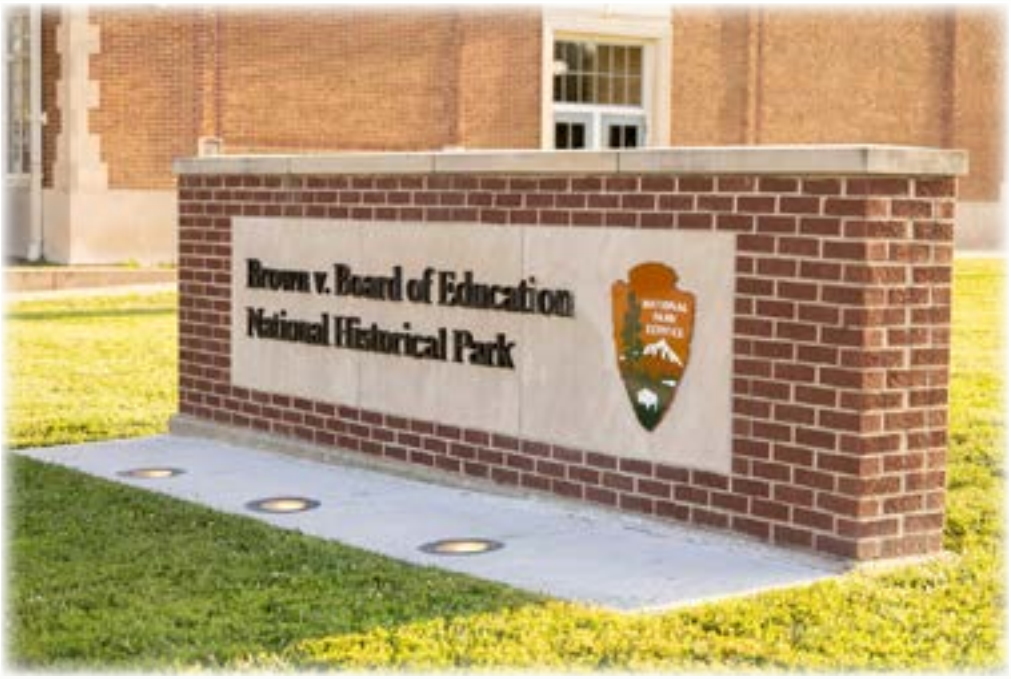
NEPC Review: School Segregation on School Report Cards: Who Are We Grading Anyway? (Urban Institute, September 2024)



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Summary

School Segregation on School Report Cards: Who Are We Grading Anyway?, released by the Urban Institute, considers the impact of proposed legislation that would add a measure of segregation to the state accountability system in North Carolina. The legislation would assign a "proportionality score" to schools, measuring how representative a school's racial demographics are to the surrounding county. Using publicly available data, the report examines how scores would vary depending on the population to which schools are compared. This "what if" exercise highlights the control (and responsibility) policymakers have over *what* is measured and *how* measurement is undertaken in accountability systems. In particular, it demonstrates how small changes to formulas meaningfully shift the story data tell about schools. Although it does not make recommendations about which formulas are best, the report does raise questions to help policymakers evaluate the trade-offs of different approaches. However, given the high stakes of accountability systems and the likelihood that measures become distorted over time, a note of caution is warranted, lest the different formulas be used to fish for optimal outcomes rather than drive deliberative policymaking.

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I. Introduction

Schools in the United States reached the height of desegregation in 1988.[1] Their gradual but steady resegregation has been exacerbated by court decisions that restricted the ability of state and local officials to use race as a factor in drawing district boundaries or making school assignments.[2] With fewer policy levers available to support desegregation, some policymakers are looking to leverage state accountability systems as a tool to visualize racial isolation and encourage policies to reduce it.

