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**School Integration and Residential  
Segregation in California:  
Challenges for Racial Equity**

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Doug Houston**

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## School Integration and Residential Segregation in California: Challenges for Racial Equity

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Most California students live in “single-race” or segregated neighborhoods, and as a result they attend schools that are similarly racially isolated. This is a matter of policy concern because racially segregated schools are institutional mechanisms for reproducing inequalities in learning opportunity and for widening the gaps in academic success among children of different races. In the study described below we analyzed elementary schools in five California metropolitan areas to examine the extent that the racial composition of schools deviates from neighborhood compositions, and investigate the potential for schools to promote racial integration. We found that some alternatives to conventional neighborhood assignments to be more promising than others. Magnet schools, on average, provide students with a more integrated environment than the local neighborhood. On the other hand, charter schools, an increasingly popular educational option, are likely to provide students with a more segregated learning environment than what they would receive in a school attended only by peers from within their own neighborhood.

### *Background*

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Considerable research provides evidence that students benefit from attending racially integrated schools.<sup>1</sup> Test scores, college attendance rates, and employment outcomes have been found to improve for students in integrated schools. In addition, students in integrated schools are more adept and confident at studying and working in diverse settings both as students and as adults. Despite these documented benefits to school integration, school segregation remains prominent throughout the United States. Gary Orfield, for example, reports that about 70 percent of African American students and 75 percent of Hispanic students attended a predominantly minority school in 1998.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, a trend of school “re-segregation” emerged during the 1990s despite a slight decrease in residential segregation.

The relationship between school and residential segregation is strong because most young children attend a nearby public school. However, numerous other factors are important to consider. In the 1970s, court-ordered student assignment plans (“busing”) sought to create racially integrated schools in segregated neighborhoods. More recently, however, Magnet schools have been used as a (voluntary) mechanism to integrate schools by attracting white students into minority-dominated central-city schools. Most recently, Charter schools have allowed students to attend schools outside their immediate neighborhood. Although integration of schooling opportunities may be among the objectives of some Charter schools, integration has not been the driving purpose behind their creation. Charter schools, therefore, may be less likely than magnet schools to cause levels of school integration to diverge from levels of residential

integration. However, the direction of this impact from both Charter and Magnet schools depends on the selection process.

### *Measuring School and Neighborhood Integration*

To better understand the prevalence of racial segregation in California's public schools and alternative strategies to promote integration, we address two questions:

1. Do children attend schools that are more or less racially mixed than their neighborhoods?
2. How do magnet and charter schools influence levels of school segregation?

Five metropolitan areas in California were selected for our intra-metropolitan analysis of school and neighborhood integration: Los Angeles-Long Beach, San Diego, San Jose, Vallejo-Fairfield-Napa, and Yuba City. We selected these five MSAs because they represent, not only California's racial diversity, but also its geographic, economic, political, and cultural diversity. To understand whether schools play a role in integrating segregated neighborhoods, we compared the level of racial integration at public elementary schools to the level of racial integration in each school's approximated attendance area.<sup>3</sup>

To measure racial integration levels we calculate an integration index for each public elementary school in the five study MSAs and calculate a comparable integration index for the school's approximated attendance area. The integration index indicates the relative degree to which each school's (or neighborhood's) racial composition is representative of the overall metropolitan area composition. Using this relative, or parity, measure means we define a perfectly integrated school (or neighborhood) as one where the racial composition is identical to the overall racial composition of the metropolitan area. Each school's level of integration is then compared to the level of integration in the school's approximated attendance area to assess whether it provides a more racially integrated environment than the surrounding neighborhood.

### *School Racial Compositions Reflect Neighborhood Racial Compositions*

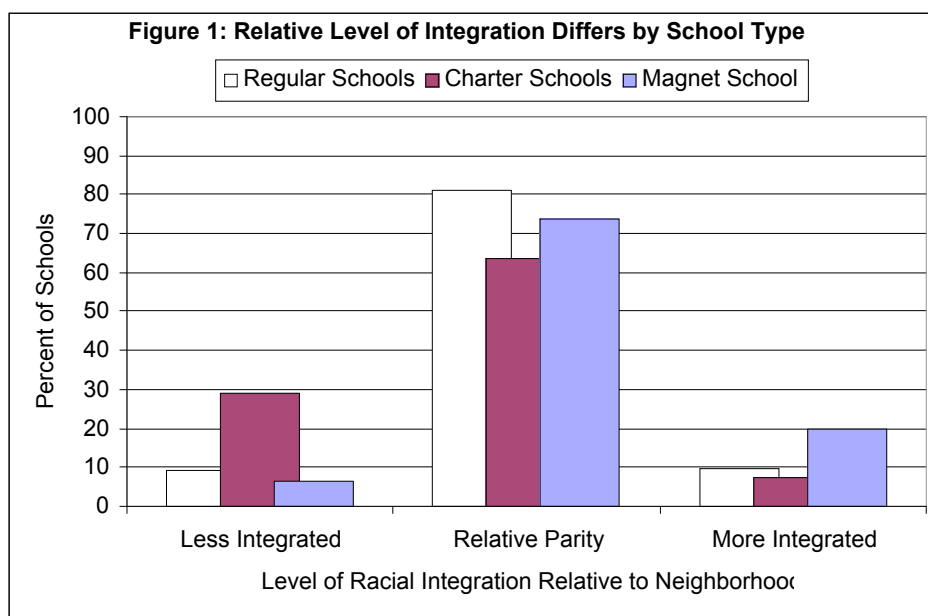
Our analyses show that, on average, the racial composition of regular public elementary schools mirrors the racial composition of the local neighborhood. As we predicted, residential housing patterns are a major determinant of metropolitan-wide levels of school segregation.

