

Hidden Segregation Within Schools Is Tracked in New Study

By Sarah D. Sparks

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Eliminating racial segregation can be a little like playing whack-a-mole: Instead of going away, too often it just finds a new outlet.

A massive new study of North Carolina classrooms over nearly 20 years finds that as racial segregation between schools went down, the racial isolation within the classrooms inside those schools went up. This class-level isolation can limit black and Hispanic students' access to challenging courses and hamstring district efforts to encourage the broader social and academic benefits of diversity.

In a working paper released earlier this month, Duke University and University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill researchers looked at data on the number of white, black, and Hispanic students in every class in the Tarheel State's K-12 traditional and charter public schools. The researchers focused on English and math classes in grades 4, 7, and 10 during the 1997-98, 2005-06, and 2012-13 school years, a time when the state's Hispanic student population grew from 3 percent of all students to 14 percent. They defined segregation as the degree to which the racial makeup of classrooms departed from the racial composition of all public school students in the county.

Segregation within schools accounted for up to 40 percent of all racial segregation in North Carolina, which has been a bellwether for national efforts to integrate schools. The study's findings suggest this "hidden segregation" can become a problem for the very districts focused on making their overall schools more diverse.

"Within-school segregation is significant. Ignore this at your peril," said Charles Clotfelter, who co-authored the study with Duke colleagues Helen Ladd and Mavzuna Turaeva, and Steven Hemelt of UNC-Chapel Hill, at a summit here by the National Center for the Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research, part of the American Institutes of Research.

Heading Off Opposition?

Clotfelter pointed to the 160,000-student Wake County school district, which has been noted for its efforts to keep its schools diverse using everything from magnet schools to various school assignment systems based on race, family income, or academic achievement. While the researchers found Wake's between-school segregation levels among the lowest in the state, the segregation rates from classroom to classroom within schools were among the state's highest. Wake County officials did not respond to requests for comment by press time.

Erica Frankenberg, a professor of education and demography and director of the Pennsylvania State University Center for Education and Civil Rights, said for many district leaders, "it can be a practice either intentional or non-intentional to try to head off the opposition to a district's assignment policy to allow for these within-school disparities to grow."

40% of all racial segregation experienced by North Carolina students occurs within schools.

For example, vocal groups of wealthy or white parents who oppose a district's plans to reduce segregation between schools may buy in if they think their children will be concentrated in certain classes.

But in the long run, allowing classrooms to become segregated undermines a district's broader diversity efforts,

Frankenberg said. Prior studies have found all students benefit more when school desegregation leads to more positive contact with students from other racial and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Preventing internal segregation also helps districts maintain credibility, Frankenberg said. "Politically, if you're trying to talk to the community about why is it important to take these efforts to desegregate the school, and then you're resegregating inside the schools, I think it can be hard for a community and the students to understand, 'Well, why is it worth this effort to just move us to different schools? We're still not going to really be seeing each other except in extracurriculars or in the cafeteria,' " said Frankenburg, who was not part of the CALDER study.

Researchers also found within-school segregation isolated Hispanic students even more than black students at every grade level and in every subject they studied, which Clotfelter attributed in part to a massive increase in Hispanic students, including English-language learners, who arrived in North Carolina during that time. Researchers only looked at schools where each student group made up at least 5 percent of the overall student population.

Class Differences

Within-school segregation intensified as students moved to higher grades, the study showed. While all grades showed some degree of racial segregation within schools, within-school segregation contributed the least to overall racial segregation in grade 4, when most students are in standalone classrooms.

By middle school, students started to split. In 7th grade, Hispanic and black students were most likely to enroll in the standard math course and less likely than average to take one of the three advanced courses typically taken by white students. For example, white students took Accelerated Middle School Math 20 percent more often than the average for their grade, while black and Hispanic students took the course 30 percent and 17 percent less often than average.

By high school, isolation within schools accounted for more than 40 percent of the total segregation experienced by black students and nearly half of Hispanic students' segregation. The effect was even stronger on which classes students took. White 10th graders in diverse schools were disproportionately likely to take Algebra II, Pre-Calculus, and Advanced Functions and Modeling, while black and Hispanic students clustered in geometry classes and Foundations of Advanced Algebra, less advanced than Algebra II.

Nationwide studies have found black and Hispanic students lack access to advanced courses, especially in math and science. In part, this is because they cannot take prerequisite courses early enough in secondary school to qualify for college-prep courses in high school. An analysis of federal civil rights data found that, calculus is offered in only a third of U.S. high schools with high concentrations of black students, versus more than half of those with low black student populations.

Brian Reeder, the assistant superintendent for research at the Oregon Department of Education, said it's easier to track segregation between schools. "During the transition points from elementary to middle to high school, schools are not talking to each other about their students," he said.

Districts can avoid resegregating inside schools when they desegregate between schools, Frankenberg said. Studies on suburban schools found those that responded most effectively to increasing student diversity worked to break down stereotypes about which students could handle advanced classes. They also cut out barriers to advanced classes, such as prerequisites.