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Media Advisory

SCHOOL SEGREGATION IN THE D.C. METRO AREA IS DRIVEN BY SEPARATION OF STUDENTS ACROSS DISTRICT LINES, ACCORDING TO A NEW SHANKER INSTITUTE RESEARCH BRIEF

WASHINGTON—Racial segregation between districts plays a huge role in shaping overall segregation in the District of Columbia metropolitan area, according to an Albert Shanker Institute research brief, "School Segregation by Race and Ethnicity in the D.C. Metro Area," released today.

The analysis, which includes Alexandria (VA), Arlington (VA), the District of Columbia, Fairfax County (VA), Montgomery County (MD), and Prince George's County (MD), provides a comprehensive breakdown of segregation by student race and ethnicity in one of the nation's largest and most affluent metropolitan areas.

Using multiple measures of segregation, the report finds that segregation *within* five of these six districts is quite low, with the sole exception being the District of Columbia proper. Segregation across the entire metro area, however, is moderate-to-high. The reason for this counterintuitive discrepancy is that a large portion of total metro area segregation is found *between* the various districts – that is, the racial and ethnic imbalance between districts is as important as the imbalance between schools within each district. For example, Prince George's County serves 22 percent of all students in the D.C. metro area, but 40 percent of the region's black students.

In fact, almost two-thirds of the segregation of black and white students, and one half of multiracial segregation (i.e., segregation of white, black, Hispanic, and Asian students), is found between districts, rather than between schools within these districts. This means that, even if all six districts were completely desegregated internally, but no students crossed district boundaries, at least half of total metro area segregation would still remain.

"If we conceptualize student diversity as a resource," the authors explain, "then the D.C. metro area is a case in which that resource is available in abundance…there is a potential for the area's schools to be truly multiracially and multiethnically diverse." True integration, however, "is, at best, half possible without substantial movement of students between districts."

These findings are noteworthy because so much of the discussion of school segregation, as well as virtually all efforts to desegregate schools, focus on shifting students between schools within districts. And, indeed, desegregation within these six districts could make a sizeable dent in overall metro area segregation. Yet, at least half of the problem in the D.C. metro area, and thus at least half of the solution, is due to differences in the racial and ethnic populations among the various districts.

Highlights:

- The D.C. metro area's student population is remarkably diverse, with substantial representation of white (26.5 percent), black (34.7 percent), Hispanic (27.2 percent), and Asian students (11.6 percent). The area's schools, however, tend not to reflect this diversity. For example, the typical white student in the metro area attends a school in which roughly 48 percent of her peers are also white, even though only about 27 percent of all students in the metro area are white.
- Reviewing the results district-by-district, segregation is generally quite modest within five of the six districts included in this analysis. The sole exception is D.C. proper, which exhibits high levels of segregation for virtually all racial and ethnic combinations.
- In contrast, in the D.C. metro area as whole, segregation is moderate or high, particularly in the cases of white and black students and black and Asian students. For example, focusing solely on white and black students, a typical school is over 50 percent less diverse than the metro area as a whole.
- Between-district segregation accounts for almost one half of total multiracial segregation (white/black/Hispanic/Asian) in the metro area, and almost two-thirds of metro area white/black segregation. This means that perfect desegregation within all six districts, without any movement of students across district lines, would leave intact half of total multiracial segregation and two-thirds of black/white segregation.
- The large contribution of between-district segregation is predominantly driven by the separation of students between suburban districts, rather than between the central city (i.e., D.C. proper) and the suburbs. The contribution of the former is approximately 4-5 times larger than that of the latter. This suggests that student segregation in the D.C. metro area is not just a "minority city, white suburb" phenomenon.

The report's authors recommend that discussions about school segregation, in the D.C. area and elsewhere, should focus as much on the separation of populations and students between districts as it does on the sorting of students between schools within each district.

The full report is available at: http://www.shankerinstitute.org/resource/school-segregation-race-and-ethnicity-dc-metro-area

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