

School Segregation on School Report Cards: Who Are We Grading Anyway?

An Essay for the Learning Curve by Jay Carter and Leonardo Restrepo
September 2024

Last fall, legislators in North Carolina and New York introduced bills that would add measures of school segregation and resource equity into the school report cards required by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).¹ The proposed policies seek to support school integration efforts, but they are likely to paint a misleading picture for the many places where generational differences in demographics and school choice make schools and their communities look different from one another.

The bills are based on the National Coalition on School Diversity's example bill and would categorize schools on how their racial composition compares with all residents of the counties in which they are located.² They directly reference the ESSA requirement that schools include one nonacademic indicator in their score cards that "allows for meaningful differentiation in school performance." Although most states have opted for measures of chronic absenteeism to fulfill this ESSA requirement, these lawmakers in North Carolina and New York are testing a new route.

The bills outline steps for calculating a "proportionality score," which would indicate how well school populations resemble the counties in which they are located. The measure ranges from 0 to 1, and the bill would classify schools as highly proportional, proportional, somewhat disproportional, or highly disproportional based on the calculated scores. This designation would appear on yearly school report cards released by the state. The bills would also require that schools report what proportion of their students in underserved groups participate in gifted and talented programs and have access to experienced teachers. If policymakers and school integration advocates are to use these bills to further school integration, there are trade-offs to consider.

¹ H.B. 729, 2023 Gen. Assemb., Reg. Sess. (N.C. 2023); and A.B. A1922, 2023 Leg., Reg. Sess. (N.Y. 2023).

² National Coalition on School Diversity, *Model State School Integration Policies* (Washington, DC: National Coalition on School Diversity, 2020).

Why School Integration?

Decided 70 years ago this May, *Brown v. Board of Education* promised that students of different races could and would learn together. The reality in the decades since is that students of different races can learn together, but many individual and structural factors conspire to cast doubt on whether they will. Over that time, the legal and policy landscape has changed immensely; perhaps only the country's demographics have changed more. During the short period when school desegregation was a national priority, tremendous progress was made reshaping the way students go to school. We know from the time post *Brown* that school desegregation resulted in positive effects across many different outcomes, especially for Black children. We also know that resegregation in the time leading up to and through the *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District* decision has resulted in harm. In looking to add school segregation as something to be measured and ameliorated, states are putting resources behind school integration.

Proportional to Whom?

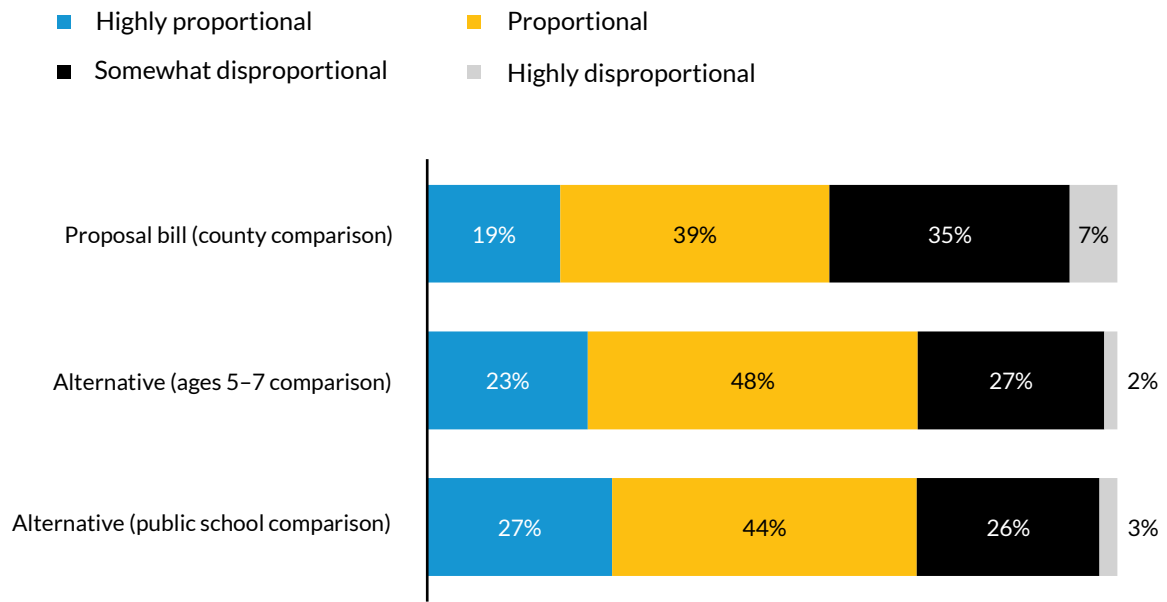
To test how the proposed bill would classify schools in North Carolina, we calculated these proportionality scores for the 2021–22 school year (the latest available year of school report card data and the Private School Universe Survey) using school-level data from the Urban Institute's Education Data Portal and the National Center for Education Statistics Private School Universe Survey, along with county demographics from the American Community Survey.³

Most public schools (including both traditional public and charter) fall in the two most proportional categories. Of North Carolina's 2,692 public schools, 19 percent are categorized by the proposed bill as highly proportional, 39 percent are proportional, 35 percent are somewhat disproportional, and 7 percent are highly disproportional (figure 1).

