



Policy Brief

Segregation at Primary Schools in Germany: The Effect of Parental Choice of School

Executive Summary

In Germany, one in every four young people with a migration background attends a secondary school where migrants account for a majority of pupils (Educational Reporting Consortium 2006: 162). This is only true for one in every 20 young people without a migration background. In large cities, this separation of pupils is evident as early as primary school age. In Berlin, almost two-thirds of children with a migration background go to primary schools where most of their schoolmates are of non-German origin. In contrast, six out of seven children without a migration background are enrolled in primary schools where the student body is predominantly other children with German roots (Berlin Senate for Education, Science and Research 2012a). This segregation at primary schools creates unequal educational opportunities for pupils with a migration background, many of whom are already at a disadvantage given their family's social background. Once enrolled at a primary school with other pupils who face similar obstacles in their education and lack positive role models, performance and behavioural norms are reinforced particularly among weaker pupils, and are ultimately reflected in poorer learning results. Moreover, it is often much more difficult for an individual pupil to acquire German language skills because their schoolmates also lack proficiency.

School segregation of children with a migration background cannot be fully explained by residential segregation. The Research Units' analysis shows: parental choice of school also has a significant impact on segregation at primary schools. Around 10 per cent of parents in large cities apply to change the primary school their child has been officially assigned to. The number of applications to change schools varies significantly depending on where families live. Furthermore, the actual number of parents who choose a different school is most likely higher due to unreported cases of parents who manage to change schools either by moving or changing their residence to a preferred school district. Families with a migration background are much less likely to decide against the assigned school: 57 per cent of parents of Turkish origin are not even aware of their option to choose.



This Policy Brief¹ examines the impact of parental school choice on segregation at German primary schools based on nation-wide studies and an analysis of The Expert Council's Research Unit of Berlin school and population data.

A detailed analysis of school and population data for 108 primary schools and the surrounding school districts in the Berlin districts of Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf, Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg, Mitte and Neukölln shows that many parents take active steps to circumvent the official primary school assignment: one in every five primary schools enrolls twice as many pupils of non-German origin than are found in its school district. An equally high percentage of primary schools has proportionally fewer children of non-German origin than live in the surrounding school district. This segregation is largely a consequence of parents actively pursuing a change in school: to offer their children a stimulating learning environment, parents, particularly those who are educated, compare the surrounding primary schools based on those school characteristics that are visible to them. The problem parents face here is that many of the school factors that influence a pupils' performance such as a supportive learning environment, teacher qualifications or how individual learning styles are accommodated are seldom known. Since visiting classrooms in person is time-consuming and school inspection reports are rarely available, many parents rely on the composition of the student body as an indicator of a primary school's quality. An analysis of online school profiles which were accessed more than 900,000 times in Berlin and Saxony also confirms this tendency. Schools with a high percentage of migrants are often avoided because many parents associate them with inadequate learning opportunities and a troubled environment. As a result, children with a migration background are frequently enrolled in schools with weaker pupils early on. This limits their ability to acquire the skills they need for a successful school career. The performance-based separation of pupils at German secondary schools is thus already introduced at primary schools, which has a negative effect on the educational mobility of children with a migration background.

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The negative effects of segregation on pupils' performance cannot be eliminated simply by forcing student bodies to mix. Instead, a more promising strategy would be to systematically improve learning opportunities at segregated schools. The measures proposed by this Policy Brief focus on the individual primary school which needs to take action in three areas:

(1) **Cooperative work with parents:** To gain the trust of parents and encourage them to actively support their children's school careers, primary schools should proactively involve parents at an early stage, ideally before their children even start school.

(2) **Networking with external partners:** Networking with secondary schools and external partners such as sports clubs, youth groups and cultural institutions can stimulate innovation, improve the quality of instruction and enhance what a school has to offer.

(3) **Systematic teacher training:** Many teachers are inadequately equipped to deal with a diverse student body. To eliminate shortcomings, e.g. in German language acquisition or individualised instruction, schools should pursue coordinated ongoing education and training of its entire staff.