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REVIEW OF *THE INTEGRATION ANOMOLY*: COMPARING THE EFFECT OF K-12 EDUCATION DELIVERY MODELS ON SEGREGATION IN SCHOOLS

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Summary of Review

The Integration Anomaly explores a “puzzling divergence” between changes in metropolitan residential and school segregation. Based on a review of existing literature, it argues that the best way to address rising school segregation is to decouple school assignment from neighborhoods through universal school choice. The report concludes with suggestions for how to structure school choice to achieve integration. On the surface, the report provides clear-cut, useful recommendations for addressing persistent school segregation. Yet the analysis of the empirical relationship between school and residential segregation relies on flawed methodological decisions concerning how to define segregation and divergent trends over time. Those problematic definitions, in turn, yield biased results and prompt the reader to incorrectly assume that housing integration policies will have little bearing on school segregation. Moreover, the report’s review of the literature on school choice is haphazard and incomplete, drawing conclusions beyond what the research supports. Perhaps most importantly, *The Integration Anomaly* ignores a growing body of literature finding that the very type of unregulated school choice it proposes has, in many instances, exacerbated racial segregation. The report presents arguments and solutions largely driven by ideology, not evidence, offering little value for policymakers or educators meaningfully engaged in the critical search for strategies to reduce school segregation.



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REVIEW OF *THE INTEGRATION ANOMOLY: COMPARING THE EFFECT OF K-12 EDUCATION DELIVERY MODELS ON SEGREGATION IN SCHOOLS*

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I. Introduction

At a time of growing diversity in the U.S., school segregation is deepening. This matters because students who attend racially isolated minority schools have weaker educational opportunities and outcomes, and because well-designed diverse schools benefit all students.¹ Such evidence buttressed the 2007 Supreme Court decision in *Parents Involved*² and the federal government's 2011 guidance to school districts outlining the compelling interest in voluntarily pursuing integration. Yet legal and political restrictions on how schools and districts can address school segregation are pervasive, prompting some advocates to zero in on housing policy as a means to promote school integration.³

Adding to the policy options (and debates), the last several decades have witnessed the explosion of school choice. While some choice-based efforts initially were designed to further school desegregation efforts, more recently politicians on both sides of the aisle have framed school choice as an important policy goal in its own right. Suggestions that choice may impede other policy goals like school desegregation or student achievement thus are often contested.

This report, *The Integration Anomaly: Comparing the Effects of K-12 Education Delivery Models on Segregation in Schools*, written by Benjamin Scafidi and published by the Friedman Foundation,⁴ explores growing school segregation amid declining housing segregation. It then examines whether school choice can help mitigate rising school segregation. As the popularity of school choice continues to mount, particularly among policymakers, this review analyzes the report's claims regarding divergent metropolitan school and residential segregation trends and whether a universal system of school choice offers the solution to persisting school segregation.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report draws on existing analyses of residential segregation in the nation's metropolitan areas, and compares them to the author's calculations of metropolitan school segregation of third grade black and non-black students using the Dissimilarity Index. According to the

author, only 28% of 215 metropolitan areas experienced neighborhood and school segregation changes that were similar in magnitude and direction (either both increasing or both decreasing) from 2000 to 2010.⁵ An additional 28% of metro areas experienced diverging trends, with 55 of 60 metros in this category reporting declines in residential segregation but increases in school segregation. In the remaining 44% of metros, school and residential segregation change in the same direction but differ in magnitude.

From this descriptive empirical examination, the report makes a remarkable leap to conclude that the public school system has been unsuccessful at reducing school segregation and should emphasize greater school choice. A selected review of literature on school choice is used to assert that increasing choice will further school integration. The report contends that introducing significantly expanded school choice would “uncouple the decisions of where to live and where to send children to school” and “allow schools to provide non-uniform educational options, thereby giving parents reasons to choose schools that go beyond just ‘peer quality’.”⁶ It closes with recommendations for connecting choice to integration in ways that would permit greater access to both public and private schooling options.

