

# **NEPC REVIEW: BALANCING ACT: SCHOOLS, NEIGHBORHOODS AND RACIAL IMBALANCE (BROOKINGS INSTITUTION, NOVEMBER 2017)**



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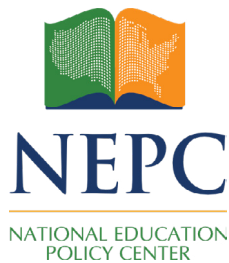
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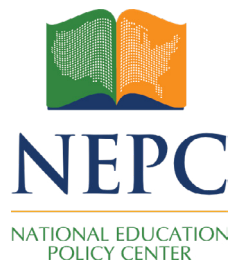
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### Summary of Review

*Balancing Act* explores the racial imbalance of schools and neighborhoods across the nation, finding that the racial composition of schools often reflects the surrounding neighborhoods. It suggests that racially concentrated schools are the result of residential segregation and how school district boundaries are drawn to separate populations. The authors also posit that charter schools, which are freed from the constraints of traditional boundaries, can interrupt the school-housing relationship. Yet the report finds that charter schools are, on average, more racially imbalanced than other public schools. The report deserves credit for tackling the complicated relationship between school and housing segregation, and for bringing renewed attention to issues that are often considered separately. Still, a shaky grounding in the research and law, and in the methods that inform school desegregation, limits the report's usefulness when it comes to policy and practice. Moreover, crucial methodological decisions, like how neighborhoods are defined or why metro areas are treated the same as rural ones, either are not fully explained or lack a research-based rationale. This weakness undermines the utility of the newly created database—which the authors view as a vital contribution of the report. In short, *Balancing Act* represents a missed opportunity to accurately explore the nexus between school and housing segregation.



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## I. Introduction

Absent policy intervention, residential and school segregation form a reciprocal relationship with one another. Student assignment policies that prioritize proximity help ensure that school enrollments reflect neighborhood segregation. Households, in turn, often seek out neighborhoods based on the schools with which they are associated. For both schools and neighborhoods, racial makeup retains crucial steering power. This holds particularly true for white families.<sup>1</sup> The intertwined nature of school and residential segregation is why decades of school desegregation policies deliberately—and often successfully—sought to decouple school attendance from proximity alone.<sup>2</sup>

Residential segregation by race and income is severe, even more so for children.<sup>3</sup> This matters because neighborhood environments have cumulative and lasting impacts on child well-being, opportunity and social mobility.<sup>4</sup> On average, racially segregated neighborhoods of concentrated poverty are linked to starkly unequal educational, health, delinquency and socioeconomic outcomes.<sup>5</sup> When schools closely mirror surrounding residential communities, those neighborhood disadvantages are compounded by concentrations of need within educational settings. One recent study found that racially disparate exposure to student poverty was the crucial mechanism by which school segregation produces racial achievement gaps.<sup>6</sup>

Despite obvious, important linkages, school and residential segregation are often examined—and addressed—separately. *Balancing Act: Schools, Neighborhoods and Racial Imbalance*<sup>7</sup> takes up the important task of considering the two together by exploring the racial makeup of schools compared to proximate neighborhoods.

## II. Findings and Conclusion of the Report

The report analyzes data from all public schools in the *NCES Common Core of Data* for the school year 2013-14 to understand school segregation. It further explores data from the 2010 Census related to the neighborhood composition of the under-18 population.<sup>8</sup> Their imbalance measure compares the racial composition of schools with that of under-18 youth in census blocks residing within two miles of the school (if within district boundary lines).

The report lists six findings: (1) Many schools in the U.S. reflect the neighborhoods in which they are located; (2) Schools that are racially imbalanced outliers have a higher percentage of Black students and lower percentage of White students than their neighborhood; (3) Racial imbalance is higher in charter schools than in traditional public schools (TPS); (4) There are no clear reasons why charter schools have higher racial imbalance; (5) Some states have higher percentages of racially imbalanced schools; and (6) School district boundaries can influence racial imbalance by dividing communities into more racially homogenous districts.

*Balancing Act* suggests that racially concentrated schools are the result of residential segregation and/or how school district boundaries are drawn to separate populations. The authors also posit that charter schools, which are freed from the constraints of traditional boundaries, can interrupt the school-housing relationship. Overall, however, the report's findings show that charter schools are more racially imbalanced than other public schools. Further analysis uncovers considerable variation depending on the specific demographic and policy contexts of charters, with some quite segregated and others more integrated.

