

## CHARTER SCHOOLS AND THE PROBLEM OF SEGREGATION IN U.S.

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### Abstract

Charter Schools emerged in the 1990s as an alternative to the U.S. public schools with the hope that charter schools would not be exposed to the same problems of the traditional public schools that are due to high levels of bureaucracy, less autonomy and no competition for students, hence for financial resources. This came about following the success of “magnet schools” that emerged as a product of the previous generation in the 1970s. Likewise, charter school movement had bipartisan support from many levels and today, although still only about 1 percent of students is enrolled in charter schools they emerged as a successful model to traditional public schools and even to the private schools in many areas. U.S. has the most diverse group of students in its history and all the basic trends indicate the diversity will become even greater. Among the school age population after only one generation the entire country will become a minority non-white or non-European in origin. Diversity is growing rapidly in the nation’s suburban rings, which have become the center of American life and politics. Yet schools remain largely segregated and are becoming more so although Americans still believe that their children benefit from integrated education and there is substantial evidence that those beliefs are correct. Segregated schools are still highly unequal. Segregation by race related to segregation by poverty and to many forms of educational inequality for African American and Latino students; few whites experience impoverished schools. Efforts to overcome the effects of segregation through special programs have had some success, but there is no evidence that they have equalized systems of segregated schools. Segregated schools particularly those in big cities have stunningly high levels of high school dropouts and very poor records of preparing students for higher education. Segregation has not been a successful educational or social policy. Yet U.S. school system is experiencing a continuing expansion of segregation for both blacks and Latinos and serious backward movement in the South. Specifically in this study, effect of charter school movement on the issue of ethnic, racial, religious, socio-economic segregation has been analyzed and it has been concluded that in fact there is a relation between the segregation issue and the charter school movement and that this relationship is mostly a negative one unlike magnet schools, which substantially improved the segregation problem in the 1970s; however it was not clear whether it is the charter school movement that is the cause or it is the other way around.

**Keywords:** bipartisan, magnet schools, charter schools, segregation, re-segregation, deregulation, decentralization, accountability.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Few topics in education inspire as much debate as charter schools. Fueling this debate are recent studies of charter school student achievement (Buddin and Zimmer, 2005; AFT, 2004; Booker et al., 2004; Sass, 2005; Hoxby, 2004; Bifulco and Ladd, 2005; Hanushek et al., 2002). While these studies have been informative, they generally have not shed light on a broader set of questions, including the effect charter schools have on the distribution of students by race/ethnicity and ability. Charter schools are popular among parents can be seen by a simple fact; approximately 70 percent report having waiting lists. However, it is critical to remember that despite the rapid growth of charter schools, nearly 90 percent of American children continue to be enrolled in traditional public schools (Teske et al., 2000). Before going into details about the relation of the charter schools and the issue of segregation, it is important to understand the current status of American education with respect to integrated education and diversity in general.

#### 1.1 Integrated Education and American Society

Americans believe that their children benefit from integrated education and there is substantial evidence that those beliefs are correct. Sixty percent of blacks in 1998 and 34% of whites believed that it is absolutely

essential for schools to have a diverse student body with kids from different ethnic and racial backgrounds (Farkas and Johnson, 1998). Further, a national poll in 1999 reveals that 68% of all respondents believe that integration had improved the quality of education for blacks and 50% believe that it had made education better for whites. By 1999, almost three-fifths of Americans believed that we needed to do more to integrate schools. (Gallup, 1999). Certainly, there is also substantial support for choice policies in 1993, 65% of the public were in favor of allowing students and parents to choose what schools they attended, regardless of where they lived (Elam et al., 1993). On the other hand, advocates of the segregated schools put forward the the idea of “separate but equal” approach, claiming that the fact that the schools will be segregated does not mean that they will provide unequal opportunities.

## 1.2 Diversity in U.S. Schools

U.S. has the most diverse group of students in its history and all the basic trends indicate the diversity will become even greater. Among the school age population there is only one generation before the entire country becomes a minority non-white or non-European in origin. Diversity is growing rapidly in the nation’s suburban rings, which have become the center of American life and politics. Yet U.S. schools remain largely segregated and are becoming more so. School segregation intensified through the 1990s in U.S., during which time three major Supreme Court decisions authorized a return to segregated neighborhood schools. Segregated schools are still highly unequal. Segregated schools particularly those in big cities have stunningly high levels of high school dropouts and very poor records of preparing students for higher education. White children attend more segregated schools than any other racial group. Segregation follows Black and Hispanic families as they move from the city to suburbia. Hispanic children have been more segregated than Blacks for a number of years, not only by race and ethnicity but also by poverty and language.