III. The Report’s Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The Integration Anomaly assumes that competition unleashed by unrestricted school choice will promote integration. Choice offers families a way to find the best educational fit for their children, helps weed out low-performing schools, and breaks the link between school and residential decisions, so the thinking goes. A greatly expanded version of choice can therefore be employed to positively diminish school segregation. Despite the emphasis of this report, the empirical analysis presented does not examine the actual impacts of school choice on integration; rather it explores the diverging relationship between school and residential segregation. After concluding that the mismatch between housing and school segregation trends is puzzling—but of concern—central assertions related to school choice and integration are backed by an oddly selected and incomplete review of literature. Later in the report, the rationale for how to design an integrating school choice system is based on international examples that may not apply to the U.S. context, a preliminary and dated treatment of domestic choice, and superficial discussions of hypothetical universal choice programs.

IV. The Report’s Use of Research Literature

To support its claims, the report draws in limited ways on three categories of research literature—school and residential segregation trends, the relationship between school choice and integration, and best practices for designing choice to foster integration. Key studies are excluded from each category, which leads to conclusions about segregation and choice that are either heavily contested or contradicted in peer-reviewed literature. Nowhere does the

report provide a clear rationale for the inclusion or exclusion of certain studies or bodies of research.

Residential and school segregation trends

The report draws on a single, well-publicized (though non-peer-reviewed) 2012 study published by the Manhattan Institute called “The End of the Segregated Century,” which showed declines in black-nonblack residential segregation since 1970. Yet critics of that study argued that nearly all-black neighborhoods remain stubbornly segregated,⁷ that the relationship between racially segregated neighborhoods and neighborhoods of concentrated poverty is strengthening,⁸ and that the general trend toward integration, driven in large part by the growing suburbanization of minority groups, may not be stable.⁹ *The Integration Anomaly*, then, presents a rosy, oversimplified view of residential segregation not grounded in a broader reading of the literature.

A synthesis of literature on school segregation patterns follows the discussion of residential trends. While the report suggests that the divergence between school and residential segregation is puzzling, numerous studies have sought to parse out the different issues contributing to rising levels of school segregation. Among the key factors linked to growing school segregation is one that *The Integration Anomaly* identifies as the solution to rectifying it: the explosion of school choice. A recent analysis of metropolitan school segregation in the U.S. between 1993 and 2010 is the latest study to find that segregation was most extreme when families have many private or charter school options or when they can choose from a variety of school districts due to regional fragmentation.¹⁰

Furthermore, over time and in metropolitan areas with different jurisdictional boundary structures or desegregation policies, the relationship between school and neighborhood segregation has been far more fluid than the report suggests. Research on city-suburban school desegregation efforts, for instance, shows that plans encompassing large parts of a metropolitan area are linked to marked declines in both school *and* housing segregation.¹¹ In other places, the relationship between school and residential segregation strengthened as school systems, particularly in the South, lost the integrating advantage they enjoyed under mandatory desegregation plans.¹²

Finally, the report ignores the well-established role inclusionary housing policy can play in addressing such patterns. One study indicated, for instance, that low-income students benefitting from a housing policy that set aside affordable units near high opportunity schools markedly outperformed their peers in high-poverty schools benefitting from many extra resources.¹³

Relationship between school choice and integration

The report ignores a robust literature that (1) finds key distinctions in the relationship be-

tween segregation and various types of school choice (e.g. charter schools, magnet schools, controlled choice, intra- and inter-district transfers, vouchers, private schools) and (2) identifies how and why parents choose schools. Instead, it relies upon strangely curated literature focusing on charter schools, within-school segregation, international school choice and simulations—much of which seems irrelevant to the focus of the report.

What we know about the link between different types of choice and segregation.

