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# White, Asian, Latinx, and Black Families Express Race-Based School Preferences

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## INTRODUCTION

Most students in the United States attend racially segregated schools. The average White student's school is 70% White. Latinx and Black students typically attend schools in which 50% of students are from their own racial/ethnic group. And, although about 5% of the U.S. public school population is made up of people of Asian descent (hereafter described as "Asian" in this brief), the average Asian student's school is 24% Asian.

To explain school racial segregation, researchers often highlight structural factors, particularly school assignment based on racially segregated neighborhoods. And while these structures contribute to segregation, schools in cities without residential school assignments are also segregated. Research has demonstrated that school segregation is actually intensified in communities that have adopted policies allowing for more school-choice options. For example, White families often enroll in schools with more White students than their neighborhood schools and charter schools are more segregated than traditional public schools.

Understanding families' school preferences, particularly if they are motivated by race, is necessary to evaluate the impact on racial segregation of expanded school-choice policies.

Here, race is conceptualized as a historically and socially situated construction that categorizes individuals based on their phenotype and ancestry. Latinx people can be of any race. Given the race-based stereotypes and discrimination associated with Latinx people in the U.S., the author refers to Latinx as a racial category.

The U.S. racial hierarchy positions people on a continuum with White people at the top, Black people at the bottom, and Asian and Latinx people in the middle. The U.S. education system reflects, reinforces, and shapes the country's racial hierarchy through multiple racialized mechanisms.

Prior research has shown that many people hold academic stereotypes that White students are smart and peaceful, and Black students are lazy, violent and low income. Latinx students are sometimes seen as hardworking and other times as unintelligent or criminally inclined, and Asian students are seen as both intellectually superior and perpetual foreigners. White and Asian students have also been shown to receive preferential treatment (for example, receiving more referrals to advanced classes and less harsh discipline) compared to Black and Latinx students in the same school. In addition, on average, schools attended by White and Asian students have more resources than schools attended by Black and Latinx students.

Within this larger context of race in U.S. schools, school preferences are likely guided by several factors related to race. Parents' and students' choices may be guided by their understanding and endorsement of the racial hierarchy operating in U.S. society. They may also be guided by their affinity toward their own racial/ethnic group, known as in-group affect. Finally, Black and Latinx families could be influenced by vulnerability to racism, or apprehension toward attending majority White schools because of the potential for racially biased interactions and policies.

This brief reports on a recent study<sup>1</sup> in which the author asked eighth-grade students and their parents who were actively choosing New York City (NYC) high schools to examine hypothetical schools with randomized majority White, majority Latinx, majority Black, and racially diverse compositions and other school characteristics. The 431 students and 403 parents evaluated five randomly assigned school profiles and then indicated their willingness to attend the schools. Across profiles, schools' racial demographics, school safety rating, neighborhood safety rating, graduation rate, and metal detector presence were experimentally manipulated. The author then compared the experimental findings with administrative data on the full population of NYC families' actual high school choices.

## KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ **Schools’ racial composition affects New York City families’ (parents + students) school preferences.** Among schools with similar graduation rates, safety ratings, and other factors, school racial demographics affect White, Asian, Latinx, and Black families’ willingness to attend schools. *See Figure*
  - ▶ White families’ aversion to attending the majority Black and Latinx schools is twice that of Black and Latinx families’ aversion to attending the majority White school.
- ▶ **Racial composition is an important factor for most parents, above and beyond other school characteristics.** *See Figure*
  - ▶ White and Asian parents rate majority Black and Latinx schools lower than majority White schools, and Latinx parents prefer to avoid Black schools compared to other schools.
  - ▶ White, Asian, and Latinx parents’ internalization of the racial hierarchy could guide their preferences.
  - ▶ Black parents do not express race-based preferences for schools.
- ▶ **White, Latinx, and Black students’ race-based school preferences differ from parents’ preferences.** *See Figure*
  - ▶ White and Latinx parents are much more avoidant of Black schools than White and Latinx students.
  - ▶ Potentially influenced by in-group affect, White and Latinx students prefer schools in which their racial group was in the majority.
  - ▶ While school racial demographics do not influence Black parents’ school preferences, Black students desired to avoid the majority White school.
  - ▶ Asian students’ preferences are similar to Asian parents: they rated White and mixed schools as the most desirable.
- ▶ **Actual school choices are similar to the hypothetical school choices.** The patterns of NYC families’ race-based school choices on their actual applications to high schools are similar to the patterns of families’ race-based preferences in the study experiment.

## White, Asian, Latinx and Black families in New York City express race-based school preferences

Parents’ preferences differ from students’ preferences

White	Asian	Latinx	Black
White schools most desirable, followed by mixed schools, with Latinx and Black schools least desirable	<b>Families’ Preferences (parents and students together)</b>		Black and mixed schools more desirable than White schools
White schools most desirable, followed by mixed schools, then Latinx schools, with Black schools least desirable	White and mixed schools most desirable; Latinx and Black schools least desirable	Latinx and mixed schools more desirable than Black and White schools	
	<b>Parents’ Preferences</b>		No race-based preferences for schools
	White and mixed schools most desirable; Latinx and Black schools least desirable	Black schools least desirable	
	<b>Students’ Preferences</b>		White schools least desirable
White schools most desirable	White and mixed schools most desirable; Latinx and Black schools least desirable	Latinx school most desirable	

Findings based on eighth-grade students’ and their parents’ willingness to attend hypothetical high schools with randomized majority White, majority Latinx, majority Black, and racially diverse (mixed) compositions and other school characteristics (graduation rates, safety ratings, metal detector presence).

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## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Although policymakers often frame school choice as a race-neutral policy, school racial demographics are central to how families choose schools. School attributes related to race cannot fully explain racial sorting and segregation within and across school districts. Instead, families' preferences to associate with or to avoid particular school racial demographics likely contribute to contemporary patterns of school and neighborhood racial segregation.

Families' race-based school preferences stem from a racial-educational structure that is made up of racial stereotypes and racist policies within and across schools. To increase racial equity and integration in schools, policymakers must dismantle educational practices, such as racially biased academic tracking and disciplinary practices, that perpetuate negative stereotypes and marginalize student populations.

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## REFERENCE

<sup>1</sup>Hailey, C.A. (2022). Racial preferences for schools: Evidence from an experiment with White, Black, Latinx, and Asian parents and students. *Sociology of Education*. Published online ahead of print.

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