The authors emphasize that one of the report's contributions is their analyses (including an online interactive appendix) illustrating the relationship between school and neighborhood racial balance in "particular places and individual schools."<sup>9</sup> This dataset gives researchers and policymakers the opportunity to explore their communities and schools. The report also offers a new measure of racial imbalance after briefly noting that all other commonly accepted segregation measures suffer from one or more disadvantages.<sup>10</sup>

## III. Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusion

*Balancing Act* rests on the central assumption that school segregation "inevitably reflects, to a greater or lesser extent, neighborhood segregation—especially when enrollment criteria are based on geography" (p. 1). While it remains deeply important to examine the connections between school and residential segregation, the swift implementation of extensive and, in some cases, lasting metropolitan school desegregation plans in a number of American communities<sup>11</sup> suggests that the school-residential relationship is malleable—not inevitable.

Despite the report's emphasis on the link between school and residential segregation, the authors fail to offer an explanation of how residential segregation became a reality in the United States. Without understanding this history—including the role educational policies played in influencing residential segregation<sup>12</sup>—it is hard to fully develop a rationale for policy action on school segregation. Indeed, in several places the report seems to argue *against*

policy action, citing difficult political and legal headwinds as a reason to understand “how far we have got” (p. 5) on school segregation, rather than how far we still need to go. Perhaps as a result of this key omission, the authors fail to offer any concrete policy recommendations, though a key aim of the report is to provide a tool for policymakers and researchers interested in examining the relationship between school and residential racial imbalance.

#### IV. Report’s Use of Research Literature

Four significant issues emerge after surveying the report’s use of research literature. First and foremost, while *Balancing Act* includes a fairly extensive reference list,<sup>13</sup> the report contains virtually no in-text citations. This makes it very difficult to ascertain how and when the research is being used to inform the report. The authors’ description of why charter schools might exhibit racial imbalance, for example, does not include any direct references to numerous studies of charter schools and segregation.<sup>14</sup>

When the authors do specifically cite to other research or analyses, most notably in the report’s first chapter about the history of and context for school segregation, it is often a footnote to media accounts of school segregation trends rather than to research. They also rely on charts gleaned from other research and cite to their earlier report on school segregation (which one of us also reviewed).<sup>15</sup>

Second, as we note above, the report includes no discussion of the forces that have shaped housing segregation even though the central thrust of the report is to better understand the relationship between housing and school segregation. Those housing forces are also important to understanding how school district boundaries, old and new, continue to structure school segregation. More attention to a profound legacy of *de jure* segregation in housing<sup>16</sup> may shift perceptions of what kinds of policies are necessary to interrupt the reciprocal relationship between school and housing segregation.

Third, *Balancing Act* misses an important opportunity to remind the reader of the well-documented benefits of school desegregation. These benefits flow to students of all racial/ethnic backgrounds and extend beyond the academic to the social/emotional and civic.<sup>17</sup> Similar to the importance of understanding the history of residential segregation, including literature on the benefits of school desegregation is important for fully evaluating the merits of policy intervention in the school-housing cycle. And again, there are times when the report seems intent on making the opposite case, including examples of resistance to desegregation (e.g., the Boston busing controversy) without discussion of more positive experiences with it (e.g., Boston’s popular and longstanding city-suburban transfer program).<sup>18</sup>

Fourth, though demographers, sociologists and geographers have spilled a good deal of ink wrestling with how to best define neighborhoods,<sup>19</sup> the authors do not acknowledge this methodological quandary. This is a significant oversight since their imbalance analysis relies heavily upon the definition of neighborhood.

## V. Review of Report's Methods

A careful examination of *Balancing Act's* methods reveals a number of problem areas. These run the gamut from concerns about definitions of key constructs to concerns about the national scope of the report. More specifically, we had serious questions about how the authors defined the geographic reach of neighborhoods and outliers when it came to the racial imbalance of schools versus neighborhoods, as well as the decision to analyze imbalance across all schools and neighborhoods rather than a more focused look at imbalance in large metros versus in small metros or in rural America. We also found the examination of charter schools and district boundaries problematic. These concerns are addressed in more detail below.

