

STILL STYMIED

Why Integration Has Not Transformed North Carolina's Schools

December 2022

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By

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INTRODUCTION

In March 2018, the North Carolina Justice Center published *Stymied by Segregation* ([Stymied by Segregation](#)), a report describing trends in school segregation over the 2007–2017 time period and identifying policies to integrate North Carolina’s schools. The report was spurred by a growing body of evidence pointing to the importance of integrated schools in improving students’ life outcomes and helping to strengthen our multi-racial democracy. The report was also spurred by General Assembly proposals that ignored this evidence and instead exacerbated school segregation.

That 2018 report included four important findings:

- 1. The number of racially and economically isolated schools has increased**
- 2. Large school districts could be doing much more to integrate their schools**
- 3. School districts still use boundaries to maintain segregated school systems**
- 4. Charter schools tend to exacerbate segregation**

With five years of additional data, this report provides an update on school segregation trends and new policy recommendations to foster integration. Most notably, this report includes information on individual schools to show which schools are most demographically dissimilar from their larger community. Identifying specific schools provides policymakers with concrete information on where desegregation efforts may have the most promise.

This report also comes after the racial uprisings spurred by the murder of George Floyd, an attempted white supremacist coup on January 6, 2021, and a racist moral

panic to demonize culturally-responsive curricula and honest assessments of history as “critical race theory.” These developments have kept race at the forefront of the national consciousness and provide a critical and timely context in which to reexamine the urgency of school integration.

There has been little progress in integrating North Carolina schools over the last five years. The takeaways from the original Stymied report remain sadly relevant today.

- 1. The number of racially isolated schools continues to increase**
- 2. Large school districts are not taking the necessary steps to integrate their schools**
- 3. In a few counties, school districts are still using boundaries to maintain racially-segregated school systems**
- 4. Charter schools continue to exacerbate segregation and are vastly more likely to be segregated than traditional public schools**

Despite these continuing challenges, a renewed focus on school integration might spur policymakers to overdue and much-needed action. This report concludes with an updated set of policy recommendations, many of which were not included in the 2018 report.

THE EVIDENCE IS OVERWHELMING: INTEGRATED SCHOOLS BENEFIT ALL STUDENTS

What was true in 2018 remains true today: students from all backgrounds benefit from integrated schools.

Research shows that school integration increases test scores of low-income students while lowering dropout rates and boosting lifetime earnings for Black students.^{1,2,3} These benefits are compounded when paired with policies to recruit and retain a diverse teaching force. Research using North Carolina data found that having a teacher of the same race during the formative elementary years would reduce the probability of dropping out of high school for low-income Black males by 39 percent.⁴

Demographic trends are making school integration increasingly important. In our increasingly multiracial society, thriving adults must be able to communicate and work collaboratively with people from various racial and ethnic backgrounds. Integrated schools provide students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds the opportunity for meaningful contact and interactions that foster cross-cultural understanding and reduce bias and prejudice.⁵ Integrated schools can be a powerful counteractive to divisive times, promoting civic participation and increasing the likelihood of students living in integrated neighborhoods as adults.⁶

These benefits can be profound. New research on economic mobility suggests that cross-class connections boost social mobility more than any other factor.⁷ Students forge those connections when they attend integrated schools.

Research has even found that school integration improves health outcomes. Students attending integrated schools report better self-rated health and lower levels of binge drinking.⁸

Conversely, increasing segregation is associated with widening test-score gaps and increased arrest and incarceration rates for male students of color.^{9,10,11}

Racial segregation often accompanies resource disparities such as lower spending, less access to advanced coursework and extracurricular activities, and fewer experienced teachers. Analysis in North Carolina has shown how Black, Hispanic, and Native students are disproportionately denied access to advanced coursework and experienced teachers.¹² These disparities largely result from schools with more low-income and more Black and Hispanic students having a harder time recruiting and retaining teachers.¹³

Segregation also impacts the adequacy of school spending levels. Meeting achievement level standards tends to require additional resources in segregated schools as compared to integrated schools. Yet adequate resources are seldom provided to schools serving largely Black and Hispanic populations. A recent examination of the impacts of segregation on school funding found that spending for the typical white student is about \$3,000 per pupil above what is estimated to achieve national average test results. In contrast, district spending is roughly \$3,000 below adequate for the average Black student and just over \$2,000 below adequate for the typical Hispanic student. These differences align with historical patterns of housing segregation and district boundaries drawn to racially segregate students.¹⁴

MEASURES OF SCHOOL SEGREGATION

There is no singular measure of school segregation, which is a multi-faceted phenomenon. A comprehensive examination of school segregation requires multiple measures of segregation:

- The first, simplest measure of school segregation is looking at the **number or share of isolated schools**. For the purposes of this report, a school is considered racially or economically isolated if more than 75 percent of its students are students of color or are considered academically disadvantaged. It is important to identify isolated schools because such schools often require additional resources for their students to overcome outside-of-school barriers to academic success, yet often lack the political pull to secure an adequate or equitable share of resources
- The **dissimilarity index** is a *district-level or county-level* measure showing how many students would have to move from one school to another to equalize the racial or economic distribution of students across schools within a district or county. For example, a racial dissimilarity index of 0.45 would indicate that a school district would need to re-assign 45 percent of its students to have perfectly racially balanced schools across the district. The dissimilarity index is important because it reveals the extent to which school reassignment policies could be used to ameliorate economic or racial segregation.
- The **disproportionality score**¹⁵ is a *school-level* measure to identify whether a school’s demographics are similar or different from the demographics of the larger community in which it is located. The table below summarizes how to interpret a school’s disproportionality score:

While school segregation indices based on demographic measures allow for comparisons to be made over time, it is important to note that changes in data collection make it impossible to compare current measures of economic segregation against prior time periods. In years past, economic disadvantage was estimated based on student eligibility for the national free or reduced-price lunch programs.

In recent years, the Department of Public Instruction has replaced reporting data on free or reduced lunch eligibility with school-level estimates of “economically-disadvantaged” students. While this change more accurately captures a school’s degree of economic disadvantage, it means that measures of economic disadvantage in the 2021-22 school year are not comparable with data from 2016-17 or prior.

Figure 1: Interpreting Disproportionality Scores

Score Range	Designation
< 0.10	Highly Proportional
0.10 to 0.25	Somewhat Proportional
0.25 to 0.50	Moderately Segregated
> 0.50	Highly Segregated

RACIALLY-ISOLATED SCHOOLS CONTINUE TO INCREASE

The number and share of racially-isolated schools continues to rise. In the 2021-22 school year, 676 traditional public schools were racially isolated. That is, in 27 percent of traditional public schools, students of color comprise at least 75 percent of all students.