Signed into law in 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) codified educational accountability systems in all 50 states. NCLB requires the assessment of student learning outcomes, rank orders districts and schools according to these outcomes, and prescribes sanctions for schools and districts not meeting achievement targets. The reauthorization of NCLB in 2015, called the Every Student Succeeds Act, aimed to diversify school quality measurement by directing states to include at least one "non-academic" indicator in accountability systems. In 2020, the National Coalition on School Diversity (NCSD) published model legislation that would define and employ a non-academic indicator to measure how representative schools are to the communities they serve.[3]

In *School Segregation on School Report Cards: Who Are We Grading Anyway?*, Jay Carter and Leonardo Restrepo describe two state-level initiatives—in New York and North Carolina—that would use NCSD's model language to add measures of school segregation to accountability systems.[4] Drawing on publicly available data to explore the North Carolina proposal in detail, the report is aimed at policymakers interested in exploring how such measures are defined and applied to the assessment of school quality, in the service of making "schools more representative of the wider community."[5]

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report briefly describes proposed policies in New York and North Carolina that would calculate a "proportionality score" for schools. Proportionality scores range from 0 to 1 and classify schools according to the extent to which their student population reflects the population around them. The crux of the report, however, takes up the policy implications and trade-offs of a defining question: "Proportional to *whom*?" Using publicly available data in North Carolina, it demonstrates how proportionality scores differ according to how the broader population is defined.

The default comparison, as written in the model legislation, is between individual schools and the total population of *the surrounding county*. To this baseline comparison, the report calculates three alternatives: the total number of *school-age children* (ages 5 to 17) within the school's county, the total number of *students enrolled in public schools* within the school's county, and the total number of *students within the school's district*. Each alternative calculation is progressively more "proportional"—that is, the demographics of the school more closely resemble the demographics of the larger population.

One complicating factor in designing and interpreting these measures is the status of charter schools (which account for 8% of public school students in North Carolina). Comparing the charter school sector to traditional public schools, the report finds that charter schools were slightly more likely than traditional public schools to be highly proportional (21% compared to 19%) and more than twice as likely than traditional public schools to be highly disproportional (17% compared to 7%). However, across charter schools, racial demographics (and therefore proportionality) varied dramatically from school to school. Charter schools also pose a technical challenge to the alternative formula comparing schools to their district since many charter schools function as their own single-school districts.

The report weighs the relative trade-offs of the different formulas for calculating a proportionality score, but it does not render a judgment on which formula is best. Rather, it assesses the various measures based in part on beliefs about where responsibility should lie for making schools more representative of the population. For example, if the responsibility for integration lies most squarely with school districts, a calculation that visualizes a school's proportionality relative to its school district may make more sense for spurring change. However, if responsibility for integration lies more with state and federal policymakers, then a measure including all school-age children would better visualize segregation caused by cross-sector school choice and help spur targeted assistance.

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

The report considers legislation that would add measures of school segregation to state accountability systems as an opportunity for states to put "resources behind school integration."[6] This language suggests there is a role and responsibility for policymakers in encouraging and supporting school integration. However, the report asks whether proportionality scores as calculated in the proposed bill are "reasonable" and whether alternative formulas

might "make more sense" to motivate action.[7]

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The report does not use research literature to motivate its analysis or substantiate its conclusions. There are eight footnotes, none of which include peer-reviewed research. The report does allude to research, albeit in general terms. For example, in a paragraph describing the period following *Brown v. Board of Education*, when courts and states were desegregating schools, it asserts,

> We know from the time post *Brown* that school desegregation resulted in positive effects across many different outcomes, especially for Black children. We also know that resegregation in the time leading up to and through the *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District* decision has resulted in harm.[8]

Indeed, during the period when desegregation orders were enforced, desegregation efforts were effective at improving student learning, narrowing the test score gap between Black and White students, improving inter-group relations, boosting lifetime earnings for African Americans, and increasing the likelihood of interracial friendships.[9] And although "harm" is a relative term, there is evidence the resegregation of schools has had negative effects on a range of outcomes. More segregated schools tend to have fewer experienced teachers,[10] more limited curriculum options,[11] lower academic performance,[12] and higher dropout rates.[13] Notably, there are several peer-reviewed studies documenting the effects of segregation and desegregation specifically in North Carolina.[14]

Another missed opportunity for citing research evidence is when the report notes how districts could "use student assignment plans and controlled intradistrict choice, such as magnet programs, to influence the demographics of their schools," while charter school authorizers could "give priority to schools that use intentional mechanisms to further diversity in their student bodies (diverse-by-design charter schools).[15] Research on the use of student assignment plans and intradistrict choice to mitigate segregation is mixed, with tempered support for student assignment policies and magnet schools (at least when they do not have competitive admissions).[16] Research on the impact of charter school growth and "diverse-by-design" charter schools on segregation is similarly mixed.[17] (The report does note "prior research indicates charter school presence increases school segregation," but it does not cite research to this effect).[18] Importantly, as above, a substantial body of research on policy outcomes like these have focused on North Carolina.[19]