The authors implicitly acknowledge the difficulty of ascertaining how to appropriately measure the “neighborhood” associated with each school by describing two different approaches that they used. These included several variations of an approach based on proximity that defined everyone living within a given radius as being in the school’s neighborhood, as well as a population fill-based approach, expanding outward to include youth in the neighborhood until the school’s enrollment (or a multiple thereof) was matched. The report’s analysis ultimately relied on the proximity approach, selecting a rather large radius of two miles. The authors do not include any rationale for why they ultimately selected a two-mile proximity radius for the report though alternate measures are reported in the appendix. Given well-known variation in the geographic reach of school catchment areas,<sup>20</sup> it is unclear why they chose not to use different sized radii for different school levels (perhaps one mile for elementary schools and five miles for high schools), or for different geographies (larger radii in rural areas, smaller in metropolitan areas). A further issue is that the authors do not clarify whether a Census block that is within the two-mile radius of multiple schools is considered part of both schools’ neighborhoods or whether a decision rule assigned it to one school (e.g., the closest one). If no such rule was in place, people would be double-counted as part of the neighborhood.

Geographers have struggled with the appropriate unit for measuring neighborhoods given the lack of social significance accorded to the most commonly used Census-based metrics like tracts, blocks or block groups.<sup>21</sup> While this report offers a work-around for these issues by relying on a proximity-based approach, arguably some of the most important features shaping one’s sense of neighborhood are how school zones are drawn and which schools are associated with a particular zone.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the report’s own analysis indicates that *district* boundaries can be very influential in constructing the racial/ethnic makeups of neighborhoods and districts.<sup>23</sup> This finding is supported by a number of other large-scale studies<sup>24</sup> though *Balancing Act* presents just the two stark examples of Camden and Long Island (without explaining why and how they were selected) to illustrate how district boundaries cleave communities along racial lines. As such, an “unbounded” analysis, or one that fails to adequately acknowledge the role that school-related boundaries play in structuring segregation, seems out of step with the literature.

Another significant methodological decision that appears flawed is the determination of outliers. While concluding that schools resemble their neighborhood composition, the authors are also interested in understanding where variation in this pattern exists. They thus define



outlier schools separately for each state with a methodology relying on the interquartile range of the state's distribution of the school/neighborhood racial imbalance.<sup>25</sup> Their rationale for defining outliers at the state-level is twofold: variations in states' racial composition, and that "many states remain under court-ordered desegregation orders that may intentionally alter the degree of resemblance between schools and neighborhoods in a non-voluntary manner."<sup>26</sup> It is true that there were state-level variations prior to *Brown* as to whether or not states required school segregation—and as a result, court-ordered desegregation orders are much more widespread in southern states with *de jure* school segregation. Yet this is an inaccurate rationale because entire states were never under court order to desegregate. Even in states like Connecticut, where the state Supreme Court's *Sheff* decision found that school district boundary lines were unconstitutional, only a percentage of districts are part of the desegregation remedy. In short, court orders occur at the district level unless there is a finding of state-level violation.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, a dwindling number of districts are today subject to court desegregation orders, and even in these cases, school choice often reduces reliance on "non-voluntary" desegregation tools.

A more appropriate way to look at outliers might be at the level of census-defined metropolitan areas (especially since they note large variations for charter schools in Core-Based Statistical Areas.) Alternatively, the authors could focus the entire analysis simply on metro areas due to the significant spatial and population differences around what constitutes a neighborhood in metropolitan versus rural America. Last, it would be helpful to differentiate among outliers. Namely, a school in New Hampshire that was 10% Black would be considered an outlier from a neighborhood that was

*Many of the report's methodological choices were not justified by the research literature, raising serious questions about the validity of the findings and conclusions*

7% Black just as a 4% Black school would be. Yet, the 10% Black school is an outlier in an integrative sense, and should be the type of "imbalance" that we would want to understand in order to replicate elsewhere. Meanwhile the 4% Black school represents a segregating imbalance.

Finally, the section of the report dealing with the comparison between TPSs and charter schools is befuddling. Charter schools in every state have a range of different laws that affect enrollment eligibility. So, whereas district boundaries are quite determinative for who enrolls in New Jersey charter schools, in Pennsylvania, students are provided with transportation to charter schools within ten miles of their district border—meaning that district boundaries are much more porous. Such wide variation hampers the ability to accurately analyze charters but goes unacknowledged in the report's three paragraphs explaining why charters are racially imbalanced, which includes no figures/calculations or citations. The authors do reference the report's appendix to support this explanation. The authors additionally find no correlation between state charter school laws and the extent to which charter schools in the state were racially imbalanced. To do so, they rely on a score from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, which in turn relies on how well states align their charter school law with the organization's model charter law.<sup>28</sup> The model law's section detailing "clarity in student enrollment and lottery procedures," which likely has the most impact on racial imbalance, is just one part of the ranking (position 12/weight 2). Clarity in enrollment and



lottery is defined by the model law as open enrollment across a state, anti-discrimination provisions, lottery requirements, and preferences for conversion students or prior year students.<sup>29</sup> Given that these somewhat vague and unsupported recommendations comprise a relatively small portion of the overall ranking, it seems unlikely that they would have much effect on racial imbalance.

## VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

As described in the preceding sections, many of the report's methodological choices were not justified by the research literature, raising serious questions about the validity of the findings and conclusions. Here, we lay out several additional issues with *Balancing Act's* conclusions, namely that some of the central takeaways are supported by assumptions often at odds with decades of desegregation experience or by a few non-representative samples.

The lack of research citations to support what the authors believe to be “common sense” assertions threatens the validity of their conclusions. While they assert, for example, that there is a “natural preference of many parents to send their children to a nearby school,” this is not necessarily supported by polling data<sup>30</sup> and no citations appear in the text.

Another example belied by some of the efforts of the Obama administration and by burgeoning state or local integration battles, is the statement that “as things stand, it seems highly unlikely that there will be renewed efforts to further integrate schools from the federal government or courts.”<sup>31</sup> In spring 2017, a federal district court found that a proposed district secession in Gardendale, AL was racially discriminatory. In 2018, the US Commission on Civil Rights issued a report calling on the government to take a range of policy efforts to curb resegregation—following on the heels of a flurry of activity during the last years of the Obama administration. This included the Stronger Together legislation, the Opening Doors grant program, federal guidance, and a US Department of Education-sponsored convening.<sup>32</sup> Several state courts are also considering desegregation cases.<sup>33</sup>

Further, the use of a handful of examples to illustrate key conclusions—without a sense of why the examples were chosen and whether or not they are representative—fails to support a finding. This is particularly problematic when it comes to the discussion of how district boundary lines divide some communities.<sup>34</sup> Still, the chapter's concluding paragraph notes that “these are the exceptions rather than the rule” and that in most places, district boundaries do not “materially influence” school racial imbalance.<sup>35</sup> These assertions go against a large body of research suggesting that district boundaries account for a hefty portion of contemporary school segregation.<sup>36</sup>

The report also seems to be uninformed by the decades-long experience with court-ordered school desegregation efforts. One of the conclusions is that schools reflect their neighborhood's racial composition, which the authors then say “means that attempts to integrate schools are likely to require active efforts to buck trends of neighborhood and residential racial segregation” (p. 33). Of course, this is precisely what school desegregation efforts have been doing since at least the *Swann* decision in 1971, which affirmed cross-district busing

and other tools (like magnet schools, which are entirely ignored in the report) to decouple school and residential patterns. Likewise, the use of the state level to define racial imbalance outliers, when virtually all federal desegregation cases have been at the local level, suggests unfamiliarity with this area of the law.

## **VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice**

The authors of *Balancing Act* deserve credit for tackling the complicated relationship between school and housing segregation. The report brings renewed attention to issues that are often considered separately. Yet a shaky grounding in the research, law and methods that inform school desegregation limits its usefulness when it comes to policy and practice. Moreover, crucial methodological decisions, like how neighborhoods are defined or why metro areas are treated the same as rural ones, are not fully explained or lack a research-based rationale. This weakness undermines the utility of the database—what the authors viewed as a vital contribution of the report. In short, *Balancing Act* represents a missed opportunity to accurately explore the nexus between school and housing segregation.

## Notes and Resources

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- 8 It's not clear why the authors did not select NCES data from 2010 to match the year of Census data used since the typical U.S. resident moves every 6-7 years.
- 9 Whitehurst, G.J., Joo, N., Reeves, R. & Rodrigue, E. (2017). *Balancing act: Schools, neighborhoods and racial imbalance*. Washington, DC: Brookings, Retrieved December 12, 2017, from [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/es\\_20171120\\_schoolsegregation.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/es_20171120_schoolsegregation.pdf), p. 33.
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- 25 For reasons the report's authors don't specify they find the percentage point for the interquartile range of the distribution of racial imbalance in a given state for a given racial/ethnic group and then multiply the percentage point for the 25<sup>th</sup> and 75<sup>th</sup> percentile by 1.5 "so that, assuming a normal distribution, a reasonable level of exclusivity is met." Whitehurst, G.J., Reeves, R.V., Joo, N. & Rodrigue, E. (2017, November). *Balancing Act: Schools, Neighborhoods and Racial Imbalance*. Washington, D.C.: Center on Children and Families at Brookings. Retrieved December 12, 2017, from [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/es\\_20171120\\_schoolsegregation.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/es_20171120_schoolsegregation.pdf), p. 16. The report's appendix doesn't appear to have analyzed alternate

definitions of outliers, despite the fact that this is a key part of the report.

