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White Parents Searching for White Public Schools

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Erika K. Wilson, [The New White Flight](#), 14 **Duke J. Const. L. & Pub. Pol'y** 233 (2019).

The New White Flight makes two significant contributions to our understanding of race and education. First, it argues that white parents chose to send their children to segregated, disproportionately white schools. This choice is reflected in white residential preferences for areas where “pricing-out mechanisms” ensure that the local school is disproportionately white. (P. 254.) This racially-motivated choice holds “even when school quality is controlled for, meaning that whites tend to choose predominately white schools even when presented with the choice of a more integrated school that is of good academic quality.” (P. 236.) Second, it shows how charter schools give white parents a way to act on their preference for majority white schools even within school districts where only minority of students are white. Charter schools and other school choice programs, by enabling white parents to act on their general preference to avoid schools that are predominantly Black or Latino, facilitate the creation and maintenance of “white charter school enclaves” within larger diverse school districts. (P. 262.)

It would be tempting to write off both contributions with a yawn. A cynic might ask what is new about white parents wanting white schools and school choice enabling educational segregation? That, after all, is the story of how white parents reacted to *Brown v. Board of Education*. But by forcefully insisting that segregated education today is a result of white parents choosing to avoid predominantly Black schools, Professor Wilson challenges race-neutral explanations for why whites prefer disproportionately white schools. And by laying out the ways charter schools, through their regulatory framework as well as their educational philosophies, cater to white parents seeking to send their kids to disproportionately white schools, Professor Wilson shows the negative consequences of educational choice programs. Ultimately, the article is an eye-opening and sobering look at how the choices of white families further educational inequality at a societal level and even within school districts. It is a valuable read for anyone interested in poverty law, education policy, and property law, but the audience that could most benefit from the article arguably are well-educated urban white parents.

What is most powerful about *The New White Flight* is that it pulls no punches. Even though the article gives a long list of reasons why white parents might opt to send their kids to predominantly white schools, none of these ultimately excuse those parents. Connecting Milton Friedman’s theoretical justifications from 1955 for a market- or choice-based approach to education to the desire of whites to avoid desegregation, Professor Wilson emphasizes that when white parents “exclude by failing to choose to associate with students of color, the consequence is a form of segregation that is palpable and harmful to students of color.” (P. 251.) Choice is inseparable from exclusion given the racial dynamics of cities and of public education.

Similarly, though it is tempting to categorize educational segregation as merely a consequence of residential settlement patterns along race and class lines, in other words to treat it as a natural result of where people live, Professor Wilson does not buy this distinction. Whites cannot claim refuge in the argument that the local school just happens to be whiter than other schools in the larger urban area. Instead, *The New White Flight* recognizes that the residential and educational choices of white families together are part of the same story: “whites as a collective are choosing racially segregated schools . . . whites are choosing school segregation.” (P. 253.)

The charter school phenomenon that the article focuses on are those charter schools that are notably whiter than the

demographics of the school district overall. Professor Wilson breaks charter schools into four different types. Two types—traditional charter schools that focus on rigorous, back-to-basics education and conversion charter schools that are basically failed public schools flipped into a charter school arraignment—tend to have more students of color and low-income students. The other two types—prestige charter schools that offer progressive or project-based educational approaches and neighborhood preference charter schools—tend to have whiter and wealthier student populations. As Professor Wilson argues that these last two types of charter schools “insulate white students from large numbers of students of color and allow whites to engage in white flight without residential mobility.” (P. 273.)

One example of how this works detailed by Professor Wilson that is particularly troubling is in Georgia, where the charter school legislation states that charter schools must give preference to kids within the proposed school’s attendance zone but allows those proposing the school to define their own attendance zone. (P. 272.) White parents or charter schools serving them can, as a consequence, create charter schools that target predominantly white neighborhoods and that by design will have a mostly white student population. If all Professor Wilson’s article did was call out Georgia’s legislation, it would have been a contribution and a sign of how far whites continue to go to use the tools of the state to self-segregate.

Professor Wilson is not writing in a vacuum. There are [other important works](#) that look at how the choices of whites, especially white parents, contribute, directly and indirectly, to racial subordination. What makes *The New White Flight* worth reading even for those people well versed in matters of educational inequality and the reproduction of racial hierarchy is how unflinching it is. It gives no quarter to white parents whose kids are in predominantly white schools. Speaking as a white parent married to a Latina, it can therefore be uncomfortable to read, in part because the choices made while parenting—including where to live and what school to attend—can feel like the most personal and most individual. But as the article shows, the choices white parents make collectively can have tremendous negative impacts on students of color and lower-income students.

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