Figure 2: Racially-Isolated Schools in LEAs

	Number of Schools			Share of Schools		
	2006-07	2016-17	2021-22	2006-07	2016-17	2021-22
Racially Isolated	433	579	676	19%	24%	27%
Economically Isolated			81			3%
Racially & Economically Isolated			71			3%

In some cases, a school might be racially isolated due to community demographics. For example, in Weldon City Schools, where 97 percent of students are students of color, all schools will be racially isolated. But in many districts, isolated schools are a function of neighborhood-based student assignment policies.

The rise in racially-isolated schools in the traditional public school sector appears to be driven mainly by statewide demographic trends. Students of color now comprise the majority of students in traditional public schools. Students of color comprised 49 percent of traditional school students in 2017, rising to 55 percent in 2022. Over the past five years, the student of color share rose 14 percent, while the racially-isolated school share rose 15 percent.

In other cases, racial isolation might be due to policy decisions. For example, even a racially diverse district might adopt location-based student assignment policies for certain schools that exclude racially diverse neighborhoods.

In the charter sector, additional policies such as choice of curriculum might create a racially-isolated enrollment. Additionally, racial isolation might be driven by the school's physical location, whether the charter offers transportation, if charter applications are available in multiple languages, or whether the school participates in the federal school lunch program.

Figure 3: Racially-Isolated Schools by Student Race and Ethnicity

	Number of Schools				Share of Schools			
	White	Black	Hispanic	Native	White	Black	Hispanic	Native
Traditional Schools	395	85	3	7	16%	3%	0%	0%
Charter Schools	49	24	1	2	23%	11%	0%	1%

Not surprisingly, racially-isolated schools are more prevalent in the charter sector than in the traditional public school sector.

For the 2021-22 school year, students of one race comprise at least 75 percent of enrollment in 20 percent of all traditional public schools. Thirty-six percent of charter schools are racially isolated.

MOST DISTRICTS BECOMING MORE EQUALLY-DISTRIBUTED RACIALLY

Analysis of districts’ racial dissimilarity index scores shows that most districts have improved the equality of the racial distribution of students across their district.

Over the past fifteen years, 75 districts have seen their dissimilarity index improve, compared to 40 districts where the racial distribution of students became more unequal. The same holds true over the most recent five-year period, where the dissimilarity index has improved in 75 districts and regressed in 40 districts.

It is unclear whether these somewhat positive trends are driven by demographics, intentional policy, or chance.

The tables below show the districts with the most unequal racial and economic distribution of students in 2022.

Figure 4: Districts with the most unequal racial and economic distribution of students

School District	Racial Dissimilarity	School District	Income Dissimilarity
Mecklenburg County	0.538	Pender County	0.436
Guilford County	0.455	Union County	0.411
Forsyth County	0.417	Chatham County	0.405
Alamance-Burlington	0.409	Iredell-Statesville	0.391
Pender County	0.407	Wake County	0.365
Rowan-Salisbury	0.405	Hyde County	0.352
Durham County	0.404	Forsyth County	0.330
Chatham County	0.402	Lincoln County	0.330
Lenoir County	0.398	Cabarrus County	0.320
Halifax County	0.397	Moore County	0.320

It remains true that North Carolina's largest districts tend to have a more unequal distribution of students across schools, as districts with fewer schools have fewer opportunities to racially or economically isolate students.

The table below shows the dissimilarity index score and associated ranking (with 1 being the most segregated) of North Carolina's ten largest school districts.

Figure 5: Racial and Income Dissimilarity Scores for North Carolina's Ten Largest Districts

School District	2022 Racial Dissimilarity	2022 Racial Rank	2022 Income Dissimilarity	2022 Income Rank
Wake County	0.321	20	0.365	5
Mecklenburg County	0.538	1	0.304	12
Guilford County	0.455	2	0.284	13
Forsyth County	0.417	3	0.330	7
Cumberland County	0.339	13	0.212	37
Union County	0.323	19	0.411	2
Johnston County	0.223	47	0.233	20
Cabarrus County	0.200	56	0.320	9
Durham County	0.404	7	0.198	49
Gaston County	0.332	16	0.233	21

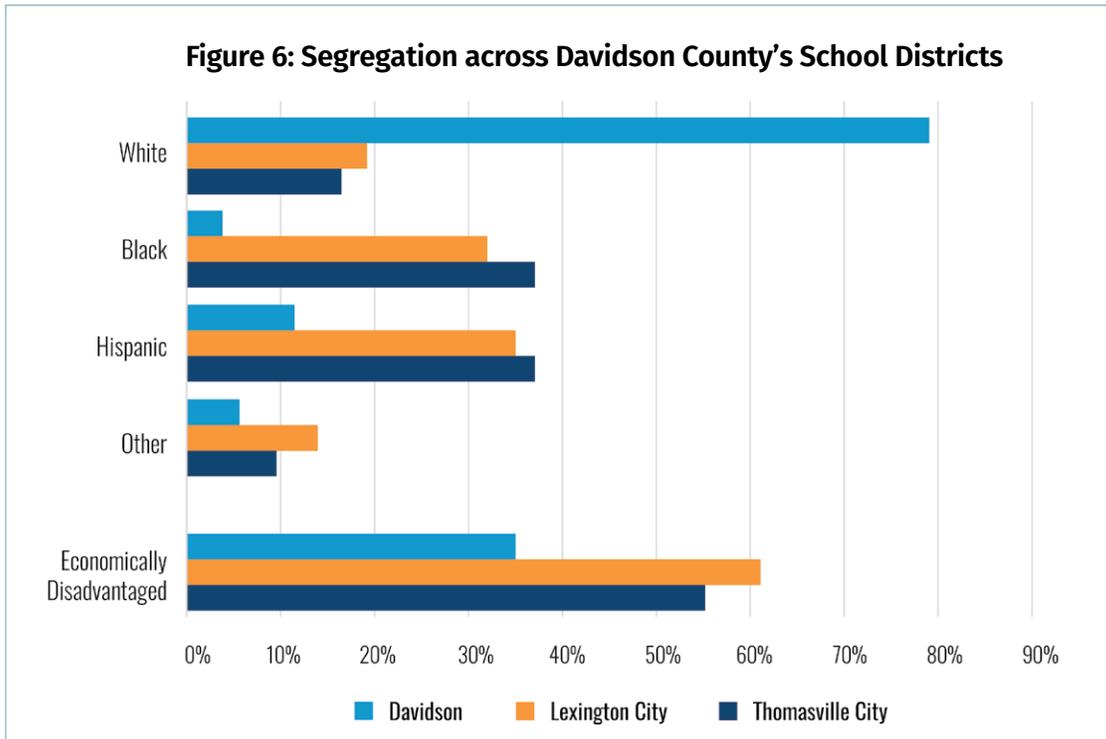
Because of changes in the measurement of students' family income, one cannot analyze trends in the income-based dissimilarity index.

