

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST

WHAT ONLINE FORUM DISCUSSIONS REVEAL ABOUT SEGREGATION IN DC  
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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## PROCEEDINGS

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews.

How does an online community, dominated by privileged parents, discuss its local school system? In a new report titled "We All Want What's Best for our Kids," Brookings researchers examined thousands of messages on the DC Urban Moms school discussion forum to find out what they were talking about and how their conversations reflect continued racial segregation in the public schools of the nation's capital. The report, co-authored by Vanessa Williamson, Jackson Gode, and Hao Sun, is on our website, [brookings.edu](http://brookings.edu), and I'm joined on the show now by Williamson, who is a senior fellow in Governance Studies at Brookings.

You can follow the Brookings Podcast Network on twitter @policypodcasts to get information about and links to all our shows including Dollar and Sense: The Brookings Trade Podcast, The Current, and our events podcast.

And now, here's my interview with Vanessa Williamson on the report, "We all want what's best for our kids." Vanessa, welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria.

WILLIAMSON: Oh, I'm glad to be here.

DEWS: All right, so we're talking about this new report that you've coauthored. "We all want what's best for our kids," and it's a very interesting report. It might be one of the most interesting datasets or methodological approaches I've seen in a Brookings report, because you studied an online forum. Can you tell us about the study, why you did it, and go into how you did it?

WILLIAMSON: Sure, so I've been interested for a long time in the kind of informal conversations that parents have about schooling choices, and we know, you know, from

empirical research that those informal conversations are decisive often in terms of parents thinking about schools. And we also have a lot of data looking at the way that segregation has been perpetuated for decades after the end of legal segregation.

And so, you know, it had always been in the back of my mind that it would be interesting as a social scientist and as someone interested in public opinion to find a data source that could get at these conversations that occur, you know, on the playground, in a coffee shop, you know, in contexts that are really hard to capture in any quantity.

And DC urban moms is a website that has a set of forums on all different kinds of subjects, but including on the public school system of D.C. And it's just an incredibly rich resource. Hundreds of thousands of messages going back ten years. And I thought, obviously it's an imperfect window on, you know, a very complicated question, but it's just it seems an extraordinary opportunity to capture how a certain community of parents thought about the public school system.

DEWS: And so this is a forum, DC Urban Moms, so I guess it's more formally called DC Urban Moms and dads. Can anybody access this and you know how did you go through ... you said there are ten years of conversations on this forum and I know you focus on the public schooling one. I mean, how do you do this kind of study? Are you copying and pasting into a spreadsheet? I mean, what is going on here?

WILLIAMSON: So some years ago we reached out to the site's owner. It's a public site and that, you know, if you go to the URL you can see it, you don't have to log in or anything like that. And it's almost all commenters comment anonymously. Technically, you could put your name in as your username, but people don't tend to do that. In fact, basically, almost literally everyone is anonymous.

So we went to the email through the website and asked for permission to web scrape. So I did not have to read with my eyes 10 years conversations, but the computer can process all that data very quickly or relatively quickly. And then we just had what you could imagine in your head is as a very large Excel spreadsheet with hundreds of thousands of rows, each one filled with a comment on the website. And they were threaded together so you could see who was responding to who and what a conversation looked like, what a back and forth looked like. Since, you know, as on most online forums, you can post something and then you can respond to those posts. So we could catch not just what each comment said, but how people were interacting with one another.

DEWS: So what are the people who are on DC Urban Moms talking about in the public education or the schools-related forum? What kind of things did you see them talking about?

WILLIAMSON: Well one of the most important subjects of conversation, and you can see this not just in the in the content of the messages but also in the time of year that they participate, is figuring out where to send your kids to school. Right? So D.C. has a very robust school choice system. That is to say, you have access to your local public school, as is true in most of American cities, you are by right allowed to go to your local public school. But there is also this very large charter system in D.C. and even traditional public schools you can try and lottery into.

