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For Immediate Release:
November 1, 2017

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MEDIA ADVISORY

Private Schools Play an Important Role in D.C. School Segregation, According to a new Shanker Institute Research Brief

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Private schools play a significant role in shaping the segregation of D.C. students by race and ethnicity, according to an Albert Shanker Institute research brief, “Public and Private School Segregation in the District of Columbia,” released today.

The analysis includes traditional public schools, charter schools, and private schools, thus providing a comprehensive portrait of student segregation in the nation’s capital.

The report finds that segregation is more pronounced when both sectors are considered together than when either the public or private sector is considered alone. This is because a substantial proportion of total citywide segregation is due to the separation of students between sectors, particularly the fact that private schools enroll just 15 percent of D.C. students but about 57 percent of its white students.

This suggests that total segregation in D.C. may be even stronger than previously thought, since virtually no analyses include private school students. It also means that, even if public schools were perfectly integrated, citywide segregation would remain quite extensive, since over half of the city’s white students would still be separated from public school students, who constitute about 85 percent of the city’s students.

“In a very loose sense,” the authors explain, “D.C.’s private schools serve as the segregation equivalent of a suburb within the city.”

“This analysis shows that private schools are a big factor in the overall segregation picture,” comments Washington Teachers Union president Elizabeth Davis, “but that doesn’t mean that we don’t need to do more to promote integration within the public school sector. It’s the right thing to do, for the benefit of all our students.”

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The report also finds that, in the private school sector, the separation of white students from African American and Latino students is the primary driver of segregation of those three groups. In public schools, however, the separation of African American and Latino students from each other contributes as much to total segregation as does the separation of white students from African American and Latino students.

This is particularly important given the decades of research indicating that racial and socioeconomic diversity in schools is beneficial for *all* students, not just the “disadvantaged.”

Highlights:

- Citywide, 60.5 percent of the typical white student’s peers are also white, though only 15 percent of the city’s students are white. “Even in a city where the vast majority of students are minorities, the average white student still attends a mostly white school. This is rather striking and is indicative of the concentration of white students in certain schools in both public and private school sectors.”
- In the public sector, the typical white student attends a school in which roughly 42 percent of her peers are also white, despite the fact that less than 8 percent of public school students are white. Conversely, in the private sector, about 65 percent of the typical African American student’s school peers are also African American, even though only 28 percent of private school students are African American. “Overall, students in D.C. attend schools in which their own races or ethnicities are strongly overrepresented.”
- Between 25-40 percent of total citywide segregation is found between the public and private sectors. This means that, even if public schools were fully desegregated, as much as half of total segregation would remain intact, because such integration would affect neither segregation within the private school sector nor segregation between public and private sectors.
- In the private sector, roughly 80 percent of total segregation is due to the separation of white students from African American and Latino students, whereas around 20 percent is attributable to the segregation of African American students from Latino students. In the public sector, in contrast, the segregation of African American from Latino students contributes roughly as much (53 percent) to total segregation as does the segregation of white from minority students (46 percent).

The authors recommend that schools in both sectors make efforts to achieve a more even dispersion of students across schools by race and ethnicity. They also suggest that private schools be encouraged to enroll more minority students. Otherwise, given that desegregation efforts have traditionally been focused on public schools, “there may be what amounts to an impermeable ceiling on the citywide impact of big city public school integration efforts.”

The full report is available at: shankerinstitute.org/resource/dcsegregation