DIVIDED COUNTIES CONTINUE TO EXACERBATE SEGREGATION

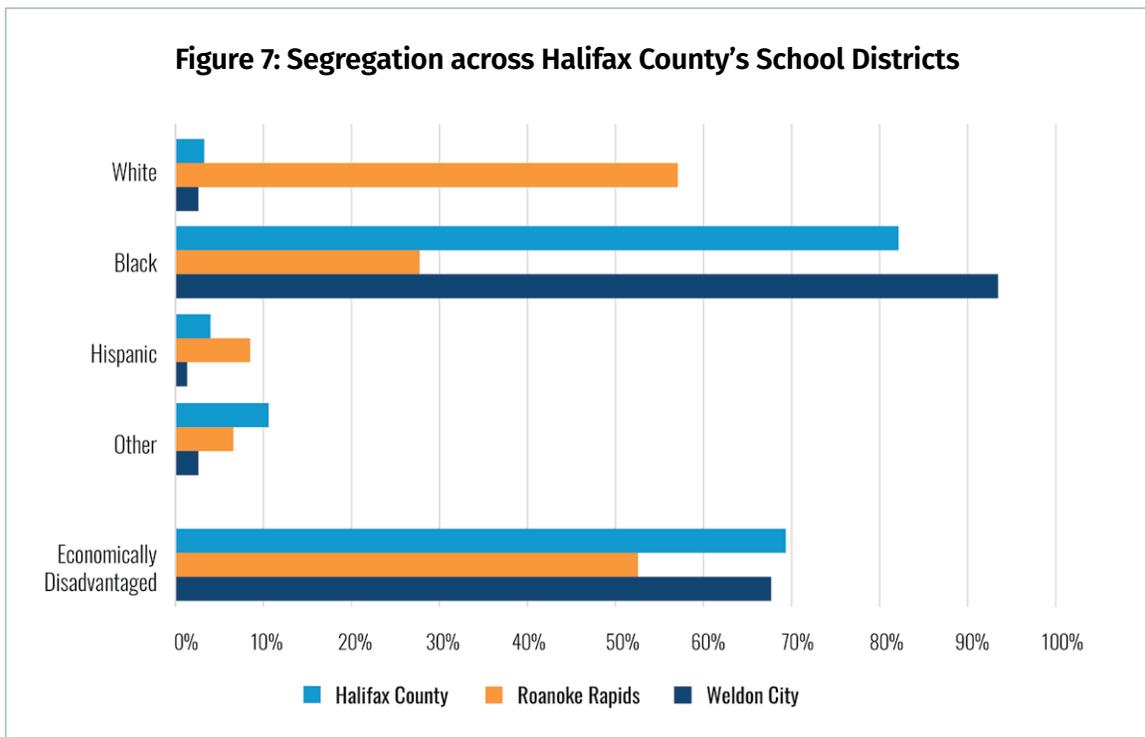
North Carolina continues to have 115 school districts across 100 counties. In most counties, the school district boundary is contiguous with the county boundary. However, 11 counties contain more than one school district. In some instances, county divisions continue to exacerbate school segregation.

Most notably, the district boundaries in Davidson and Halifax Counties are drawn in ways that exacerbate racial segregation.

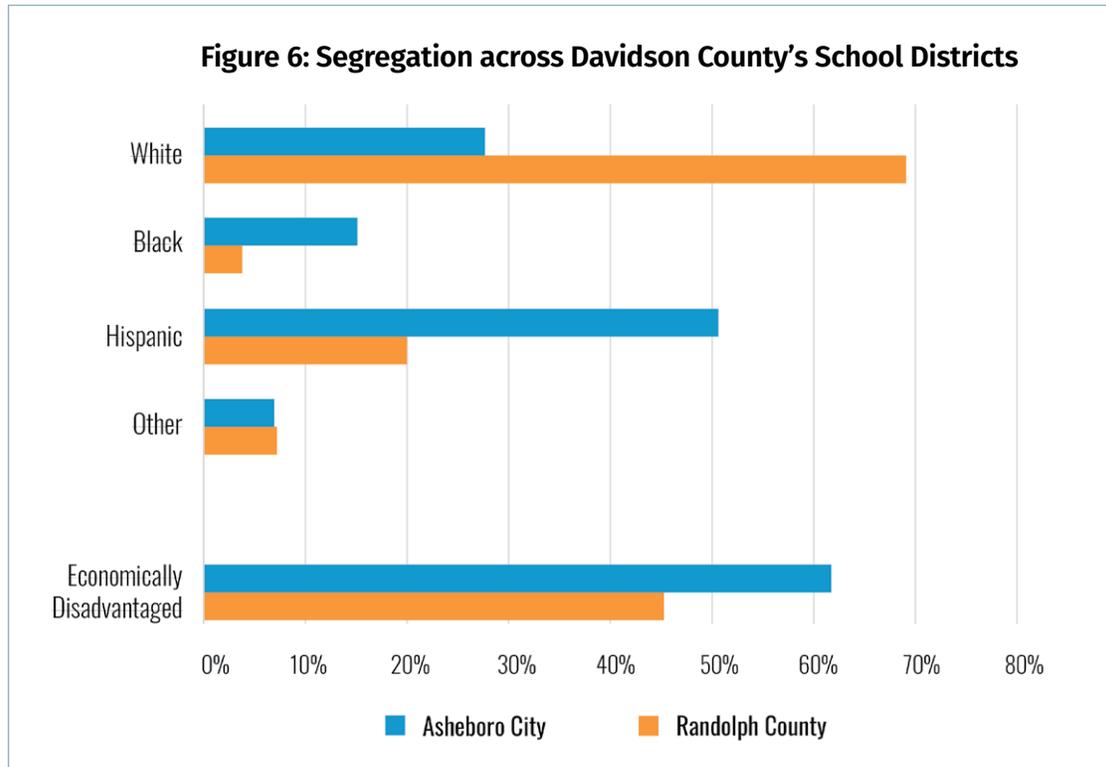
In Davidson County, two districts that are majority students of color have been carved out from the rural, majority-white county district. Lexington City and Thomasville City districts are primarily Black and Hispanic, while Davidson County Schools are overwhelmingly white.



In Halifax County, a whiter, wealthier city has carved a school district out from the larger, poorer, and majority-Black rural areas. Roanoke Rapids Schools are majority white, while Halifax County and Weldon City are overwhelmingly Black.



Randolph County's school districts also deserve scrutiny. Here, a majority Hispanic city district is segregated from the majority white county district.



These racially divided counties remain a sad artifact of the Jim Crow era. It wasn't until the 1870s that localities were allowed to create special school districts separate from the county district. Before the forced integration of public schools, there were 174 school districts in North Carolina.¹⁶ Integration efforts have reduced that figure to 115 by 2004. Sadly, work remains to eliminate racial disparities between school districts within a county.

