



What Happened When School Segregation Went Viral?



School segregation has attracted a very small slice of the attention economy in recent years.

But a [viral article](#) by journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones changed that—at least temporarily. Published in September in the *New York Times*, the piece chronicled Hannah-Jones’s daughter’s journey through New York City’s [highly segregated](#) public school system.

Ten years earlier, in a similarly high-profile *Times* [article](#), Hannah-Jones, a prize-winning journalist known in part for her coverage of school segregation, had described her decision to send her daughter to a school that served a high-poverty Black community. As educated middle-class parents with the resources to advocate for a high-quality education, Hannah-Jones and her spouse hoped their involvement in the school “could help improve it for all the children there” and also “challenge other families with similar values to do the same.” But the story did not end there.

Although her daughter's experiences over the next decade were not uniformly negative, Hannah-Jones and her partner often found themselves facing insurmountable systemic barriers related to school segregation but also related to racialized and concentrated poverty. These barriers were too big for even the savviest of parents to overcome on their own. Heartbreakingly, Hannah-Jones writes that their daughter, a teenager now, asked: "Did you know my school was bad like this when you decided to put me here?"

In the wake of the article's publication, Hannah-Jones has faced intense [backlash](#) from both right- and left-leaning commentators. Oddly, given that the piece mainly focused on problems in highly segregated schools, the article left some observers "wondering about the feasibility of trying to desegregate schools," the education news outlet *Chalkbeat* [reported](#).

While it is true that recent Supreme Court decisions have made it challenging for districts to launch new initiatives that aim to further racial integration, socioeconomic integration remains legally and practically feasible in most areas. As of [2020](#), socioeconomic integration (which often results in greater racial integration) was being undertaken by nearly 1,000 U.S. school districts and charter school networks. Several NEPC Fellows contributed to a [2023 research series](#) that highlights policy measures that would help expand such efforts.

These desegregation efforts can and should be research-based. For decades, expert researchers, including many NEPC Fellows, have written extensively about the harms of segregation and the benefits of integration. As NEPC Fellow and Western Michigan University professor Julian Vasquez Heilig [pointed out](#) in response to the viral article in the *Times*:

The question, then, is not whether Hannah-Jones made the right choice for her daughter, or whether another family would have been more virtuous for choosing differently. The harder question is why we continue to tolerate the American education system that makes families choose among things every child should receive together.

NEPC Resources on School Segregation

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