

# Bridging Gaps or Reinforcing Divides? Montessori Education's Relationship to School Segregation

David J. Fleming, Ph.D.  
(david.fleming@furman.edu)

TJ Robertson  
(robete6@furman.edu)

## BACKGROUND

This study examines the relationship between Montessori education and school segregation. There are many reasons why one could expect that Montessori education could encourage a diverse student body, from the evidence of its benefits for students of color to the notion that the Montessori model lends itself to a culturally responsive and supportive approach to education (see Debs and Brown 2017). When it comes to public Montessori programs, these schools generally enroll a racially diverse student body (Debs 2016; Fleming and Culclasure 2023).

However, there is a persistent stereotype of Montessori education as being particularly appealing to high-income and white parents (Debs 2019). Most Montessori programs exist in private schools, which have a disproportionate proportion of white students. Examinations of public Montessori programs have determined that white and wealthier students are often overrepresented in Montessori programs when compared to the districts in which they are located (Debs 2016; Fleming and Culclasure 2023).

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the relationship between Montessori education and school segregation?
2. Does the relationship between Montessori status and a school's contribution to racial segregation differ by school type?

## DATA & VARIABLES

URBAN  
INSTITUTE

NCES  
National Center for  
Education Statistics

NATIONAL CENTER for  
MONTESSORI in the  
PUBLIC SECTOR

Variables of Interest:

- **Montessori status** – 1,465 Montessori schools: 165 Traditional Public Schools (TPS), 93 Magnet, 186 Charter, 1,021 Private
- **Segregation Contribution Index** – Determined by: 1) % of Black/Hispanic students in the school vs. % of Black/Hispanic students across the school district; 2) the enrollment of the school; and 3) the size of the school district
- **Neighborhood School Demographics** – The % of Black/Hispanic students who attend schools with the same grade level within 1-15 miles of each school

See the Urban Institute's estimate  
of your school's Segregation  
Contribution Index here: [bit.ly/3TkPLYW](https://bit.ly/3TkPLYW)



## ANALYSIS

Figure 1: Black/Hispanic Students are Underrepresented in 74% of Montessori Schools