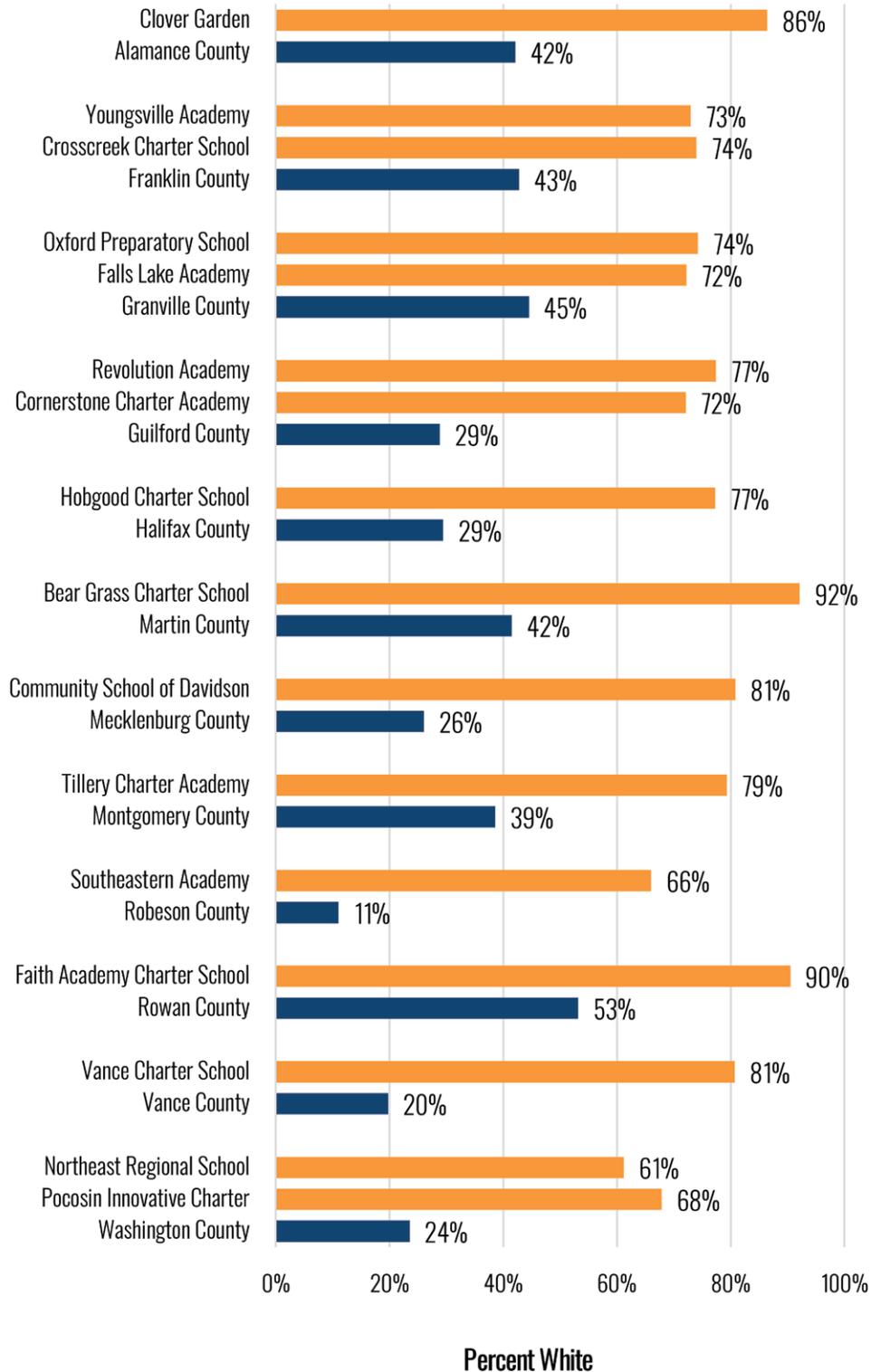
CHARTER SCHOOLS EXACERBATE SEGREGATION

Consistent with national studies¹⁷, peer-reviewed studies of North Carolina's charter schools have shown that charters continue to exacerbate the segregation of public schools.¹⁸

Charters' contribution to racial segregation in North Carolina was abetted by the rewrite of state legislation in 2013. When charter schools were first introduced in North Carolina in the mid-90s, the schools were required to "reasonably reflect the racial and ethnic composition" of the population of the district in which the charter school is located. This requirement was watered down in 2013. Now, North Carolina charter schools must only "make efforts" to achieve demographic parity with the local school district.¹⁹

Not surprisingly, an increasing number of North Carolina charters overwhelmingly serve white students. In 1998, 46 percent of white students in North Carolina attended a school that was

Figure 9: White flight charter schools



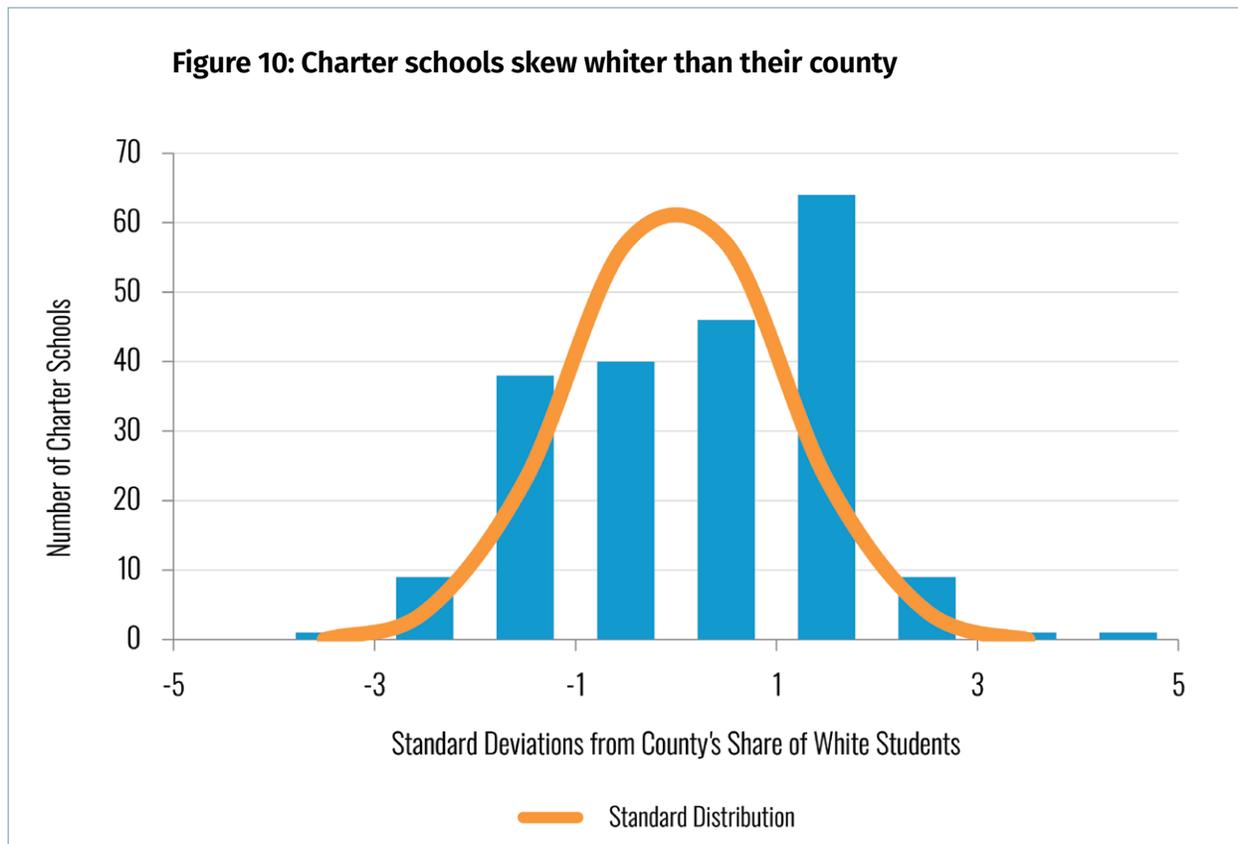
more than 80 percent white. Almost none of these students were in charter schools. By 2016, only 27 percent of white North Carolina students attended a school that was more than 80 percent white; 9 percent were in charter schools.²⁰