³ See <https://educationdata.urban.org/data-explorer>; and "Private School Universe Survey," US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, accessed September 10, 2024, <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/pss/index.asp>.

FIGURE 1

Proportionality Categories, by Comparison



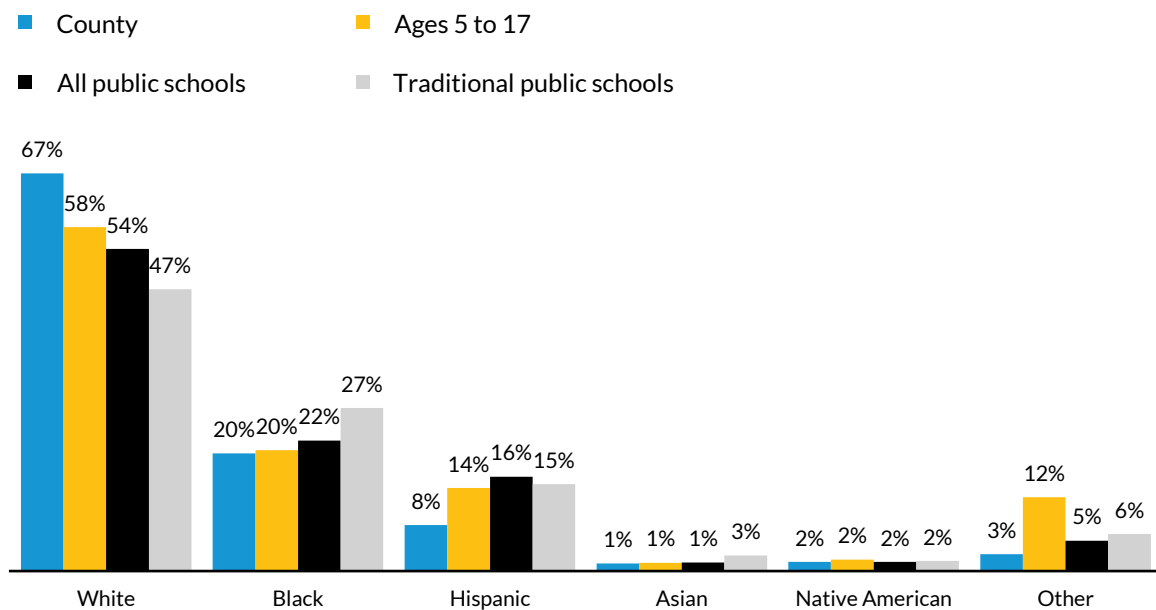
URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Authors' calculations using data from the Urban Institute's Education Data Portal and the American Community Survey.

The policy's design, as proposed, asks whether a school looks like everyone who lives in its surrounding county, but is that a reasonable comparison for public schools? School-age populations are not necessarily similar to the broader age range included in the entire county population. In 111 of the 115 noncharter school districts in North Carolina, the student body in public schools is less white than the county in which the school district is located.⁴ On average, North Carolina children ages 5 to 17 are less white (and more Hispanic) than the full population (figure 2). The differences between public school enrollments and county demographics are even larger. School districts will simply be unable to make all schools look like the surrounding county because of this age-related demographic mismatch.

⁴ Authors' calculations from US Department of Education Common Core of Data school demographic data and US Census Bureau American Community Survey county demographic tables.

FIGURE 2
Demographic Comparison, by Race or Ethnicity



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Authors’ calculations using data from the Urban Institute’s Education Data Portal and the American Community Survey.

Policymakers can address this mismatch by considering other comparisons for school demographics. One alternative is to use the school-age population of the county in which the school district is located.⁵ Recalculating the proportionality scores using American Community Survey data for 5-to-17-year-olds, 71 percent of public schools would grade in the top two proportionality categories instead of 58 percent in the proposed bill language (figure 1).

Another option would be to narrow the comparison with all public school students in a county. This option removes from the calculation children in private schools and home schools—students that public schools have no direct control over. In this case, the same share of schools (71 percent) ends up in the top two proportionality categories as in the comparison with all 5-to-17-year-olds. The key conceptual downside of this approach is potentially ignoring segregation that results from families’ decisions to exit the public school system.

The narrowest comparison would be with students in the same school district. Looking only at traditional public schools, this calculation would result in 76 percent of them being in the top two proportionality categories. Although this comparison is narrow and leaves out charter schools, it would be the most appropriate measure to pressure school districts into adopting policies to distribute their

⁵ The county and traditional public school district are the same geographic area in 93 of the 100 counties in North Carolina.

students more evenly across schools. In most cases, charter schools are their own single-school districts, so calculating this measure is more complicated for them. One way around this issue would be to use the students in the charter school's geographic school district. But again, if the purpose is to pressure a school district into doing things such as redrawing their school attendance boundaries or offering intradistrict school choice options to entice families to move schools, then measuring charter schools is less necessary. Nationally, school segregation within districts is the second-biggest factor in overall school districts⁶ (behind segregation across districts but in front of segregation between public, charter, and private schools). Using the narrow within-district comparison would make more sense in places where county-wide school districts are the norm, such as North Carolina.

