



## **The Simplest Way to Improve Racial Inequalities is to Fund Students Instead of Systems**

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Harrisburg, Pennsylvania mom Najimah Roberson knows a thing or two about schools not working for the children assigned to them. Her three children used to attend their local district school, but there were too many problems. “It seemed like every other week I was calling for a meeting or being called in for a meeting,” she told the Pennsylvania Senate Education Committee in testimony back in April.

Roberson asked district officials if there were any school choice options, but they gave her the runaround. After doing her own digging, she found Pennsylvania’s tax credit scholarship programs, which enabled her to enroll two of her children in private schools. The third attends a charter school.

Three different schools for three different kids. And all three children are thriving in their new environments.

That’s the power of education choice.

*“MANY SCHOOL DISTRICT BOUNDARIES ARE SHAPED BY RACIST GOVERNMENT POLICIES OF THE PAST.”*

The Urban Institute recently released a report on a major problem in American education: racially unequal school boundaries. It shone a light on something that is well known by education researchers but might come as a surprise to others—many school district boundaries are shaped by racist government policies of the past. But surprisingly, it gave little positive attention to the opposite of government assignment: choice, just as was used by the Roberson family.

“The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America,” by Richard Rothstein, explains how many housing patterns stem from discriminatory policies in the 1930s. Back then, the Federal Housing Administration practiced “redlining,” a policy of refusing to insure mortgages in or near Black neighborhoods. The federal government also subsidized certain housing developments, requiring that those homes not be sold to African-Americans.

The residential assignment system of schooling perpetuates these injustices. And it makes no sense. We’re not mandated to shop in grocery stores, use hospitals, or choose pre-K or college based on where we live — even if we receive taxpayer funding. But when it comes to K-12 education, your address determines your school.

Yet the Urban Institute report authors’ primary recommendation is tinkering with the current system. “Our findings show that small changes to the attendance boundaries of neighboring schools in many cases could make a big difference for school integration.”

*“DO WE REALLY WANT TO RELY ON THE GOVERNMENT BUREAUCRATS AND ENTRENCHED INTERESTS THAT HAVE FAILED TO FIX THESE LINES FOR NEARLY A CENTURY?”*

Do we really want to rely on the government bureaucrats and entrenched interests that have failed to fix these lines for nearly a century? A better approach would be to empower families to make their own decisions.

Numerous studies have found positive outcomes from education choice, including improved school integration. Since segregation is the primary issue examined in the Urban Institute report, this is a very relevant finding.

On the academic front, education choice has been linked to improved test scores, graduation rates, and college completion rates. But the benefits of choice are much broader, including reduced crime and teenage pregnancy along with increased parental satisfaction and civic engagement.

As the Urban Institute report notes, Black and Hispanic children have been disproportionately harmed by the current public schooling system. It's no wonder Black and Hispanic parents are highly likely to support choice programs. An EdChoice survey in April found support as high as 80% for education savings accounts, which are the most flexible form of education choice.

*“IT’S TIME TO FUND STUDENTS INSTEAD OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM.”*

It's time to fund students instead of the public school system. This would help level the playing field by enabling all parents — regardless of race, income, or address—to choose the educational options that work for their children. Because even the very best school won't be the right fit for every child who happens to live near it.

Najimah Roberson's story illustrates the need for education choice over just moving attendance boundaries. Her children are doing great academically and they're happy — and they each attend a different school. If one school wasn't the right fit for Roberson's three children, it's unreasonable to expect one school to work for every child who lives within a certain radius. Families need options.

The Urban Institute report puts data behind the problem of racial inequity in public schools. But it misses an important opportunity to use that information to call for real change. We've tinkered with the system for more than a century. It's time to change course and focus on the students instead of the system.

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