Edsight
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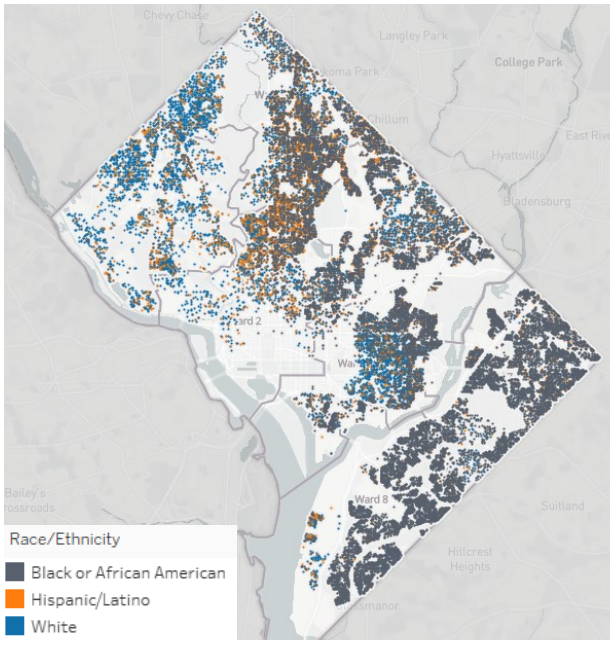
Racial Segregation Is High for Public Schools in Washington, DC

Where students live contributes to highly segregated schools. Segregation increases in later grades.

While the Supreme Court decision in Bolling v. Sharpe in 1954 prohibited the overt policy of racially segregating schools in Washington, D.C., schools remain segregated due in large part to where students live. Figure 1 shows the residential patterns of the three largest racial/ethnic categories.

Black students (65% of all PreK-12 grade public school students) live in large number everywhere except west of Rock Creek Park. Latino students (17%) live primarily in Wards 1 and 4 (east of Rock Creek Park). White students (13%) live primarily west of Rock Creek Park in Wards 3 and 4 and in Ward 6, just west of the Anacostia River.

Figure 1: Where Public School Students Live by Race/Ethnicity, SY21-22



Student locations were geographically masked for privacy purposes.

For a more detailed breakdown of where these racial/ethnic groups live in Washington, DC, view the Maryland Population Research Center's DC Education Brief.

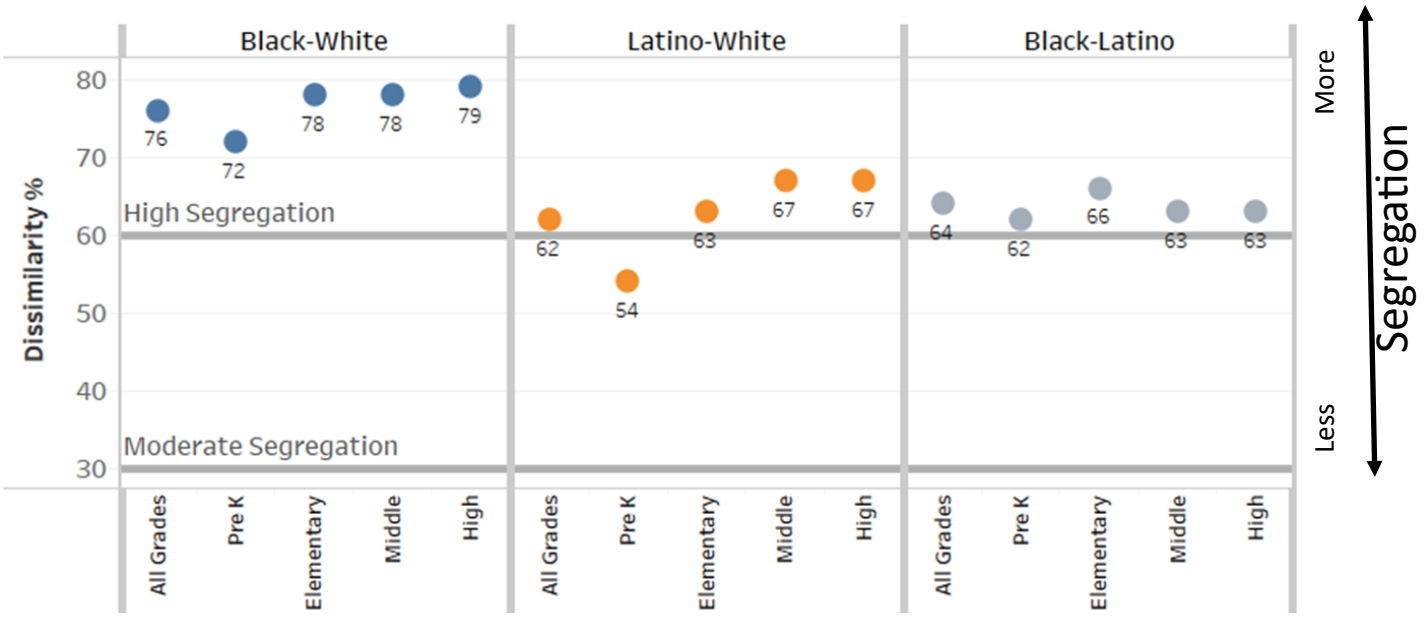
In Washington, D.C., families can choose where to send their children to school regardless of where they live, and many choose a school other than their neighborhood school. In SY2022-23, 28% of PreK-12th grade students attended their in-boundary DCPS school. Another 21% chose a DCPS out of boundary or citywide DCPS school, and 45% chose public charter schools. Enrollment trends also vary by race/ethnicity: roughly one-fifth of Black students attended their in-boundary school compared to more than half of white public students. (See Edsights on enrollment trends by race/ethnicity.)