Worldwide evidence links certain kinds of choice to stratification.¹⁴ In the U.S., open enrollment, or the unrestricted choice of public schools within or across districts, is allowed in many communities.¹⁵ Constraints such as a lack of information or providing free transportation often prevent families from taking advantage of the policy, however, and white, advantaged or higher-performing students are much more likely to utilize choice in ways that exacerbate segregation.¹⁶

Similar findings extend to charter schools, where evidence of white segregation emerges alongside minority segregation.¹⁷ In fact, *The Integration Anomaly's* description of the charter school literature pertaining to segregation is woefully inadequate. This is especially noteworthy as charter schools are largely unregulated in terms of their impact on segregation.¹⁸ Though the report indicates that mixed findings emerge in well-designed research, it only cites two analyses. It then misleadingly suggests findings from those studies differ when both find that black students transfer to more segregated charter schools. The report also ignores research confirming and expanding on those trends for different states and for other groups of students besides African-American students.¹⁹ Simply put: on virtually every measure and at each level of geography, research shows that charter schools are more segregated than our already increasingly segregated traditional public schools.²⁰

How and why parents choose schools

The report unnecessarily relies on speculation and simulation to construct models of how families choose neighborhoods and schools. Contrary to assertions and recommendations in the report, qualitative studies of white, affluent parents find they choose schools based on word-of-mouth information closely tied to the racial/ethnic and socioeconomic makeup of the school, *not* through actual visits or a nuanced reading of publicly available education data.²¹ In other words, advantaged parents often make decisions about schools and districts based on the “good” or “bad” reputation that friends and acquaintances pass on. Quantitative evidence also shows that white families are more likely to exit traditional public schools or school zones with higher proportions of nonwhite students.²² Moreover, this type of sorting extends to private schools. Highly educated white, advantaged families who either went to private schools as students or who were concerned with maintaining social advantage were more likely to opt in to private school settings.²³

What all of these studies have in common is that they examine the behavior of the advantaged parent groups who do engage with unrestricted choice—the policy prescription at the heart of this report—and find that their behavior often exacerbates stratification. Schools competing to attract families and students with the most concentrated advantages will need to serve very high proportions of advantaged students, effectively locking out the families and students who most need quality school choices.

How to design school choice to promote integration

Alongside accumulated evidence indicating that choice and stratification often go hand-in-hand, studies show that carefully designed school choice can be used to promote integration.²⁴ Attention to civil rights protections like extensive outreach, free transportation, diversity goals and interest-based admissions is fundamentally critical.²⁵ Without such protections, less well-off families either will not know about the school, or will not be able to get their children to it, or—assuming they overcome those barriers—run into a selective admissions process based on test scores that measure wealth more than anything else.²⁶ Yet the report ignores these well-documented and essential strategies in favor of a set of recommendations for expanding unrestricted school choice.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The report's methods are defined by unusual analytic choices for the empirical analysis of school and residential segregation and, as discussed above, selectively chosen studies that result in an incomplete and misleading review of literature on school choice. On both key parts of the report, the author's decisions are questionable, seriously undermining the credibility of his conclusions regarding both school and residential segregation trends and the use and design of school choice.

The empirical analysis at the heart of *The Integration Anomaly* analyzes changes in school segregation and neighborhood segregation from 2000 to 2010 using the Dissimilarity Index (DI) to evaluate whether segregation has increased or decreased. The DI is measured on a 0-100 scale and analyzes the segregation of two groups from one another (as opposed to a multi-group measure like the Entropy Index). It is a descriptive measure detailing how evenly two groups are distributed within a geographic unit, in this case, metropolitan areas. While used more frequently in neighborhood contexts, DI is of less utility for measuring school segregation because it does not indicate the interracial exposure groups would have to one another in an actual school setting.²⁷

Beyond issues with the broad measure of segregation chosen to analyze school segregation, a number of other methodological concerns emerge. One is the use of black-nonblack as the two “groups.” While this racial categorization was occasionally used in southern desegregation cases, today educational or residential segregation analyses seldom employ it for two

major reasons.²⁸ First, in some regions, like the West, black students make up such a small percentage of the enrollment that the black-nonblack classification does not make sense. Black students are now the third largest group in all U.S. public schools behind whites and Latinos. Second, contact with white students historically has been central to integration and equity.²⁹

A second methodological concern dealt with the decision to focus on third graders. It is more typical to use an entire school level, often elementary school grades. Likewise, instead of using an absolute number of students as a minimum cut-off for consideration, it would be more reasonable to use a percentage (e.g., 5%). The report does not indicate how many metropolitan areas were excluded because they reported fewer than 200 African-American third graders in 2010, but our best estimate is that approximately 150 were omitted, or about 40%. Taken together, these decisions likely skewed the analysis, particularly in places where Latino groups are larger.