So, in the spring every year there's a lottery for schools, and you as a parent put down a list of schools you'd like to attend. You have various preferences and you're guaranteed a spot in your local school. And so, you know, the decision-making that goes into putting that list together is something that a lot of parents pay a lot of mind about. And so that's a lot of what the

conversation is about. It's about what schools are good, what schools are acceptable, what schools are worth talking about.

DEWS: And could you give listeners a sense of, kind of the demographics of D.C. public schools? I mean, how many kids are we talking about? How many schools? I know some are public charter schools, some are traditional public schools? What's it look like in D.C.?

WILLIAMSON: So there about 90,000 students in the public school system. Most of them are children, but there is some adult education as well. The system is divided pretty equally between public traditional schools—that is to say, schools that serve a neighborhood, though you can lottery into them as well—and charter schools.

And the demographics of the city obviously are changing, and you can see that in our public school system here in the city. D.C. was once a predominantly black city, but has experienced gentrification in recent years and a growing white population. And you see that in the schools that the, you know, at lower grades there are more white children than at older grades. But the city has a relatively small minority of white children.

So, that's the overall demography of the city. And then you know one of the really interesting things about it, of course, is that it's a divided system. Right? So there's sort of half traditional, half charter, which makes it fun to try and work out the data for all the schools, since you have to go through two different systems. But it also means that there are just an awful lot of schools to consider for parents. If you were really going to think seriously about all of your options, you know there are, let's say, around 200 schools to consider.

DEWS: So what were some of the key research questions that you had, you and your co-authors had—and again those were Jackson Gode of Brookings, and Hao Sun of Gallaudet University—what were some of your key research questions going into this data set?

WILLIAMSON: I was interested first of all, in what schools were discussed, and then secondarily, how they were discussed. What sort of, you know, were people talking about the playgrounds? Were they talking about the math teachers? Were they talking about test scores? Were they talking about whether a school was renovated? I was just interested in what aspects of schooling seemed important and what were raised as considerations when describing a school as, you know, a good school or a school you didn't think was right for your kid. And then so that was the thing I was interested at first. Just because I thought, you know, it's very hard to get quantitative data about the aspects of the schools that a parent thinks of on their own, you know, because you can do a survey and ask them about the different elements. Right? But what do people sort of volunteer? What are they thinking about without any prompting? Those were the questions that got me started.

DEWS: So one of my takeaways from reading the report is that there was a definable set of topics that the participants in the message boards talked about, but then that you were also able to discern a set of schools that were talked about more often than other schools, and in fact some schools were not talked about at all. And also the topics that people talked about were very specific to the kinds of school or the demographics of schools involved. Can you elaborate on some of those points?

WILLIAMSON: Sure. So, one of the things that struck me in the data is that it wasn't the right way to think about the data that there was sort of a set of criteria that people had and they were applying those to all schools and then ranking them based on those criteria. That's not how the conversations unfolded. One of the first things I noticed was that the mentions of schools were clustered. Now obviously that makes some sense, in any case. If you live in a particular part of town, you're going to talk about the schools there; you probably talk about elementary

schools. You can be comparing them, perhaps. And not elementary schools, but also high schools in the same conversation. Right?

So we see some of that. We see that there are clusters of schools based on geography and based on grade and to some extent based on sector. That is to say, there's a conversation about the traditional schools versus a conversation about the charter schools in one particular part of the city.

But the other thing that defined the clusters was the racial demography of the students. And that became clear pretty quickly as soon as you start looking just quantitatively at what schools are discussed together. For the high schools in particular, it was very clear that there were sort of two clusters of conversations. One cluster was the sort of high attention schools that had a lot of very positive words associated with them. And the other cluster was low attention schools. But the low attention schools were not the low performing schools in the city. They were not universally in one part of town. They were not schools that had served one economic group either. The low attention schools that clustered together just in terms of what schools were discussed in common, right, in the same conversation, the low attention schools were schools that were overwhelmingly African American in the student body that attended. And so it sort of jumped out of the data the extent to which segregation was visible even just in what schools are seen as comparative to one another.