Estimated School Segregation

We used a "dissimilarity index" to measure the level of segregation between Black-white, Latino-white, and Latino-Black students in each public school as compared to the proportion of these racial groups in public schools citywide. The measure ranges from 0% (indicating total integration, where every school has the same racial mix as all public schools combined) to 100% (indicating total segregation). The measure tells us what percentage of the populations being compared would need to change schools in order to match the city's overall proportions for those racial groups. For example, an index value of 50% for the Black-white comparison means that 50% of Black or 50% of white students would need to change schools in order to get all schools to the citywide proportions (i.e., 65% Black and 13% white). Index values greater

continued

Figure 2: Dissimilarity Index by Race/Ethnicity and Grade Band SY21-22



Source: Audited enrollment, excludes adult and alternative students.

than 60% indicate high segregation, between 30% and 60% indicate moderate segregation, and below 30% suggest low segregation.

Figure 2 shows the dissimilarity index between Black and white students (blue dots), Latino and white students (orange dots), and Black and Latino students (gray dots). At 76%, segregation is highest amongst Black and white students compared to the two other racial/ethnic categories (Latino-white and Black-Latino). While lower than Black-white segregation, the other two comparisons still indicate high segregation — 62% in the Latino-white comparison, and 64% in the Black-Latino comparison.

Estimated School Segregation by Grade Band

While segregation in schools is high across all grades in every comparison, there is variation across grade bands. Segregation between white and Black students increases as grade levels increase. As the blue dots show, there is consistent high segregation that starts off at 72% in PreK then increases even higher to approximately 78% in elementary and middle, and 79% in high school.

Segregation between Latino and white students (orange dots) also increases in older grades, although the rates start approximately 10 to 20 percentage points lower than the Black-white comparison. Segregation is moderate in PreK (54%) and then increases to the high category for elementary grades (63%) and to 67% for middle and high school grades.

Segregation between Black and Latino students (gray dots) follows the reverse trend — segregation is highest in elementary school at 66% then falls to 63% in middle and high school grades.

In sum, students from the three largest racial/ethnic groups live in different parts of the city, which lays the foundation for a segregated public school system. Although most students do not attend their in-boundary neighborhood school, they still largely attend schools where students are like them racially/ethnically. Together, where students live and what school choices their families make contribute to highly segregated schools.

To explore how demographic patterns have changed among public school students in Washington, D.C. over the years, visit

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