## 2 SEGREGATION AND CHARTER SCHOOLS

One might well think that charter schools would have a better chance to be integrated than public schools due to the enhanced autonomy they enjoy when compared to the public schools. However, enhanced autonomy and incorporation of free market economy rules into education does not necessarily mean that schools are becoming more diverse. In fact, when the concept of charter schools was first introduced, some concern was expressed that charter schools would become enclaves of white students escaping the racial diversity of public schools (Frankenberg and Lee, 2003).

### 2.1 Are Charter Schools Skimming off Best Students?

Charter school critics argue that charter schools could skim off the best students from traditional public schools, reducing the peer interaction of high- and low-ability students within the traditional schools. These critics point to a long and well-developed literature that highlights the benefits of the interaction of students with diverse backgrounds and ability levels (Frankenberg and Lee, 2003; Zimmer, 2003; Zimmer and Toma, 2000; Summers and Wolfe, 1977; and Henderson, et al., 1978). In general, these critics fear that charter schools might not only have negative consequences for charter students that attend these schools but might also have social and academic effects for students who remain in traditional public schools if charter schools “skim off” high-achieving students (Lee and Croninger, 1994; Wells, 1993). Supporters, in contrast, argue that charter schools will improve racial integration by letting families choose schools outside of neighborhoods where housing is racially segregated—and by promoting fuller and richer integration in classrooms within schools where all students have chosen to attend (Kolderie, 2004; Finn et al., 2000; Nathan, 1998, 1996). While some have tried to address this debate through an analysis of school-level data, the best way to know how charter schools are affecting the distribution of students is through the tracking of individual students. By doing so, we will know more definitively whether students transferring into charter schools are moving from heterogeneous schools, both by race/ethnicity and ability, to homogenous schools, or vice versa. When two large states with high number of students going into charter schools are compared, first of all, it is found that charter schools in both states had similar effects on the distribution, both by race/ethnicity and ability despite some differences in charter policies across the California and Texas states. In both states, significant differences are apparent between students who choose to move to charter schools and those who do not, and those differences vary by their race/ethnicity. Black students in particular tend to move to charter schools that have a higher percentage of black students and are more racially concentrated than the public schools they leave, which is similar to the findings of Bifulco and Ladd (Bifulco and Ladd, 2005). Charter schools, particularly in Texas, seem to be taking students who are on average lower performing, with this performance difference largest for black students, and also appear to be taking students from lower-performing schools. In both states little evidence can be found that charter schools are systematically cream-skimming high-performing students, and indeed in Texas the opposite appears true. In general, these findings should relieve some of the fears of the critics who argued that charter schools could

become white enclaves and skim the best students. In fact, it appears that charter schools are targeting some of the more challenging students. However, on the downside, charter schools, through black student choices, may create greater segregation and expose these students to less diversity.

## 2.2 Does Being a School of Choice Lessen Segregation?

The question of whether an enhanced array of choices reduces or increases racial segregation has been debated in other contexts, most notably in the debate over school vouchers. Since the concept of school vouchers was introduced by economist Milton Friedman in 1955, advocates have argued that vouchers and other forms of school choice can enhance the access to high quality schools for disadvantaged families (Lacireno-Paquet et al., 2002). They argue that poor families, which are disproportionately black or Hispanic, do not have real choices in public education system because of their inability to move their residential location. Under a traditional system, in which school attendance is tied to residential location, school choice advocates argue that schools have become a reflection of highly segregated neighborhoods. Under a system of choice, the advocates argue, parents can now choose among a wide array of schools, therefore increasing the accessibility to schools with different racial (and to the extent race/ethnicity is correlated with ability) and ability mixes. Weiher and Tedin argue that whether schools become more or less segregated under a school choice program is a highly dependent upon two factors (Weiher and Tedin, 2002). First, parents with greater economic means may be more likely to take advantage of choice and, because variance in income is related to race/ethnicity, school choice may lead to greater racial segregation (Witte and Thorn, 1996; Schneider et al, 1998; Witte, 2000; Lacireno-Paquet et al., 2002). In an analysis of 1,006 charter school households in Texas, Weiher and Tedin found that race/ethnicity is a good predictor of the choices that whites, blacks, and Hispanics make in transferring to schools with higher levels of students of the same race/ethnicity (Weiher and Tedin, 2002). These results reinforce the concerns of charter critics who fear that charter schools will create greater racial segregation. In addition, a number of researchers have raised concerns about whether low-income families will have sufficient information to effectively make the “consumer” choice of where to send their children (Henig, 1996, Kleitz et al., 2000.) Second, if it is easier for parents to choose schools based on race/ethnicity and if parents have a preference for racially homogenous schools, then charter schools could create greater racial stratification (Witte and Thorn, 1996; Levin, 1998; Witte, 2000). In fact, one could argue that charter schools generally locate where they can attract students, which would primarily be in low-performing school districts or in areas within a district in which traditional public schools have performed poorly. These low-performing districts and neighborhoods are likely to have high proportions of minority students, making it difficult for charter schools in the aggregate or individually to be representative of statewide or district-wide populations.