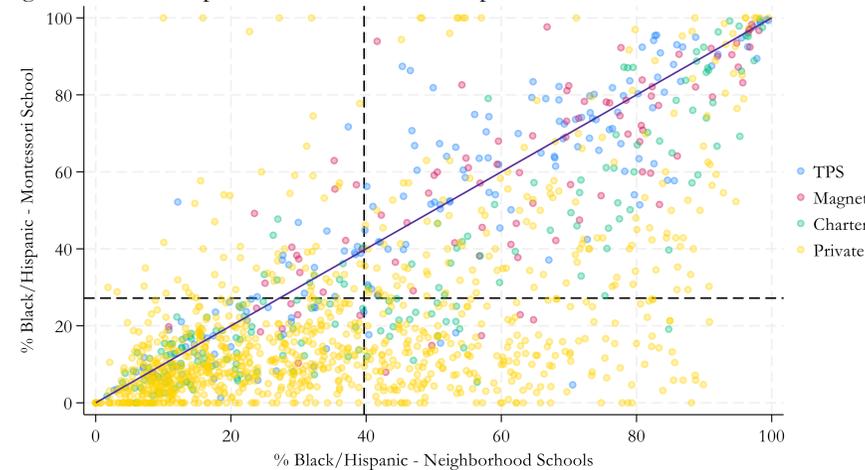


Figure 2: Montessori Schools Have a Higher Segregation Contribution Index

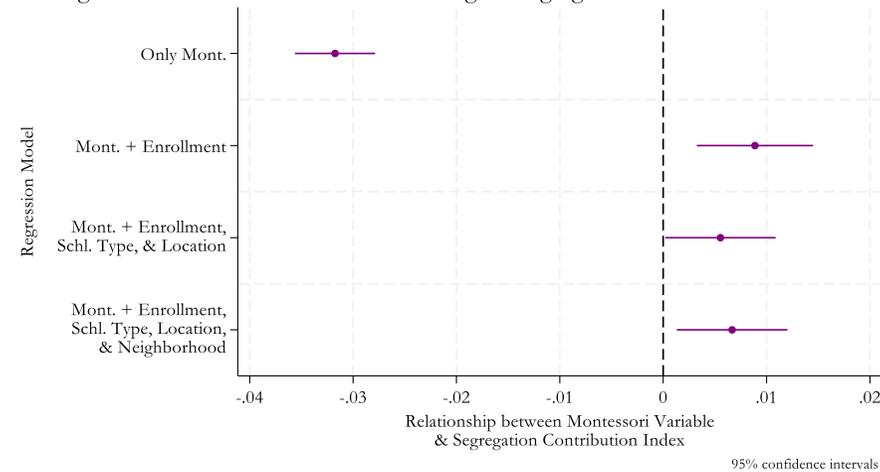
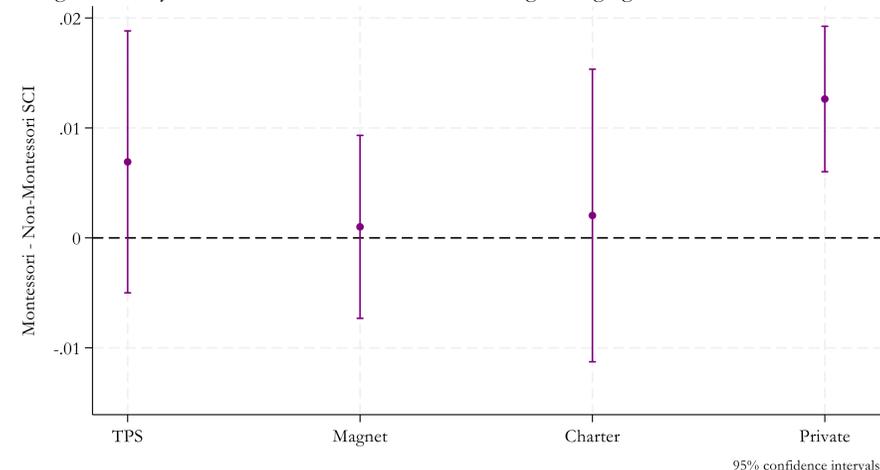


Figure 3: Only Private Montessori Schools Have a Higher Segregation Contribution Index



## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

**Figure 1** is a scatterplot of each Montessori school in terms of its percentage of Hispanic and Black enrollment versus the percentage of Hispanic and Black students who attend schools in the same neighborhood. We estimate that 74% of Montessori schools in the dataset have a lower percentage of Black and Hispanic students than neighboring schools.

Our OLS regression results are presented in **Figure 2**. The last regression compares schools within the same district that serve the same grades, have comparable numbers of students, and are situated in neighborhoods with similar racial demographics. We find that Montessori schools have a 0.7 percentage point higher SCI than non-Montessori schools. Montessori schools contribute more to within-district school segregation than non-Montessori schools do. While this difference is not substantively large, it is statistically significant.

**Figure 3** presents the results of our interaction model. While Montessori schools have a higher SCI for each school type, the difference is only statistically significant for private Montessori schools. Montessori private schools have a 1.3 percentage point higher SCI than non-Montessori private schools.

This study provides much-needed information about the relationship between school segregation and Montessori education. We conclude by emphasizing that no single study can capture all of the complexities of school segregation. Our findings should not be used to blame any Montessori school or type of school; the results should be used to inform school officials and the Montessori community about the relationship between Montessori education and school segregation and could be used to focus efforts on increasing racial integration in schools throughout the country.

## REFERENCES

- Debs, M. C. (2016). Racial and Economic Diversity in U.S. Public Montessori Schools. *Journal of Montessori Research*, 2(2), 15–34.
- Debs, M. (2019). *Diverse Families, Desirable Schools: Public Montessori in the Era of School Choice*. Harvard Education Press.
- Debs, M. C., & Brown, K. E. (2017). Students of Color and Public Montessori Schools: A Review of the Literature. *Journal of Montessori Research*, 3(1), 1–15.
- Fleming, D. J., & Culclasure, B. (2023). Exploring Public Montessori Education: Equity and Achievement in South Carolina. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 1-26.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors thank the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector and the Urban Institute for making the data available for this analysis. All analyses and conclusions are the responsibility of the authors alone.