

# Racial and Economic Diversity in US Public Montessori Schools

Mira Debs

Department of Sociology, Yale University



mira.debs@yale.edu

## Introduction

Public Montessori schools have historically appealed to families across racial and economic backgrounds. The earliest public Montessori schools were developed in the 1970s to attract white families to city schools as part of desegregation initiatives in Cincinnati, Ohio; Kansas City, Missouri; and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. More recently, cities such as Cambridge, MA, Hartford, Connecticut, and Fort Wayne, Indiana have successfully used this same strategy.

At the same time, there has been recent opposition to new or expanded public Montessori programs in cities like Santa Cruz, CA, Salem, OR, Charleston, SC, Memphis, TN. In these cases, opponents have charged that public Montessori is for middle class white families. Is this perception born out by the data?

## Research Question

**What is the racial and economic diversity of public Montessori in schools across the country?**

## Method

This dataset is part of my dissertation research on parents and public Montessori schools. It includes 400 hours of participant observation at two public Montessori schools and 75 interviews with parents and public Montessori leaders around the country.

Here, I created and analyzed an original data set of 284 schoolwide\* public Montessori schools, derived from the 2013 National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) crosschecked with the 483 public Montessori schools in the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector All Montessori Census.

These 284 schoolwide public Montessori schools are 59% of the total 482 public Montessori programs, but represent 72% of approximately 125,000 public Montessori students.

\*I focused my analysis on schoolwide programs since I could not ascertain the demographics of Montessori programs within schools.

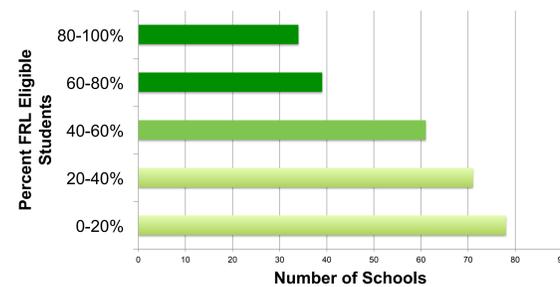
## Results

### ECONOMIC DIVERSITY

Researchers commonly use a combined percentage of students eligible for Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) as a proxy for student poverty. For 2014–15, the eligibility threshold for free or reduced school lunch is a family of four with an annual income of less than \$44,123.

The following table shows the distribution of FRL eligible students at schoolwide public Montessori programs.

Table 1: Percent Free and Reduced Lunch Eligible Students at Schoolwide Public Montessori Schools 2012-13

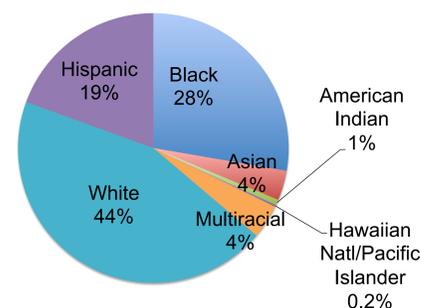


Note that 47% of schoolwide public Montessori programs enroll 40% or higher FRL eligible students. This is the same as the national public school average. 74% of schoolwide public Montessori schools have between 20 and 80% FRL eligible students, creating schools with high levels of economic diversity (Kahlenberg, 2003).

### RACIAL DIVERSITY

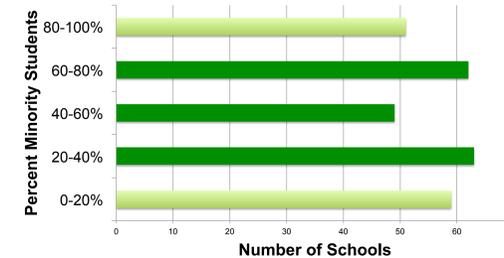
The following table shows the total number of 92,221 students broken down by race at schoolwide public Montessori schools.

Figure 1: Enrollment by race at schoolwide public Montessori schools 2012-13



To evaluate the diversity of students in public Montessori schools, the following table shows the distribution of minority students at schoolwide public Montessori programs.