A final significant issue arises with the author’s definition of divergent patterns of school and residential segregation. If residential and school segregation changes in a particular metro are within two points of each other, the author considers them the “same trend.” Even accepting this seemingly arbitrary band, for which the author gives no explanation, only 28% of the metros actually reported divergent changes in school and residential segregation. In the vast majority, residential and school segregation changes were either the same or just differed in magnitude. Importantly, though, other demography literature typically uses a much larger variation in dissimilarity over time before interpreting it as meaningful change.³⁰ So what the report labels a contradictory trend may in fact represent minimal or no meaningful change in segregation. In our reanalysis of the author’s data, we found that relying on a more commonly used 10-point cut-off yielded very different conclusions. Using the 10-point band, fewer than 4% of the metros reported significantly divergent trends in residential and school segregation (Tables 1a & 1b).

Tables 1a & 1b: Metropolitan-level residential and school segregation changes, 2000-2010

	Decreasing residential segregation change	Increasing residential segregation change
Increasing School Segregation	5	2
Decreasing School Segregation	22	0

Note: This table only includes the 29 metropolitan areas where change in school segregation DI was 10 points or more; all others (n=186) experienced change that was less than 10 points.

	Decreasing school segregation change	Increasing school segregation change
Increasing Residential Segregation	0	0
Decreasing Residential Segregation	12	3

Note: This table only includes the 15 metropolitan areas where change in residential segregation DI was 10 points or more; all others (n=200) experienced change that was less than 10 points.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The empirical analysis anchoring *The Integration Anomaly* flows from questionable methodological decisions and data interpretations that overstate and oversimplify the relationship between school and residential segregation. The report asserts simply that residential segregation is declining as school segregation is increasing. Our careful unpacking of existing research suggests something quite different: that the relationship between school and residential segregation is fluid, influenced by a host of factors—including the design and extent of school choice.³¹ Yet based on trends in less than one-third of the metropolitan areas studied, and even fewer using more appropriate methodology, the report advocates for a radical national policy shift to universal school choice. This sweeping ideological conclusion does not flow logically from either the author’s own empirical analysis or a careful review of existing research.

The second half of the report revolves around assumptions about choice and competition not born out in the literature. It ignores an abundance of studies indicating that civil rights protections like transportation, outreach and diversity goals are essential for school choice to actually promote integration.³² It also engages in speculation about the racial preferences of advantaged parents, overlooking the body of research actually examining those preferences. When research on school choice is addressed, discussion of it either suffers from invalid or unspecified inclusion/exclusion criteria, a lack of nuance or a failure to draw clear, rational connections to segregation and integration.

A considerable amount of new information is introduced in the conclusion of the report. Without supporting material, the reader is left to wonder about key recommendation points, including whether or not it possible to “mandate equality,” or why the cost of transporting students for integration would be prohibitive, but not the cost of providing universal school choice vouchers. The author also takes off the table a number of options for connecting choice to integration (e.g., controlled choice, lottery-based admissions) backed by research.

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

The Integration Anomaly helpfully focuses on the persisting problem of school segregation and describes some of the ways integrated schools benefit students. Yet it deceptively presents a not-so-puzzling divergence between school and residential segregation to make the case for a far-reaching policy shift to universal school choice. That central recommendation ignores research indicating that choice often furthers stratification, as well as literature suggesting that efforts to improve residential segregation positively impact school outcomes. In accepting many of the assumptions embedded in superficial policy discussions around school choice, the author offers advice about the design of school choice at considerable odds with what research actually tells us. The report thus provides little utility for guiding policies or communities seeking to combat growing school segregation.

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31 See discussion in Part IV.

32 See, e.g., endnote 25.

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