

Can Our Schools Capture the Educational Gains of Diversity?

North Carolina School Segregation, Alternatives and Possible Gains

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Executive Summary

May 17, 2024 marks the 70th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the landmark Supreme Court decision that ruled segregated schools were “inherently unequal.” At the time, North Carolina was one of 17 states that enforced de jure segregation, that is, segregation by law. The state of North Carolina and the school districts within the state have played prominent roles in our nation’s history of school desegregation. The current context is different from the context during the time in which *Brown* was decided 70 years ago. North Carolina’s public school enrollment is increasingly multiracial, and the expansion of school choice means that a growing share of students attends charters and private schools, both of which tend to be more segregated than traditional public schools. The nation, including North Carolina, is in a period of extreme racial and political polarization.

As the nation marks this important anniversary, it is essential to assess where North Carolina schools are now in terms of school desegregation, as segregated schools are systematically linked to unequal educational opportunities and outcomes, while desegregated schools are associated with numerous short-term, long-term, academic, and nonacademic outcomes for individuals and society. Therefore, in this report, we analyzed school enrollment and desegregation trends at the state level from 1989 to 2021. We measured desegregation using concentration and exposure/isolation.

Key findings from our analysis include:

1. From 1989 to 2021, North Carolina’s public school enrollment increased by over 41% and became increasingly diverse. In 2021, the state’s public school enrollment was 45% White, 25% Black, 20% Hispanic, 5% Multiracial, 4% Asian, and 1% American Indian.
2. Despite an increasingly diverse student body, patterns of segregation intensified as students of all racial groups were disproportionately enrolled in schools with same-race peers.
 - In 2021, the typical White student attended a school where 58.9% of the students were White, even though White students only comprised 45% of the total state enrollment.
 - The typical Black student attended a school where 41.2% of the students were Black, even though Black students accounted for 25% of the state’s enrollment.
 - The typical Hispanic student attended a school where 28.7% of the students were Hispanic, even though Hispanic students accounted for only 20% of the state’s public school enrollment.
3. In 2021, Black students had the least exposure to White students; the typical Black student attended a school with 28.3% White schoolmates. The typical Hispanic student

attended a school with 36.1% White schoolmates, the second lowest exposure to White students of any demographic group.

4. Despite accounting for less than half of the state's enrollment in 2021, 68.6% of White students attended majority White schools.
5. In the past three decades, the share of intensely segregated schools of color (schools that enroll 90-100% students of color) increased such that in 2021, 13.5% of the state's public schools were intensely segregated schools of color.
6. In 2021, 1 in 4 Black students and almost 1 in 5 Hispanic students across the state attended an intensely segregated school of color.
7. In 2021, within intensely segregated schools of color, 82.6% of the students were recipients of free or reduced-price lunch, indicating a double segregation of students by race and poverty.
8. The typical Black and Hispanic students attended a school with disproportionately large shares of low-income students (61.3% and 55.3%, respectively) while the typical White and Asian students attended a school with disproportionately small shares of low-income students (38.0% and 29.4%, respectively).
9. Compared to charters and magnets, traditional public schools had the smallest share of intensely segregated and hypersegregated schools of color (10.5% and 0.5%, respectively) and charters had the largest share of hypersegregated schools of color (6.0%). Hypersegregated schools of color enroll 99-100% students of color.
10. In 2021, majority schools of color and intensely segregated schools of color were found in all areas of the state, but cities had the largest shares of majority schools of color (81.7%), intensely segregated schools of color (30.6%), and hypersegregated schools of color (2.3%), while rural areas had the largest share of intensely segregated White schools (4.0%).
11. When comparing different grade levels, in 2021, elementary schools had the largest share of both intensely segregated schools of color (15.9%) and intensely segregated White schools (2.6%).

Local, state, and federal efforts could aid in facilitating desegregation. Encouraging efforts to support desegregation and integration are underway in several North Carolina districts, including the following:

- Cumberland County Schools and Winston Salem/Forsyth County Schools were awarded approximately \$1.5 million in federal funding from the Fostering Diverse Schools Demonstration Grant to support their plans to foster diversity and equity across their schools.
- From 2021 to 2023, Wake County Public School System received more than \$42.5 million in federal funding through the Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP), a federal grant program that aims to support districts in using magnet schools to further desegregation efforts.
- In the 2024-2025 school year, Durham Public Schools will implement its Growing Together student assignment plan, which prioritizes diversity in the redrawing of school attendance boundaries and expands access and equity through controlled-choice admissions.

To further support desegregation in North Carolina, we make the following recommendations for school districts, the state, and the federal government:

- Districts around the state should design voluntary school desegregation policies that are likely to be most effective in their local context. These policies could include implementing controlled-choice plans or multi-factor student attendance policies that include diversity goals, redrawing attendance boundary lines with diversity as a priority, developing magnet schools, pairing elementary schools, and consolidating multiple school districts within the same county.
- North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NC DPI) should offer incentives to districts and schools to desegregate through grant programming, as well as offer support to LEAs engaging in desegregation efforts.
- The state legislature should strengthen its charter school regulation by holding charter schools accountable for diverse student enrollment practices and require that charter schools offer transportation and free or reduced-price lunch to qualifying students.
- The state legislature should also strengthen the statutory language for the statewide voucher program to include civil rights protections for all students in private schools that accept vouchers, as well as require the same levels of transparency and accountability for those private schools accepting public funds.
- The federal government should increase funding for MSAP and the Fostering Diverse Schools Demonstration Grant Program to allow for more awardees.