DEWS: And one of those schools that I found interesting is the Duke Ellington School for the Arts. Now, I mean, a lot of listeners who don't live or work in D.C. aren't going to be familiar with most of the schools in D.C., and I don't live in the D.C., but I've worked in D.C. for many years, and I know about Duke Ellington School for the Arts and obviously it's named after

Duke Ellington. But it's in the Northwest section of Washington, it's really close to Georgetown University, it's a very predominately white area, but that was a low-mentioned school.

WILLIAMSON: That's right. There are two schools that sort of stuck out in terms of being schools that you have rigorous application procedures—both Duke Ellington and Banneker. But they were grouped with other schools that have, you know, lower graduation rates, fewer kids going to college, fewer kids performing at grade level. And the thing that those schools share is that they have a very small, almost nonexistent in some schools' cases, white population. And so you could really, you could just see the segregation of the city, and not just residential segregation, but the segregation of the school system in the way that conversations unfolded.

And it's not just that the schools were clustered or segregated from one another, but they were discussed very differently. And so for example, as I was saying, there's this high attention high school cluster—not only did that set of schools have a much stronger association with words to do with academics, you know things like “homework” or “advanced” or “math” or “science”; not only did it have far more attention to sort of academic aspects of the school; and not only did it have more words to do with extracurriculars as well; but it also had far more words that were sort of humanizing words about people. And by way of example, if you looked at words more associated with the high attention cluster than the low attention cluster, that is to say more associated with the schools that white kids attend versus the schools where almost no white kids attend, one of the words most associated with the whiter schools was “child.” Another one was “kid,” another one was “mom,” another one was “family.” Whereas for the lower attention high schools, among the most common words associated with those schools, rather than

the high attention schools, was “black,” “African American.” There were also words like “failing” associated with those schools.

And so one of the most troubling findings for me was that. Right? Because you can imagine that the whiter schools in D.C., which serve a better off population, are better resourced, and might genuinely have different academic offerings in some cases. But the reality is that there are kids in all our schools, but we don't see it that way, apparently, at least looking through the eyes of this forum. And that to me was a deeply troubling aspect of the findings.

DEWS: Let me quote from the report and ask you to expand on this because it relates directly to what you're just saying. And you write, “school segregation in general, and as it is evidenced by the conversations on the DC Urban Moms forums, reflects the history of racist housing and education policy in the United States.”

WILLIAMSON: That's right. The fact is that segregation is not a new problem for America. It is ingrained in our history. And the thing that I think this report shows is that we haven't managed to untangle it. Right? We've had decades since legal segregation was abolished but our city remains segregated. So profoundly segregated that if you tell me the zip code you live in, I have a pretty good chance of guessing a lot of things about you.

And what is more, the school system is more segregated than the city. Because in our diverse neighborhoods, our gentrifying neighborhoods, white families move in but they opt into only a handful of schools. So you see, the report looks specifically at Brookland, which is a gentrifying neighborhood in the northeast part of D.C. And you see that, you know, there's three or four schools that have a substantial white population, and every other school in the neighborhood has almost literally no white students. And you can see because this forum, DC Urban Moms—to the extent that you can see it from the data given that it's anonymous—serves

an upper middle class white population, it seems pretty clear. Those are the schools that get talked about on the forum and the other schools are almost invisible.

So, when we're talking about the taking the data together, we have schools that are not discussed, and those are predominantly black schools, and the people in those schools are not visible. Right? They're not seen as people like the word "child" makes you think of a person, right? They're seen in demographic categories instead. So the sort of double invisibility of Black children in the D.C. school system, I think, was one of the really striking results in the paper.

DEWS: Listeners to this episode might also be interested in the previous episode that I aired on the Brookings Cafeteria podcast. It was my interview with Michael Hanson, the director of the Brown Center on Education Policy at Brookings. And his book, "Teacher diversity and student success," which actually goes someone into the history of school segregation. More focused on teachers. So listeners can find that and your report on our website.

