New NEPC Review: Using Integration Rhetoric to Advocate School Choice

Key Takeaway from NEPC Review: Report relies on arguments driven by ideology rather than evidence

Review: http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-integration

At a time of growing diversity in the U.S., school segregation is deepening. Well-designed, diverse schools benefit all students, yet students of color are often isolated in highly segregated schools with weak educational opportunities and outcomes. A new report from the Friedman Foundation claims that a universal system of school choice offers a solution to increasing school segregation, but a review of that report finds that the arguments are not based on evidence.

Genevieve Siegel-Hawley, an assistant professor at Virginia Commonwealth University, and Erica Frankenberg, an associate professor at Pennsylvania State University, reviewed The Integration Anomaly: Comparing the Effects of K-12 Education Delivery Models on Segregation in Schools for the Think Twice Think Tank Review Project at the National Education Policy Center, housed at the University of Colorado Boulder’s School of Education.

The Integration Anomaly explores what its author calls a “puzzling divergence” between changes in metropolitan residential and school segregation. While neighborhoods in some metropolitan areas are experiencing relatively more racial integration, these trends are largely absent from schools. Based on a literature review, the report argues that the best way to address rising school segregation is to decouple school assignment from neighborhoods through universal school choice. The report suggests that housing integration has not been an effective way to pursue school integration, and it concludes with recommendations for how to structure school choice to achieve integration.

Professors Siegel-Hawley and Frankenberg note the surface appeal of the report’s recommendations for the expansion of school choice, including ending virtually all regulation of school choice and providing universal scholarships, as a means for addressing persistent school segregation. They explain, however, that the analysis of the empirical relationship between school and residential segregation relies on flawed methodological decisions with regard to how to define segregation and divergent trends over time. Those problematic definitions, in turn, yield biased results and prompt the reader to incorrectly assume that housing integration policies will have little bearing on school segregation.

The review also points out that the report’s use of research literature on school choice is haphazard and incomplete, drawing conclusions either beyond what the research supports or contrary to what research has found. Perhaps most importantly, The Integration Anomaly ignores a growing body of literature finding that the very type of unregulated school choice it proposes has, in many instances, exacerbated racial segregation.

The reviewers conclude that the Friedman Foundation’s report presents arguments and solutions largely driven by ideology, not evidence, and offers little value for policymakers or educators meaningfully engaged in the
critical search for strategies to reduce school segregation.

Find Siegel-Hawley and Frankenberg’s review at:
http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-integration

Find The Integration Anomaly: Comparing the Effects of K-12 Education Delivery Models on Segregation in Schools, by Benjamin Scafidi, published by the Friedman Foundation, at:

The National Education Policy Center (NEPC) Think Twice Think Tank Review Project (http://thinktankreview.org) provides the public, policymakers, and the press with timely, academically sound reviews of selected publications. The project is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: http://www.greatlakescenter.org/

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