## 2.3 Segregation in Charter Schools and Legislation

It also important to note that the effect charter schools have on race/ethnicity and ability may also be a function of the type of charter laws in place (Gill et al., 2001). For instance, if a state only allows schools to convert from traditional public schools to charter schools, or conversion schools, they may not have much effect on the total distribution of students because there may not be much turnover in the school. In contrast, if a state only allows charter schools to start from scratch, or start-up schools, then charter schools may have dramatic affects on the distribution of students within schools. In addition, some states may have more rural, rather than urban charter schools, which may create different opportunities. On the other hand, charters schools’ impact on racial segregation is often ignored in the legislation, despite many parents’ preferences for integrated schools and choice policies as revealed by the research data. Many state charter laws are not explicitly supportive of racial diversity in charter schools (Wells, et al., 2000). Although the charter school reform is primarily governed by policies set by each state, there are federal regulations and programs that may also affect the composition of the student body of charter schools. In 1994, a new federal grant program was implemented to support charter schools as part of the Improving America’s Schools Act. Charter schools can receive funding through federal programs such as the Eisenhower Professional Development Program, the Safe and Drug Free Schools Act, and the Perkins Occupational Education Act. However, federal funding can only be used if charter schools comply with federal civil right statutes such as Title VI. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) provides funding to schools with high levels of student poverty, formerly known as Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, but accepting NCLB money means that these schools must comply with federal civil right provisions. Likewise, although states individually pass their own charter legislation, if charter schools receive money from the Federal Public Charter Schools Program, they are required to use a lottery to admit students in the event that there are more applicants than available slots for the school. In practice, charter schools must meet the terms of their charter or they will be terminated. In most states there are few resources for oversight of schools and revocations of charters for educational failure as opposed to financial problems are rare. On the other hand, although there was an early concern

that charter schools would serve as a haven for white students to escape diverse public schools, many minority parents have also expressed strong interest in alternatives to their local public schools and some minority led civil rights organizations actually run charter schools. On the contrary, white parents have also shown strong interest in educational alternatives to segregated, concentrated poverty, and low-achieving public schools as evidenced by the strong demand for magnet schools. Overall, however, despite claims by charter advocates, there is no systematic research or data indicating that charter schools perform better than public schools.

### **3 CHARTER SCHOOLS VS. MAGNET SCHOOLS**

There have been a handful of highly selective schools in American public school systems, which have produced remarkable students for generations. Overall, however, choice of schools and specialized curriculum for schools except for vocational schools were very rare in the U.S. until desegregation policies produced the magnet school movement in the mid-1970s. Magnet schools, like charter schools, grew rapidly in response to federal grant programs. Like magnet schools a generation earlier, charter schools offer distinctive curricula and the opportunity to create and manage schools with freedom from many normal constraints in large districts. Unlike magnet schools charter schools have the added advantages of even greater freedom to innovate and for the most part are not tied to geographically fixed attendance boundaries in residentially segregated communities as are neighborhood public schools but can draw from wherever interested can be found; in some places where school districts grant charters, they are limited to the school district boundaries. The magnet school programs funded by the Emergency School Aid Act, however, had desegregation policies while the federal charter school law did not. From that respect, the charter school law was a movement backward to the unregulated choice policies common 40 years ago across the South and in many big cities. However, because charter schools are created under state laws and are or could easily be made independent of district boundaries and because state policy and state organizations determine where and how charter schools can be formed, it seems appropriate to compare them with other schools in the state rather than just with the schools in the particular community where they are physically located.

### **4 CHARTER SCHOOLS VS. PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

Charter schools embody wildly different educational approaches and charter and public schools obtain their enrollment in very different ways, thus evaluation and comparison between the two require very careful analysis. At a minimum, it is certainly safe to say that there is little convincing evidence for the superiority of charter schools over public schools.

#### **4.1 Are Charter Schools and Public Schools comparable?**

One of the problems in evaluating the charter schools is that their effect is normally examined by comparing them to regular public schools, but their student body and parent groups are not the same, which makes the comparison of academic achievement inaccurate. Even if one were able to control for income, parent education, and other relevant, easily measurable family resources, several kinds of selection bias make such comparisons virtually impossible. First, the families who are informed enough to choose a school and make the effort to get their child to a more distant school every day are not the same as the families who do not. Second, charter schools commonly lack the expertise and programs to serve students who are English Language Learners or severely disadvantaged children such as those in Special Education. That makes a big difference in school's success ratings because, as these students tend to score lower on standardized tests, the school's average scores will tend to rise in case that students from lower achieving groups do not enroll in the respective school. Third many charter schools seek applications from students they believe would succeed, or who would respond to their approach, while not recruiting others. Some schools have screening procedures that public schools are prohibited from using because the public schools are required to serve all students. These biases mean that even if there were higher test scores or lower dropout rates for charter schools it might well be because of selective recruitment, students from families with more resources and/or fewer students with special needs, than because of the school's superior educational approach.