- 26 Whitehurst, G.J., Reeves, R.V., Joo, N. & Rodrigue, E. (2017, November). *Balancing Act: Schools, Neighborhoods and Racial Imbalance*. Washington, D.C.: Center on Children and Families at Brookings. Retrieved December 12, 2017, from [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/es\\_20171120\\_schoolsegregation.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/es_20171120_schoolsegregation.pdf), p. 15.
- 27 See *Milliken v. Bradley*, 418 U.S. 717 (1974).
- 28 Alabama—which did not have a single charter school operating until Fall 2017—got a perfect score, for example. During the time of the report’s analysis, no charter schools would have existed in the state and wasn’t part of their analyses. DC, New York, New Jersey, and Minnesota also get a perfect score from them. Concerns have arisen about the segregating nature of charter schools in many of these places. See Orfield, M., Gumus-Dawes, B., & Luce, T.F. (2013). Failed promises: Assessing charter schools in the Twin Cities. In G. Orfield & E. Frankenberg (Eds.), *Educational delusions? Why choice can deepen inequality and how to make schools fair* (pp. 145-158). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press;  
  
Orfield, G., & Ee, J. (2017). *An increasingly diverse city with racially polarized schools*. Los Angeles: Civil Rights Project at UCLA. Retrieved January 15, 2018, from [https://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/our-segregated-capital-an-increasingly-diverse-city-with-racially-polarized-schools/POSTVERSION\\_DC\\_020117.pdf](https://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/our-segregated-capital-an-increasingly-diverse-city-with-racially-polarized-schools/POSTVERSION_DC_020117.pdf);  
  
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- 29 National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. *Charter law database: Clear student enrollment and lottery procedures*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved January 15, 2018, from <https://www.publiccharters.org/our-work/charter-law-database/components/12>
- 30 Phi Delta Kappan. (2017). 2017 Poll. Retrieved December 21, 2017, from [http://pdkpoll.org/assets/downloads/PDK-2017-Topline\\_National\\_FINAL.pdf](http://pdkpoll.org/assets/downloads/PDK-2017-Topline_National_FINAL.pdf)
- 31 Whitehurst, G.J., Reeves, R.V., Joo, N. & Rodrigue, E. (2017, November). *Balancing Act: Schools, Neighborhoods and Racial Imbalance*. Washington, D.C.: Center on Children and Families at Brookings. Retrieved December 12, 2017, from [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/es\\_20171120\\_schoolsegregation.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/es_20171120_schoolsegregation.pdf), p. 5.
- 32 National Coalition for School Diversity. (2017). *Federal support for school integration: An Obama Administration review*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved January 15, 2018, from <http://school-diversity.org/pdf/DiversityIssueBriefNo8.pdf>
- 33 See, e.g., Raghavendran, B. (2018, January 9). School integration case opens with Minnesota Supreme Court justices grilling lawyers. *Star Tribune*. Retrieved January 15, 2018, from <http://www.startribune.com/state-s-highest-court-hears-arguments-in-desegregation-lawsuit/468506763/>
- 34 Whitehurst, G.J., Reeves, R.V., Joo, N. & Rodrigue, E. (2017, November). *Balancing Act: Schools, Neighborhoods and Racial Imbalance*. Washington, D.C.: Center on Children and Families at Brookings. Retrieved December 12, 2017, from [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/es\\_20171120\\_schoolsegregation.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/es_20171120_schoolsegregation.pdf), p. 25.

- 35 Whitehurst, G.J., Reeves, R.V., Joo, N. & Rodrigue, E. (2017, November). *Balancing Act: Schools, Neighborhoods and Racial Imbalance*. Washington, D.C.: Center on Children and Families at Brookings. Retrieved December 12, 2017, from [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/es\\_20171120\\_schoolsegregation.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/es_20171120_schoolsegregation.pdf), p. 32.
- 36 Fiel, J. (2013). Decomposing school resegregation: Social closure, racial imbalance, and racial isolation. *American Sociological Review*, 78(5), 828-848;
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