Differences by School Sector

Charter schools enroll about 8 percent of public school students in North Carolina, and prior research indicates charter school presence increases school segregation. Our analysis finds that North Carolina charter schools are slightly more likely to be classified as highly proportional than traditional public schools, with 21 percent of charter schools falling into the highly proportional category (defined using the bill's definition) compared with 19 percent of traditional public schools. But charter schools are also more likely to be classified as highly disproportional (17 percent versus 7 percent of traditional public schools).

Public charter schools and private schools also show racial demographic differences even among the school-age population. In North Carolina, private schools are, on average, about 3 percent whiter than the school-age population in their county, but the spread is enormous (anywhere from private schools being 81 percent whiter to being 68 percent less white).

Charter schools also vary widely in their demographics as compared with their home counties. Charter schools are about 12 percent less white, on average, than the counties they are in, but again, the variation is extremely wide (anywhere from 42 percent whiter to 73 percent less white than their home county public schools). Additionally, charter school and private school students may live in different counties than where they attend school because there are rarely restrictions on school attendance outside of traditional public schools.

Implications

Who should be responsible for trying to change a school to be more representative? If the answer is public school districts, a tighter comparison makes sense to spur action from school district leadership and measure progress against that goal. School districts can use student assignment plans and controlled intradistrict choice, such as magnet programs, to influence the demographics of their schools. Instead of using a measure that includes the racial characteristics of 40-year-olds in a school's county or instead of holding district administrators responsible for students in private schools, policymakers can

⁶ Halley Potter, "School Segregation in U.S. Metro Areas," The Century Foundation, May 17, 2022, <https://tcf.org/content/report/school-segregation-in-u-s-metro-areas/>.

ask school districts to influence the learning environments of the public school students under their care.

If policymakers would like all public schools to be involved in the process, using a measure that includes charter schools makes sense. The state charter authorizing body (in North Carolina, this is the State Board of Education) would need to be involved in making sure the type and location of charter schools do not increase school segregation. State charter authorizers could give priority to schools that use intentional mechanisms to further diversity in their student bodies (diverse-by-design charter schools).⁷ Individual charter schools can be encouraged to participate in programs such as the NC ACCESS program, which includes funding for schools to “increase the number of educationally disadvantaged students attending high-quality charter schools” or to join organizations like the Diverse Charter Schools Coalition.⁸ If we take for granted that the school report card is the place to display information about school segregation and representativeness, the policy is leaning on all North Carolina public schools, including charter schools. Unsurprisingly, individual public schools are more likely to be proportional to the school districts they are a part of than the wider population of the counties they are in. Even expanding the comparison to include all 5-to-17-year-olds in the county, whether they are in traditional public, charter, private, or home schools, schools are more proportional than the wider county demographic comparison indicates. Using a measure that includes all school-age children would help show the effects of segregation attributable to cross-sector school choice, even if public schools are the only schools being graded. State and federal policymakers can then find places to target with technical assistance, funding, or other supports to help their schools become the vibrant, diverse places they can be.

Whatever the precise comparison, administrators at the school, district, and state levels can attempt to make schools more representative of the wider community in a way that makes more sense than simply trying to make those schools mirror their home counties. This means students should be in schools and classes with peers that encompass the wider demographic spread of their age groups, not the more limited diversity of older generations.

Jay Carter is a senior research associate and Education Data Portal lead in the Center on Education Data and Policy at the Urban Institute. Leonardo Restrepo is a PhD student at the George Washington University.

⁷ New York requires that charter schools “demonstrate good faith efforts” to match the demographics of their school districts. For more information, and for some proposed policy changes, see Halley Potter, “Why Are Charter Schools Missing from New York City’s School Diversity Plan?” The Century Foundation, September 13, 2017, <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/charter-schools-missing-new-york-citys-school-diversity-plan/>.

⁸ See “NC ACCESS Program,” North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, accessed September 10, 2024, <https://www.dpi.nc.gov/students-families/alternative-choices/charter-schools/nc-access-program>. See also the website for the Diverse Charter Schools Coalition at <https://diversecharters.org/>.

Acknowledgments

This essay was funded by the Gates Foundation as part of the Learning Curve essay series. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission.

The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute’s funding principles is available at www.urban.org/fundingprinciples.



500 L'Enfant Plaza SW
Washington, DC 20024

www.urban.org

ABOUT THE URBAN INSTITUTE

The Urban Institute is a nonprofit research organization that provides data and evidence to help advance upward mobility and equity. We are a trusted source for changemakers who seek to strengthen decisionmaking, create inclusive economic growth, and improve the well-being of families and communities. For more than 50 years, Urban has delivered facts that inspire solutions—and this remains our charge today.

Copyright © September 2024. Urban Institute. Permission is granted for reproduction of this file, with attribution to the Urban Institute.