful in taking advantage of school choice options. For example, families with a higher socioeconomic status might understand how to navigate and access information on school choice. These families are likely to have the resources to seek school choice options and to enable their children to participate, especially if these families have greater access to, for example, transportation options.

Analyze variation in how school choice influences integration based on local context and policy design. Understanding the local context before school choice options are implemented is critical to understanding how school choice might influence integration. In their recent study, Monarrez, Kisida, and Chingos (2019) found that charters led to small decreases in integration nationally, on average. Interestingly, they found that reductions in integration *within* school districts were partially offset by increases in integration *between* districts in metropolitan areas. The study also found considerable variation regionally, with little to no effect on integration in some states and larger effects in others. Researchers should analyze how the variation in the effect of school choice relates to different aspects of the local context, including the levels of racial and economic integration that exist before the school options take effect. In addition, more studies are necessary on how effects vary with policy design (notably student eligibility and the participation of existing private schools). Most of the rigorous studies within this review focused on charter schools, but a few focused on how other types of school

choice influenced integration. Vouchers merit particular attention because a wide range of different kinds of voucher programs now exist in many states, but the integration impact has been examined carefully for only one program in one state.

Examine families' preferences and how they influence school choice's effect on integration.

Family preferences are an important factor that can influence how school choice impacts integration. We know that many families decide where to live based on the quality of the traditional public schools and the options available in a given school district, but we know less about the way those decisions are made. A few emerging studies examine family preferences. Glazermen and Dotter (2016) find that although proximity to home is an important factor for parents, they also weigh key factors such as the academic achievement of a school's students and student factors, including race and the level of economic disadvantage within the school. Overall, the field requires a better understanding of how family preferences can either help or reduce integration. Future research should also examine different ways that policies can influence or support families' preferences for schools of choice and thus effect integration. One way to assess family preferences, for example, is to examine how increasing information available to parents about different school choice options relates to levels of integration at their prior school and the school of choice.

Study school choice initiatives that are designed to improve integration.

There are several ways that school choice could serve to support increases in integration, including intentionally diverse charter schools, magnet schools, inter-district choice programs, or common enrollment systems (Manno 2019). Research is necessary to understand whether these efforts are successful at increasing integration in schools sending students as well as schools receiving students. When studying school choice policies that promote integration, researchers should make sure to examine any unintended consequences of these policies—for example, how the policies affect high-performing schools of choice that almost entirely serve disadvantaged minority students.

Use school choice lotteries to measure the impact of school choice on integration. Lotteries are important mechanisms to provide choice to students and families, particularly in cases in which a given school has only a limited number of slots available (Tuttle et al. 2012; Chabrier et al. 2016). School choice lotteries ensure that students are randomly selected for a given school, enabling researchers to use the most rigorous causal design to measure impacts. Future lottery studies should measure integration in addition to capturing student achievement (see the companion brief [“How Does School Choice Affect Achievement in Traditional Public Schools?”](#) for a comprehensive examination of the effects of school choice on achievement).

Measure integration within schools. In addition to examining integration at the school level, it is also important to delve into the way that students are sorted within schools. If one benefit of integration is helping students better understand students from different racial, ethnic, or economic backgrounds, the sorting of students in classrooms and school activities could be more important than their sorting in school buildings. Schools of choice might have different internal sorting than conventional public schools. Measuring integration within schools, in the context of advanced placement classes, ability grouping, performance arts classes, and so on will help understand how well schools are actually integrating.

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