#### **4.2 Segregation in Charter Schools vs. Segregation in Public Schools**

Charter school critics argue that charter success might be illusory if charter schools are simply recruiting the best students from traditional public schools and reducing the race/ethnic diversity of students in schools (Fiske and Ladd, 2000; Cobb and Glass, 1999; Wells et al., 1998). One way to address these concerns is to analyze the effect of the redistribution of students to charter schools on the dynamics of peers within traditional public schools. In both California and Texas black students are more likely to move to charter schools and tend to move to charter schools with a higher percentage of black students, and those schools are more racially concentrated than the public schools they leave. Students who move to charter schools are on average lower performing than other students at the public schools they leave and that this performance

gap is largest for black students. Charter schools disproportionately attract students and families who are poor and who are from African American backgrounds. Therefore, compared with traditional public schools, charter schools enroll more African American students, fewer whites, and slightly higher proportions of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunches. Charter schools also attract high proportions of low performing students (Evaluation of the Public Charter Schools Program: Final Report, 2004). Seventy percent of all black charter school students attend intensely segregated minority schools compared with 34% of black public school students. In almost every state studied, the average black charter school student attends school with a higher percentage of black students and lower percentage of white students (Frankenberg and Chungmei, 2003). A recent national study suggests that, overall, the racial composition of students enrolled in charter schools was similar to that of their local public school districts. Nearly 70% of charter schools had a student racial and ethnic composition similar to the surrounding school district, about 17% of charter schools served a higher proportion of students of color, and about 14% enrolled a lower percentage of students of color (RPP International, 2000). However, there may be charter schools that have significantly different racial and ethnic populations than traditional public schools in the same area. The most elaborate state study of racial and ethnic enrollments was conducted in Arizona, which is an atypical charter school state in several ways. The Arizona study found that a substantial number of charter schools differed from their neighboring public schools, often because they had a significantly higher proportion of white students (Cobb and Glass, 1999).

## 5 RESULTS

The level of racial segregation in charter schools is not a surprise when viewed in the light of segregation in many aspects of American life. Those who think that charter schools are inherently likely to be free of racial inequality need to reflect on the racial consequences of other markets operating in areas of housing, employment, health care, etc., where the markets have worked more to perpetuate and spread racial inequality than to cure it. As a result, segregation in charter schools show similarity to the segregation in the society. Segregation in charter schools is worse for African American than for Latino students, but is very high for both. In some states, however, white student isolation in charter schools is as high as that of African Americans. Following statements point to the current trends and their possible outcomes in the future with respect to segregation in charter schools;

- Despite concerns that charter schools would serve as a haven for white students to escape diverse public schools, the outcome has proven the opposite. As a result, because of the disproportionately high enrollment of minority students in charter schools, white charter school students go to school, on average, with more nonwhite students than whites in non-charter public schools. However, there are pockets of white segregation where charter school students are as isolated as black charter school students (Frankenberg and Chungmei, 2003).
- The pattern for Latino segregation is mixed; on the whole, Latino charter school students are less segregated than their black counterparts (Frankenberg and Chungmei, 2003).
- The high level of suburban segregation reported for Black and Hispanic students in general suggests that a major set of challenges to the future of the minority middle class and to the integration of suburbia.

It is also important to note that however, the segregation issues reported here may not be due to either to the intent or the desires and values of charter school leaders. They possibly reflect flaws in state policies in enforcement or in methods of approving schools for charters.

## 6 RECOMMENDATIONS

Following recommendations were expressed as a solution to the segregation problem in U.S. schools in general (Orfield, 2001);

1. expanding the federal magnet school program
2. imposing desegregation requirements for federally supported charter schools
3. exploring school and housing policies to avoid massive re-segregation of large sections of the inner suburbs
4. promoting and funding teacher exchanges

And specifically for charter schools, based on lessons learned from other school choice programs, such as magnet schools, the following conditions may help to address this racial isolation by creating a system that allows students to choose to attend charter schools on an equitable (Frankenberg and Chungmei, 2003);

1. Providing full information to all families,
2. The provision of free transportation for all students, even across school district boundaries,
3. Providing for and welcoming all groups, including students from all racial/ethnic groups, English

- Language Learners, and special education students,  
4. No admissions screening of children for charter schools, academic or otherwise.

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