We'll be right back.

[MUSIC FADE IN]

DEWS: Here's distinguished veteran journalist and author Marvin Kalb with a word from his new book from the Brookings Institution Press, "Assignment Russia."

KALB: Please consider "Assignment Russia" as a long letter home after an unforgettable personal adventure. It's the story of a few very important years in my life as a young reporter trained in the crucible of the Cold War. In the 1950s, I pursued one professional goal with an unflinching determination—to become CBS's Moscow correspondent. It took three years for me to get to Moscow, but it was worth the effort.

DEWS: Visit [brookings.edu/AssignmentRussia](http://brookings.edu/AssignmentRussia) to find out how you can get your own copy of Kalb's new book.

[MUSIC FADE OUT]

DEWS: And now, back to my interview with Vanessa Williamson.

Vanessa, so what's a key takeaway for policymaking here?

WILLIAMSON: I think there are a couple of things. First of all, I think we need to think seriously about the way that choice plays out in our school system. And I mean choice in two senses. I mean both choice in the housing market, because D.C. is an expensive city, is an expensive segregated city with a desperate shortage of affordable housing. And that shuts people out of neighborhoods, and that means it shuts people out of schools. So that's one set of choices we're making about whether people have available housing across the city.

And the other set of choices we're making is in our schools. And as I said, the capacity of privileged parents to opt out of schools that are majority African American in neighborhoods that they live in worsens segregation in the city. So, I think we need to think seriously about how we can build policies that do not allow privileged parents to leverage them, to hoard resources in the way that we currently see.

I think there are also implications, though, for individuals and I include myself in that. You know, I am a D.C. resident, in fact I'm a D.C. mom. I am also in the D.C. public school system or my family is in the D.C. public school system. And one of the things that resonated with me about the results is that it sounded like conversations that I have heard. And so, I think it's important for individuals it's very hard and very awkward to confront the ways that our individual choices because of the unfair, inequitable, and racist systems that exist in our country, our individual choices have toxic outcomes. And it's uncomfortable to think about that. But I think we need to.

And I think that one of the things this report sheds light on is the way that when we receive segregated information about our schools, that is to say when we hear the opinions of people who are demographically very similar to us, we don't know about the system as a whole and we have frankly biased views of the parts of the city and of the schools that our children, right, don't attend.

And so, I think that that is a piece of the puzzle that's really important. Is for parents like me to think seriously about how our choices affect not just our children but all children.

DEWS: So, I think one of the interesting things I'm trying to tease out and listeners might think of this too, is how do you as a social scientist, but also as a D.C. mom, how do you tease out whether this study is more about the people who participate in the forum, so the things that they're saying, and perhaps their biases, versus kind of structural issues in the public school system in D.C., funding choices, and you know what kind of resources go to this school or that school?

WILLIAMSON: So, one thing I will say is there's not very much that's unique. There's a lot of research showing that upper middle class white parents opt out of schools with poor kids and opt out of schools with Black kids in large percentages.

And so to some extent I think this forum is interesting because it is so rich, because it has been running for so long, and because there's enough data that you can build this sort of broad picture, right, of the D.C. school system. But in another way, it's confirming what we know. Right? Which is that privileged parents, when they can choose, they choose segregation. And that's the issue we face. Right?

So, I think the takeaway for policymakers is that we need to build systems that prioritize equity, and sometimes that means not prioritizing choice, because we can see that people will

choose resource hoarding. Right? They'll choose to build a school system where some schools have very low rates of poverty and very high levels of resources, both in terms of funding from the state or the government itself. But also they'll build sort of a bubble and it's very comfortable.

But if you concentrate wealth in one school, mathematically you're concentrating poverty in another. And so the challenge I think we face is building systems that resist those instincts. Right? That sort of lifeboat mentality of I'm going to get mine. That resist, you know, providing sort of additional levers of privilege for people who have a lot already.