Table 2: Percent Minority Students at Schoolwide Public Montessori Schools 2012-13



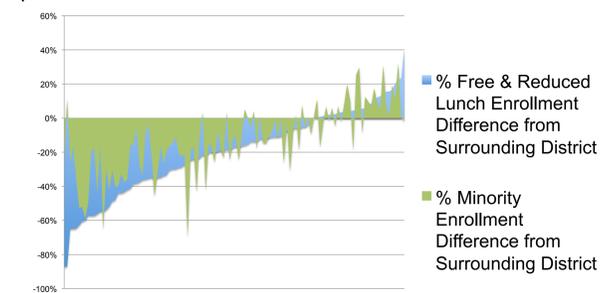
61% of schools (the dark green bars) have high levels of racial diversity.

### DIFFERENCE FROM SURROUNDING DISTRICTS

Finally, I wanted to examine how similar or dissimilar public Montessori schools are to their surrounding district. I evaluated a subset of 37 school districts which each had two or more schoolwide public Montessori schools, for a total of 114 schools.

Dissimilarity = % FRL school - % FRL district  
OR  
% Minority school - % Minority District

Table 3: Difference from surrounding districts for 114 schoolwide public Montessori schools in 37 districts



72% of these schools had fewer FRL students than the surrounding district. 70% of these schools had lower minority enrollment than the surrounding district.

These lower enrollments can be positive if they help reduce the racial and economic isolation of students. But it's important to examine if there are cases where students who might benefit from Montessori are not enrolling.

### Discussion

Many public Montessori schools recruit diverse student populations. However, they are almost entirely "choice" schools that families must choose through a lottery rather than schools to which they are assigned.

Research shows that the school choice process can exclude poor and minority families if not implemented with care (Beal and Hendry, 2012; Pattillo, Delale-O'Connor & Butts 2014; Renzulli & Evans 2005).

As part of my broader dissertation research on parent choice and Montessori, here are some strategies public Montessori schools are using to recruit a racially and economically diverse student body:

### Access

- Providing full-day programming and before and after care to support working families
- Providing transportation to all families
- Participating in the district lottery process to simplify enrollment for parents
- Using a weighted lottery to increase enrollment of disadvantaged students
- Following the federal law mandating that Charter Montessori schools that have private preschools conduct open lotteries to ensure that all students have access to the charter program

### Outreach

- Print brochures in multiple languages, include translations or a translation service on website
- Hold information sessions at community libraries, Head Start facilities, places of worship
- Publicize Montessori's efficacy with English Language Learners and Students with Special Needs
- Publicize Montessori's rich curriculum around cultural diversity
- Share academic results so that parents will know they are choosing a college preparatory curriculum

### Cultural Diversity

- Hire diverse staff, and create school-based pathways for training and hiring from within the local community
- Use curriculum materials that accurately represent economically and racially diverse students and families

### Advocacy

- Advocate for increased public funding for all early childhood students, starting as young as possible
- Advocate for well-planned and intentional urban renewal plans, including mixed-income housing and affordable units.

### Acknowledgments

Thanks to Jacqueline Cossentino, Sara Suchman and Keith Whitescarver of the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector for their comments and revisions.

### Sources:

- Beal, Heather K Olson and Petra Munro Hendry. 2012. "The Ironies of School Choice: Empowering Parents and Reconceptualizing Public Education." *American Journal of Education* 118(4):521-50.
- Kahlenberg, Richard. 2003. *All Together Now: Creating Middle-Class Schools through Public School Choice*. New York: Brookings Institution Press.
- Pattillo, Mary, Lori Delale-O'Connor and Felicia Butts. 2014. "High Stakes Choosing." Pp. 237-67 in *Choosing Homes, Choosing Schools*, edited by A. Lareau and K. Goyette. New York: Russell Sage.
- Renzulli, Linda and Lorraine Evans. 2005. "School Choice, Charter Schools, and White Flight." *Social problems* 52(3):398-418.