The 2018 Stymied report confirmed these findings, showing that charter schools in North Carolina exacerbate racial segregation and are disproportionately serving as schools of white flight.

The impact of charter enrollment on racial segregation can be observed by comparing the racial dissimilarity index of a county's traditional public schools against the index when also including charter schools. In 2017, charter schools increased racial segregation in 72 percent of the 60 counties with charter schools. By 2022, charters had expanded to 64 counties, with charter schools exacerbating racial segregation in 75 percent of these counties (see Appendix D).

Several schools fail to “reasonably reflect the racial and ethnic composition” of their community. The charts below compare selected charter schools to the demographics of all public schools (traditional and charter) within the county.

It is unclear the extent to which these schools are following state laws requiring them to “make efforts” to achieve demographic parity with their larger community. DPI is now requiring charter schools to submit “demographic mirroring plans.” The agency provided this author with the plan for Clover Garden School, a racially-isolated school in Alamance County. The two-page document highlighted the school's overall recruiting efforts and participation in community events.²¹ However, it was unclear how any of these activities (e.g., hosting a talent show, sending



holiday cards to soldiers) could improve the school's racial, ethnic, or economic diversity.

Overall, North Carolina's charter schools continue to skew whiter than traditional public schools in the same county. Figure 10 compares the share of white students in a charter school against the standard deviation of white enrollment in all public schools within a county. If racial segregation in charter schools followed similar patterns as segregation in traditional schools, the distribution of charter schools would follow a normal distribution. The actual distribution of indicates that charter schools skew whiter than the county where they are located.

More than a third of all charter schools have a white enrollment that exceeds the county average by more than a standard deviation. If charters reasonably reflected the racial demographics of their county, one would expect to find about two-thirds of charter schools within one standard deviation of the county average. Only 40 percent are.

THE CASE FOR NONWHITE CHARTER SCHOOLS

While the benefits of integration and the harms of segregation are well documented, it is important to note that not all forms of segregation are created equal.

It is unfortunately true that too many traditional public schools fail to meet the needs of students from historically marginalized racial groups. Traditional public schools often deny Black, Hispanic, and Native students access to resources regularly provided to white students such as well-qualified teachers, advanced coursework, and culturally-affirming curricula. Understandably, families from historically marginalized racial groups might seek out segregated schools that offer their children opportunities and resources that they can't find in their traditional public schools.

This form of segregation is understandable and stands in contrast to white flight charter schools.

Whereas culturally-affirming charters serving historically-marginalized groups are about uplifting students underserved by traditional public schools, white flight charters are largely a reactionary response seeking to hoard existing institutional advantages.

While neither form of segregation is ideal, they have contrasting downsides for students.

The downside of majority nonwhite charters is that they decrease cross-racial learning opportunities for students from all backgrounds. However, the downside of nonwhite charters to white students is limited, as white students remaining in the traditional sector generally attend a school that is largely designed to meet their needs and preferences.

The downside of white flight charters similarly decreases cross-racial learning opportunities for students from all backgrounds. But

these costs are compounded in white flight charters due to resource hoarding. When wealthier white families with political power exit the traditional public school sector, it undermines the collective will to adequately resource traditional public schools.

Sadly, research shows that white parents are most likely to seek schools where their child is in the majority.²²

The ultimate goal of this author is for public schools to offer equal opportunities and cultural affirmation to students of all racial groups. This report contains several recommendations on how we can achieve that goal. But until public schools achieve that goal, it is understandable why Black, Hispanic, and Native students might seek opportunities outside of the traditional public school system.

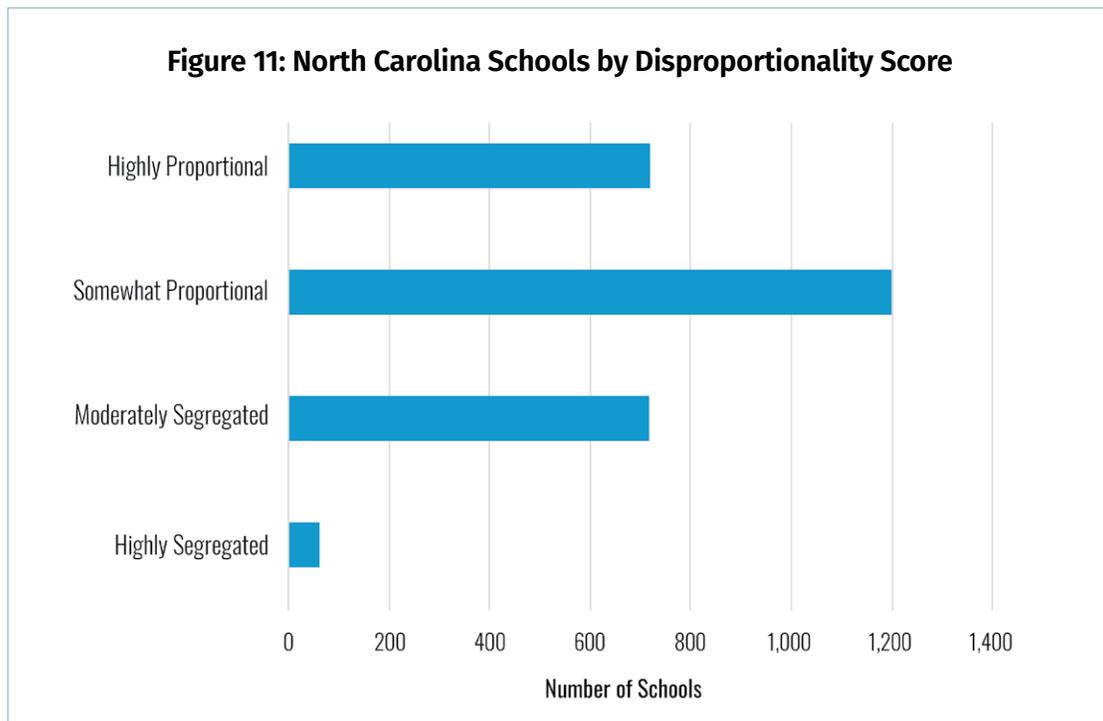
It is important to note how charters might indirectly hinder school integration efforts in the traditional public school sector. For districts considering new integration plans, the existence of charters allows families that mistakenly believe they benefit from segregated schools to threaten the withdrawal of their child into a charter school. This threat has serious consequences and could reduce the district's budget, undermine public support to adequately fund education, and ultimately harm the students who find themselves in increasingly segregated, under-resourced schools.