DEWS: So how do you see this this approach, this methodology, your findings, have applying not just to Washington, D.C., schools, but nationwide?

WILLIAMSON: Yeah, I mean, there's been interesting studies in some other cities. I know that there's a there's a study of sort of a parental listserv in New York that looks at how a school gentrifies, because schools can gentrify just like neighborhoods, and how parents have perceived their role in a school when there are relatively few number of relatively privileged white parents in a school that is predominantly majority and how that can change over time.

There's a lot of great research across the country looking at very similar issues. And I think, you know, there's a real sort of resonance between these different lines of research, right, that we are seeing very similar concerns. It is certainly not just D.C. that is segregated. It is certainly not just D.C. schools that are segregated. And it's certainly not just D.C. where parents are making choices that preserve that segregation.

You know, New York City is a good example of that, actually. You know, and there have been examples recently where cities have tried to put in place patterns of school assignment that would have been more integrated, that would have made schools look more like the community. Right? And those plans face resistance, serious resistance, typically from relatively wealthy

white parents who see the access to a very narrow band of schools as something of a right that will be threatened by the presence of other children in that school.

DEWS: You also have in the Washington Post last week an op-ed about this report. And so I mean, this is out there. It's on our website, but now you've talked about it in the in the local newspaper. And, you know, schooling is a vital interest to so many people. Have you heard from other people in in the community? People who send their kids to school? Maybe people who participated in this forum. What kinds of things are you hearing?

WILLIAMSON: I've had an overwhelming level of interest. I think in part because the findings are kind of an eye-catching version of something that we know. Right? That segregation is a problem in our schools and that privileged white parents reinforce that segregation. And that's not a D.C. specific matter, that is a problem in our cities across the country. So, I got a ton of very positive feedback from education researchers and people concerned about segregation. And, you know, just a lot of interest, you know, I think in part because the site is quite well known in the city, and so it did take off in that way.

Also, I'm under the impression that there's a pretty active discussion of the report on DC Urban Moms itself, of course, necessarily. I haven't been following it myself, but my co-author has been and I've been sort of given a sort of broad overview. And I think to the extent I can speak about that, I just say that, you know, I understand how hard it must be to confront the possibility that the way you've been thinking or talking about a subject is damaging. And I think this is a conversation we're having in this country all the time now, and it is good that we're having it. You know, sort of confronting the question of white fragility. Right? That feeling of extreme discomfort when we face the possibility that maybe we did the wrong thing. But I also

think that we can be brave about that, and, you know, think seriously about how we can do better in the future.

So, my hope is that, you know, for parents for whom this report resonated, where it sounded like, yeah, that sounds like a conversation I remember in my PTA meeting, or that sounds like a conversation I had with my neighbor—I think it's a good opportunity to think about how we could be having better conversations, conversations that don't reinforce our biases, conversations that challenge us instead.

In the Washington Post report at the end I have a few resources that I've seen to help people have those conversations right to examine the ways, for instance, it is in no way unique to DC Urban Moms that the word “child” is more associated with white children and Black children. That is an empirical fact in a number of different studies.

So, it is important to think to ourselves about is it possible that in this scenario I am, you know, what they say is adult-ifying this child because of the color of their skin, and how can I be better? And I think we can all do that. You know, this is advice that I give to myself as much as anyone, that I think that there's a real place for self-examination for particularly privileged white parents who are sometimes shielded from having to think through the consequences of, you know, the assumptions that are in the air around us that we were raised with about what counts as a good school. What counts is the right peers for my child.

DEWS: Well, Vanessa, I think we'll leave it there. I want to thank you for sharing with us today your time and your expertise about this really fascinating and important study.

WILLIAMSON: Well, thank you so much. I'm always glad to talk.

DEWS: You can find the report by Vanessa Williamson, Jackson Gode, and Hao Sun, “We all want what's best for our kids: Discussions of D.C. public school options in an online forum,” on our website [brookings.edu](http://brookings.edu).

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Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.