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The report does not have a detailed description of its methods, instead saying only that proportionality scores were calculated for the 2021-2022 school year for all schools in North

Carolina and then listing the data sources used in this exercise.[20] Importantly, the report also does not describe how to interpret a "proportionality score," noting only that the measure ranges from 0 to 1 and that within this range the North Carolina bill would classify schools as highly proportional, proportional, somewhat disproportional, or highly disproportional.[21]

An explanation of what a proportionality score is and how to interpret it—central concepts in this report—would be helpful for lay readers. A proportionality score, as it relates to school segregation, calculates the extent to which the racial demographics of one unit (e.g., a school) is or is not representative of (or proportional to) a larger population (e.g., a county). The number represents the percentage of students at a school who would need to be exchanged with students of different racial backgrounds to make the school perfectly proportional to the larger unit to which it is being compared. Thus, a lower score indicates the school is more representative of the larger population and would therefore be categorized as either "highly proportional" or "proportional."[22]

With this explanation as background, figures and analysis in the report are easier to interpret. Figure 1 compares scores calculated as proposed in the North Carolina bill (schools to their surrounding county) with two alternatives: (a) schools relative to all school age-children within the county and (b) schools relative to all public school students in a county. Because the population to which schools are compared in these two alternatives are less White, the percentage of "highly proportional" and "proportional schools" increases. Under the legislative formula, 58% of schools were highly proportional or proportional, compared to 71% for each of the alternatives.

The report differs from some research reports in that it is not attempting to evaluate existing policies. Instead, it is written as more of a "what if" paper that examines how a seemingly small change in a measurement formula could have substantial changes in the distribution of highly proportional or proportional schools statewide. As such, the methods, such as they are, are appropriate to the report's purpose. That said, as noted, the key concepts and data are under-explained.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Report's Conclusions

Broadly speaking, the report's conclusion that changes to the state's formula for measuring a school's proportionality would lead to changes in the distribution of schools across its four proposed proportionality categories is reasonable and follows logically from the methodology.

There are some examples of imprecise language in how findings are interpreted. For example, in a section about the differences in proportionality across sectors, the report notes that, using the proposed bill's formula, charter schools are "slightly more likely" to fall into the highly proportional category than traditional public schools (21% of charter schools vs. 19% of traditional public schools). However, it is not clear whether these differences are statistically significant or not, nor for that matter why this comparison is important to understand.

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

If it is an important policy aim to have schools be representative of the communities they serve (and, as noted above, there is clear evidence suggesting that racially diverse schools benefit students in many ways), then the proposed legislation analyzed in this report could be used to hold schools, districts, and policymakers accountable for that goal. The "what if" exercise in the report highlights that decisions about *what* to measure and *how* are well within the control of policymakers and have real consequences for the stories data tell and what policymakers and citizens do in response. Policymakers and practitioners should consider seriously the trade-offs raised.

A potential shortcoming of the report—and a note of caution—is that, while it raises questions about which measure is best for various purposes, it does not offer recommendations for how to answer these questions. In the absence of clear guidance, one could read the "what if" exercise less as a tool for informed policymaking and more as a fishing expedition. In accountability systems, especially high-stakes ones, measures become subject to manipulation and gaming to get the best possible outcome.[23] For example, in Figure 1, the "best" proportionality scores are those that use as points of comparison all school-aged students or all public school students. Not pictured in Figure 1 but discussed in the text, a formula using all students in *traditional* school districts has an even better outcome.[24] From an optics standpoint, this formula paints the "most proportional" picture, but it also excludes students from charter schools, private schools, and homeschools. Is that, in the report's words, a "reasonable comparison"[25]?

This report offers a helpful window into how policymakers might assert control over measurement and accountability in ways that promote positive student outcomes, but this same asset could—if not exercised with caution—become a liability. Given the high stakes of accountability systems and the likelihood that measures become distorted over time, policymakers should take care to engage in deliberative and intentional policymaking rather than use the formulas offered to fish for optimal outcomes.

Notes and References

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