There is strong evidence of charters' indirect impact on school segregation in North Carolina. When the General Assembly granted four majority-white Charlotte suburbs the authority to open charters that would grant enrollment priority to their own residents, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School Board responded by ensuring families that the district would maintain its neighborhood-based assignment policy. The sentiment extends beyond Charlotte. A 2019 study found that North Carolina superintendents believe there is "less political will for diverse schools when families have charter schools available as an alternative."²³

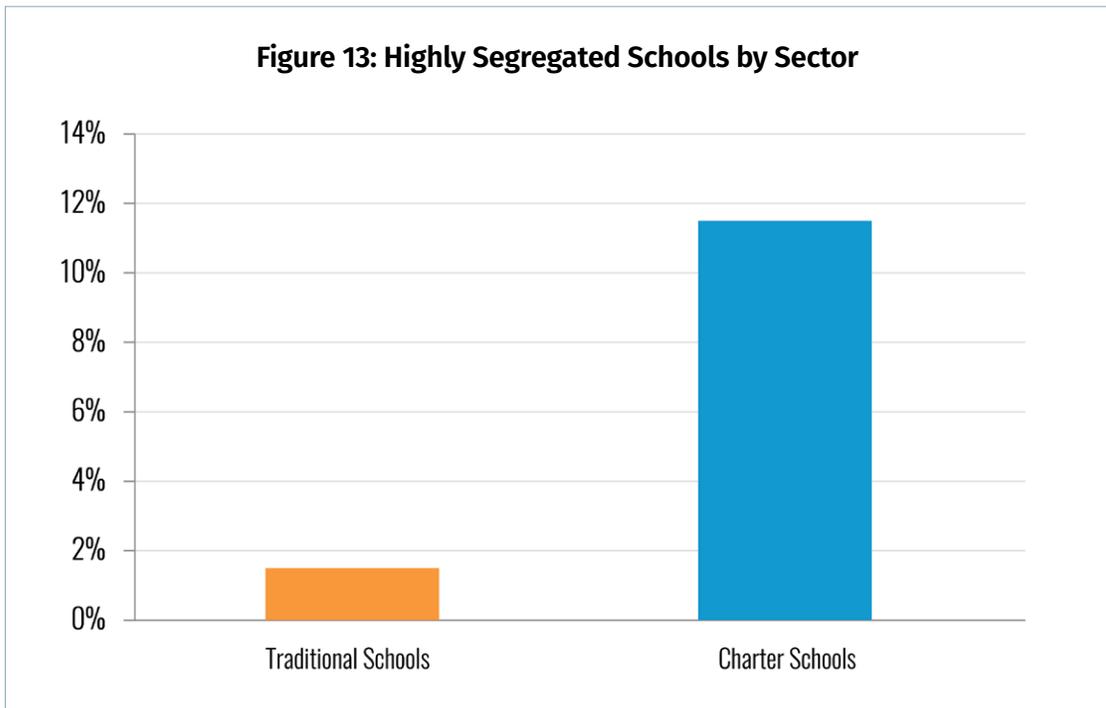
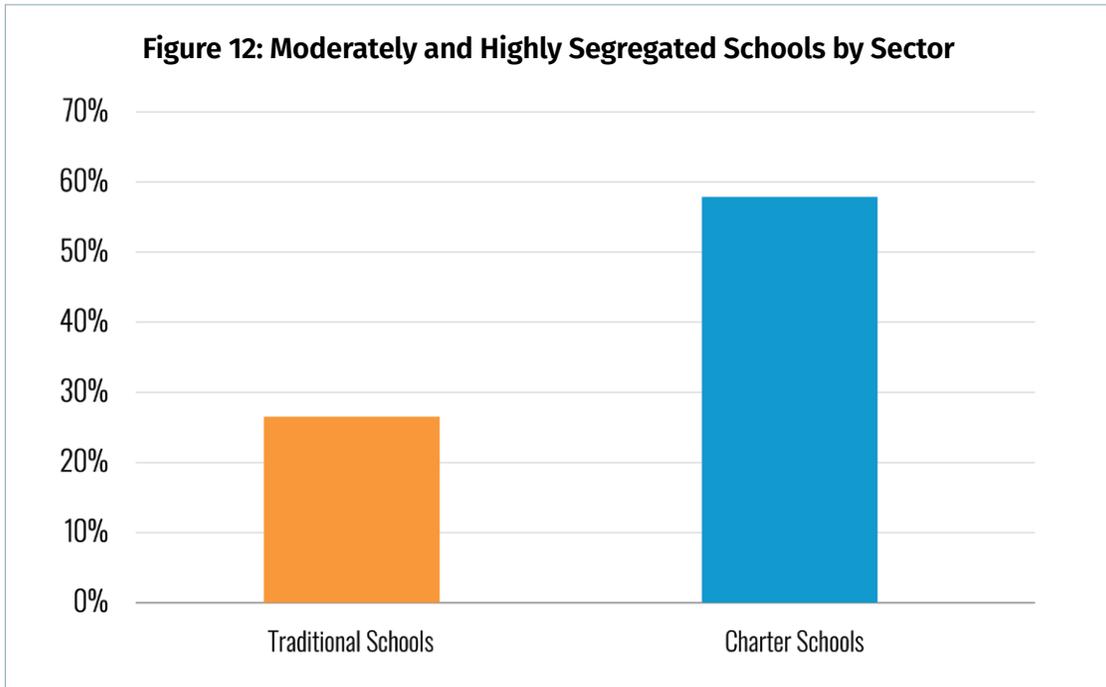
HOW SEGREGATED IS YOUR SCHOOL?

One can examine the extent to which any individual school's demographics differ from the larger district or county by a school's disproportionality index. A disproportionality score of 0.1 or lower indicates the school's demographics are mainly similar to the county or district in which the school is located. A score of 0.5 or greater indicates that the school is quite segregated.

Overall, just 27 percent of public schools are highly proportional.



The disproportionality scores also highlight the extent to which charter schools are much more racially segregated than their traditional sector counterparts. Fifty-eight percent of charter schools are moderately or highly segregated, compared to 26 percent of schools in the traditional public school sector.



Extreme segregation is ten times more common in the charter sector than in the traditional public school sector. More than 1 in 10 (11 percent) charter schools are highly segregated, while just one percent of traditional public schools are highly segregated.