However, while the close association between school composition and neighborhood composition is consistent across metropolitan areas in California, some notable differences exist. Regular public elementary schools in the Los Angeles-Long Beach metro area were, on average, slightly more integrated than their local neighborhoods. Schools in the other four metropolitan areas were, on average, slightly less integrated than their neighborhood, with the Vallejo-Fairfield-Napa metro area experiencing the lowest level of relative integration.

### *Magnet Schools More Integrated, Charter Schools Less Integrated*

Differences in integration levels emerge when schools are examined separately by regular, magnet, and charter status. Magnet schools, on average, are significantly more integrated than regular schools and charter schools are significantly less integrated than regular schools.

Figure 1 displays the distribution of schools based on their level of integration relative to the surrounding neighborhood. While the majority of all schools have a level of integration similar to the surrounding neighborhood, noticeable differences exist among schools that are not at parity. Almost 30 percent of charter schools are less integrated than the surrounding neighborhood, while less than ten percent of regular and magnet schools fall into this category. On the other side of the distribution, about 20 percent of magnet schools are more integrated than the surrounding neighborhood, while less than ten percent of regular and charter schools fall into this category.



The differences between regular, magnet, and charter schools persists even after statistically controlling for other metropolitan, district, school, and neighborhood characteristics that might affect relative levels of integration.

Our analysis also found a strong positive relationship between the percent of non-Hispanic white children in the neighborhood and the relative level of school integration. Schools located in predominately white communities are likely to be more integrated than the local neighborhood compared to schools in predominately minority communities, everything else equal. This

relationship is particularly strong when looking at just magnet and charter schools. Two possible explanations for the positive relationship are associated with school busing decisions. For regular schools, students (most-likely non-white) in overcrowded schools are bused to less crowded schools (most-likely white communities), thus integrating the schools. For charter and magnet schools (particularly magnet schools), the schools located in white communities are attracting non-white students from outside their local neighborhood as designed; while charter and magnet schools located in minority-dominated communities are not attracting white students.

### *Policy Implications*

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- Expanding magnet school programs can increase racial integration. However, because schools located in non-Hispanic white communities are likely to be more integrated than the local neighborhood, the expansion of Magnet programs in such neighborhoods is more likely to result in integrated schools than magnets in non-white neighborhoods.
- Encouraging Charter schools to adopt racial integration as a primary goal of their selection process and limiting racial disparities in charter school access may reverse their current trend of providing less integrated student bodies than regular schools. Given the increasing popularity of Charter schools, these could be particularly effective tools for providing children integrated schooling opportunities.
- School attendance boundaries can also be drawn to incorporate students from diverse neighborhoods into particular schools.

For most children, the racial composition of their neighborhood determines the racial composition of their school. Our analysis of elementary schools in California metropolitan areas examined the extent that the racial composition of schools deviates from neighborhood compositions, and their potential to promote racial integration. Two types of schools—magnet and charter schools—have a potential to sever the nexus between residential and school segregation.

Magnet schools, on average, provide students with a more integrated environment than the local neighborhood. This is an encouraging finding for those who support magnet programs as a desegregation tool, and suggests that expansion of magnet school programs will increase racial integration. However, integration may be less likely to occur for magnet schools located in predominately non-white communities.

California law implies that the racial composition of a charter school should reflect the racial composition of the district it is located in, yet charter schools tend to provide a less integrated student body than regular schools. While charter schools currently make up a small proportion of California's public schools, efforts to encourage integration among charter schools should help integrate segregated neighborhoods—particularly as the popularity of charter schools grows.

One should not overlook the potential role of regular schools to integrate segregated neighborhoods. While on average the level of integration at a regular school mirrors that of the local neighborhood, our findings hint at ways in which regular schools do provide a more integrated environment. Schools located in non-Hispanic white communities are likely to be more integrated than the local neighborhood. School busing programs could be driving this outcome, but additional research is necessary to truly understand the role of busing on the level of racial integration at particular schools. School attendance boundaries can also be drawn (or loosened) to incorporate students from diverse neighborhoods into particular schools.

Future research needs to examine the underlying causes, and selection processes, that drive these factors—such as why charter schools tend to be less integrated than the surrounding neighborhood. Efforts to understand and expand the integrating mechanisms of schools, and minimize the segregating forces, are necessary to improve racial equity in the educational system.

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<sup>1</sup> For evidence on the impact of school desegregation see:

Schofield, Janet Ward (1995). “Review of Research on School Desegregation’s Impact on Elementary and Secondary School Students,” in James A. Banks and Cherry A. McGee Banks, eds., Handbook of Multicultural Education (New York: McMillan Publishing, 1995) chapter 33.

Wortman, Paul M. and Fred B. Bryant (1985). “School Desegregation and Black Achievement: An Integrative Review,” *Sociological Methods and Research* 13, No. 3 (February): 289-324.

<sup>2</sup> For evidence of school segregation levels see:

Orfield, Gary (2001). “Schools More Separate: Consequences of a Decade of Resegregation” (Cambridge, MA: The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, July). Online at: [www.law.harvard.edu/civilrights](http://www.law.harvard.edu/civilrights)

<sup>3</sup> Our analysis used 1999/00 data from the California Department of Education (CDE) for racial demographics of elementary schools and Census 2000 Summary File 1 (SF1) data from the U.S. Census Bureau for racial demographics of elementary school-aged children living in each school’s neighborhood.

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