[An interactive tool](#) allows one to examine the disproportionality score of every North Carolina public school for the 21-22 school year.

REAL INTEGRATION IS MORE THAN DEMOGRAPHICS

It is important to note that real integration is about much more than simply moving bodies between schools. Real integration provides supportive environments that foster cross-cultural and cross-racial understanding and friendships.

Student leaders at New York’s IntegrateNYC have defined what real school integration looks like. They have developed the “5 Rs of Real Integration” to ensure that integrative practices continue within the walls of the school building. The 5 Rs are paraphrased below²⁴:

1. **Race and Enrollment:** Every school should reflect the diversity of its community and give all students equal opportunities regardless of their skin color, income of their parents, or where they live.
2. **Restorative Justice:** Schools must be free of police presence and metal detectors. Schools must protect the integrity and humanity of each student and help build student leaders.
3. **Resources:** Lawmakers must provide an equitable distribution of resources across all schools and meet constitutional requirements for a “sound basic education.” These resources include qualified staff, an updated curriculum, support for failing students, support for English learners and students with disabilities, appropriate class sizes, up-to-date books, library, technology, and labs, and a safe, orderly building. Schools must provide students with equitable access to after-school programs, school supplies, sports teams, AP courses, music and art programs, guidance counselors, and healthy, nutritious meals.
4. **Representation:** Faculty must be diverse, inclusive and elevate the voices of communities of color, immigrant communities, and the LGBTQIA+ community so that school leadership reflects student identities and experiences.
5. **Relationships:** Schools must build relationships between students across group identities by being empathetic to students’ identities and focusing on the power of different backgrounds. This requires a curriculum that teaches students about their history, encourages them to express themselves, and fosters pride in their culture.

For students from all backgrounds to reap the benefits of integrated schools, we must ensure that within-school policies and practices reflect a commitment to empowering students from all backgrounds.

POLICIES TO INTEGRATE OUR SCHOOLS

Segregated schools don't happen by accident. They are the product of deliberate policies and institutional racism that have created a racially divided society.

Undoing this damage requires intentional policymaking. Luckily, policymakers and educators at every level of government and the education system can take steps to help integrate our schools.

Federal education leaders

The federal government has the resources and scope to advance school integration at scale. Additionally, federal politicians are at a political distance that leaves them somewhat insulated from the opposition that can arise from local integration efforts.

Several existing pieces of federal legislation could improve school integration:

- President Biden's budget proposal included the **Fostering Diverse Schools** grant program, but Congress has not funded it. The program would support voluntary efforts to increase racial and socioeconomic diversity by making competitive grants available to school districts.
- Increase funding for the **Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP)**. Magnet schools can be an important tool for improving school integration. However, federal funding for MSAP has failed to keep up with inflation.
- Dramatically increase funding for **Title I grants** to low-income schools. As a candidate, President Biden promised to triple funding for Title I. Additional Title I funding can reduce the underfunding and lack of resources in high-poverty schools that serve as barriers to integration. Additionally, states are required to set aside seven percent of Title I funds to implement evidence-based interventions for low-performing schools. The Department of Education can issue guidance reminding states and school districts that integration plans are an essential evidence-based intervention.

Federal leaders could develop new programs that would:

- Create new funding streams and grants for districts implementing school integration plans and that create incentives for consolidating racially segregated neighboring districts
- Establish new prohibitions preventing the division of existing school districts along racial lines
- Strengthen the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights to ramp up enforcement of federal civil rights laws in our schools, including enforcement of school desegregation orders

While this report focuses on policy levers available within the education sector, federal leaders

can also **work through Housing and Urban Development** to mitigate residential segregation. For example, the federal government could require HUD to place new public housing in wealthy communities with high-performing schools.

State education leaders

Members of the North Carolina General Assembly and the State Board of Education can also play a role in creating more racially and economically integrated schools.

The most critical step for state leaders would be **implementing the Leandro Comprehensive Remedial Plan**. The *Leandro* Plan is a highly-detailed, research-based set of investments and policy changes necessary to create a school system that meets the guarantees provided under the North Carolina Constitution. A product of the nearly three-decade-long *Leandro* court case, the Plan will — among other things — dramatically improve the adequacy and equity of school funding. Adequate and equitable funding are often necessary conditions for successful school integration plans. Families are less likely to oppose transfers to “bad” schools when fewer under-resourced schools exist.²⁵

State-level grant programs could include **transportation grants** for districts implementing income-based student attendance policies or controlled choice assignment plans and **awards to districts that improve their racial or income-based dissimilarity indices**.

General Assembly leaders can **mandate merging city and county school districts** in cases where district boundaries create segregated school systems. If leaders are uncomfortable forcing such a change, they may create financial incentives to encourage local mergers.

The General Assembly could **overhaul its racist and classist school performance grade system and prohibit real estate agents from advertising homes based on school performance grades**. North Carolina assigns each school an A-F letter grade that highly correlates with students’ race and family income levels.²⁶ Rather than stigmatizing schools that enroll students of color and students from families with low incomes, state leaders could adopt inspectorate models where teams of experienced educators serve more as consultants, identifying areas where schools can strengthen their practices.

If the state doesn’t completely abandon performance grades, they should eliminate achievement as a measure. Instead, school performance grades should **incorporate multiple measures that encourage academic growth and the closing of school opportunity gaps**. A great example is 2021’s House Bill 948 which proposed adding measures of school segregation to North Carolina’s school report cards. The bill would use each school’s disproportionality score to determine which individual schools are the most segregated in relation to other public schools in the same county. Additionally, the bill would examine the equitable distribution of opportunities and resources across schools and student subgroups within a district. It would measure equality of access to instruction in arts and music, and access to support personnel such as psychologists, counselors, and nurses.

State leaders could provide **public oversight of new school construction and attendance boundaries**, including charters. The location of new schools could be subject to state approval based on an analysis of the predicted impact of the new school on predicted attendance patterns

and whether the new construction exacerbates unequal access to newer, high-quality school buildings.

Staff at the Department of Public Instruction could be better deployed to help integrate schools by:

- Providing technical support to districts and charter schools looking to integrate their schools. Officials could assist district leaders in selecting attendance zones, establishing transportation routes and helping charter leaders identify school practices and marketing strategies that will help diversify enrollment.
- Identifying and providing high-quality curricula that are culturally affirming.
- Providing training on restorative justice practices that end racialized exclusionary discipline practices.
- Assisting schools in implementing cooperative learning opportunities.
- Providing supports that improve the retention of teachers of color.

State leaders could also make several changes to charter school laws and policies to limit how much this sector segregates our schools. Options include:

- **Capping enrollment in charter schools.** Charter schools do not only provide options for families who want their children to be in the racial majority. They also hinder school districts seeking to implement school integration plans that modify neighborhood-based attendance zones.
- **Revoking the charters of white flight charter schools.** While school closures are disruptive events for students, white flight charters, several of which are identified in this report, are especially harmful to their own students and the surrounding community.
- **Requiring charter schools to adopt inclusive practices** such as offering transportation, mandating participation in the federal school lunch program, and prohibiting mandatory parental volunteer commitments. Families with low incomes are often unable to provide their children with reliable transportation, cannot afford expensive school lunches, and cannot meet volunteer requirements because of work or family commitments. State inspections could also ensure that charters provide decent instruction for English learners and students with disabilities.
- **Repealing S.L. 2018-3**, a bill that grants four majority-white Charlotte suburbs the authority to create charter schools that would grant enrollment priority to residents of the four suburban towns. This authority has stymied local efforts to implement new student assignment plans to reduce racial segregation.

Finally, state leaders can **use the bully pulpit to emphasize how school integration strengthens our communities**. State leaders can help raise awareness and highlight the important ways that integrated schools benefit students from all backgrounds. Such leadership can help sway public opinion and help establish the conditions to facilitate local school integration efforts.

District education leaders

District leaders are well positioned to help break the connection between school segregation and residential segregation. Most notably, district leaders can break these links by limiting the extent to which residency drives school attendance patterns. Policies that help break the connection between school and residential segregation include:

- **Income-based student attendance policies:** While the U.S. Supreme Court declared race-based attendance policies unconstitutional in 2007, districts may still adopt income-based student attendance policies that seek to balance the share of students in each school from families with low incomes. Wake County Public Schools experienced particular success in the early 2000s with an attendance policy that ensured no school would consist of more than 40 percent of students receiving free or reduced lunch and no more than 25 percent of students performing below grade level.²⁷
- **Controlled choice: Under a controlled choice assignment plan, parents rank their preferred schools** in the district. The district then uses a computer algorithm to balance parental preferences against district goals for student diversity. Jefferson County Public Schools (Louisville, Kentucky) and Cambridge School District (Massachusetts) are two examples of districts with successful controlled choice policies.
- **Magnet schools:** Magnets are schools with specific themes that seek to draw students from across geographic areas. Magnets designed to foster integration factor diversity into the admissions lottery and select themes that appeal to a broad range of families to attract students from across the district.
- **Merging of segregated districts:** Local education leaders drove the consolidation of school districts in North Carolina from 174 to 115 rather than top-down efforts from state officials. Leaders in the 11 counties that still contain multiple school districts should rekindle efforts to merge districts, particularly in counties like Davidson, Halifax, and Randolph, where extreme racial divisions persist across small school districts.

District leaders can limit the opposition to school integration efforts by **ensuring equal opportunities across all district schools**. Under North Carolina's school finance system, state funding is provided at the district level. It is the local school board's responsibility to determine how best to allocate resources across schools. Smart allocation of resources can ensure all students have equal access to great teachers, academic opportunities, arts programming, and extracurriculars and reduce perceptions that some schools are "haves" while others are "have-nots."

District leaders can also provide **guidance and resources that allow or incentivize school leaders to adopt inclusive policies**. That is, district leaders can ensure that school leaders have the training to identify and deliver culturally-affirming curricula, abandon discriminatory discipline policies, eliminate tracking, and encourage cooperative learning strategies that encourage youth from different backgrounds to work together. District leaders can also create incentives to ensure school adopt such inclusive practices by establishing equity goals and incorporating inclusive practices into employee evaluations.

School leadership and educators

Research is clear that simply placing students in the same building is insufficient to reap the benefits of integrated schools.

School leaders should regularly examine their practices to ensure that their classrooms aren't segregated and that **all students have equal access to resources affecting academic success**. Research has found North Carolina's students of color have diminished access to advanced coursework and experienced teachers.²⁸

Similarly, school leaders should identify and **eliminate barriers that prevent equal participation in enrichment activities and after-school programs**. For example, schools should ensure that supplemental fees or lack of transportation don't inhibit participation in music programs or after-school activities.

Principals, teachers, and other educators can also **create inclusive and affirming school environments**. A recent Learning Policy Institute report details several school-based strategies to help students feel safe, protected, and valued:²⁹

- **Promoting trust and interpersonal connection:** Connection-building tools and values affirmation interventions are important ways to build empathy. Identifying commonalities between staff and students can help mitigate bias while building strong relationships.
- **Creating intentional communities of care and consistency:** Identity-safe classrooms, norms for positive dialogue, and identity-affirming forums can build a sense of belonging for students.
- **Creating trusting relationships using restorative practices:** Restorative practices use mediated dialogue to prevent and address the roots of conflict and wrongdoing. Restorative practices build and maintain relationships instead of exclusionary discipline that can isolate students.
- **Promoting understanding, voice, and responsibility:** Creating projects where students have choice, voice, and responsibility for their own learning adds relevancy and fosters connections, especially when projects draw upon students' individual and cultural experiences. For example, educators can ask students to identify solutions to community-based challenges or organize collective action around important political issues.
- **Elevating diversity as a resource for learning:** When students see teachers and principals support cross-racial relations and adopt anti-racist practices, they report greater interest in developing cross-racial friendships over time.³⁰ In addition to modeling supportive norms, learning experiences enabling young people to explore their identities or engage with culturally responsive content also validate students' diverse backgrounds and experiences.

Inclusive and affirming school environments provide students with cooperative learning opportunities that foster cross-cultural understanding and friendships.³¹ Such practices are vital to both academic success and lifelong economic mobility.

Charter school leaders

In addition to adopting the inclusive and affirming practices described above, charter leaders can make additional efforts to integrate their schools.

State law allows charter schools to use **weighted lotteries** to help the demographic makeup of their schools better reflect the makeup of the larger community. Currently, 64 of 206 charter schools have been approved to use a weighted lottery that grants enrollment preference to certain student groups when the school is over-subscribed.

Additionally, charter schools can **offer transportation and school lunch** programs to minimize the exclusion of students from low-income families. They can **eliminate mandatory volunteer requirements** that can create barriers for working families. Finally, charter school leaders can utilize **intentional marketing** efforts to attract a more diverse student population.

CONCLUSION

The past five years have presented a mixed bag for school integration in North Carolina. While the racial distribution of students within districts has slightly improved in most districts, the number of racially-isolated schools continues to climb. While leaders in the General Assembly have abandoned overt efforts to further segregate North Carolina's schools, there has been almost no state legislation targeting school integration.

Despite the relative inaction during the past five years, the case for school integration grows. Demographic changes heighten the importance of ensuring that students are provided opportunities for cross-racial and cross-cultural friendships. Such opportunities are vital for economic success. They are also important for fighting against the troubling rise of overt racial hate groups ushered in by the Trump administration. Within North Carolina, politicians continue to enflame racial divisions through — among other things —participating in the cynical moral panic against Critical Race Theory.

Without school integration, we can't create a multiracial democracy where students from all backgrounds can thrive. Hopefully, this report will rekindle efforts in North Carolina by reminding folks of the importance of the topic, identifying the work that remains, and offering new solutions to create truly integrated schools.

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