



An Authoritative Look at Charter Schools and Segregation

HAVE CHARTER SCHOOLS INTENSIFIED the already high levels of segregation afflicting American public schools? Such was the claim advanced by the Associated Press in a December 2017 analysis showing that as of the 2014–15 school year, 17 percent of the nation’s 6,747 charter schools had enrollments consisting of 99 percent or more students of color, while just 4 percent of traditional public schools had such racially skewed student bodies. Their headline: “US charter schools put growing numbers in racial isolation.”

It is a claim that leading candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination are advancing on the campaign trail. U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont cited the AP’s numbers in calling for a halt to public funding for charter-school expansion and a ban on for-profit charter schools. His education plan states that “the proliferation of charter schools has disproportionately affected communities of color” and notes that charters have been criticized by teachers unions and the NAACP for “intensifying racial segregation.”

The allegation is not new. As far back as 2010, the Civil Rights Project at the University of California Los Angeles asserted that “charter schools are more racially isolated than traditional public schools in virtually every state and large metropolitan area in the nation.” In an analysis for *Education Next* (see “A Closer Look at Charter Schools and Segregation,” *check the facts*, Summer 2010), researcher Gary Ritter and colleagues demonstrated the logical flaw inherent in using that kind of blanket comparison to assess whether charters increase segregation. Many charters locate in communities of color, where the education challenges and the demand for schooling alternatives are greatest. When one compares charter schools to their nearest district counterparts, Ritter and his team showed, differences in enrollment patterns virtually vanish.

Still, the question lingered: How exactly *has* charter schooling affected the amount of segregation in American schools? Has this ambitious school-choice experiment led families to sort into schools that are more homogeneous than those they would have been assigned to? Or, by weakening the ties between neighborhood of residence and school assignment, have charters instead fostered greater integration?

In this issue, Tomas Monarrez and Matthew Chingos of the Urban Institute and Brian Kisida of the University of Missouri provide the most compelling answer to this question to date (see “Do Charter Schools Increase Segregation?”). The authors use national data spanning nearly the entire history of the charter movement and a measure of segregation that takes into account

the widely varying demographic composition of school districts and metropolitan areas across the country. To assess charters’ causal impact on school segregation, they look for any link between charter-school enrollment and racial balance across different grade levels in the same school district. If the share of charter enrollment at one grade level grew more than in other grades and there was a corresponding increase in segregation at that grade level relative to other grades, the researchers would conclude that charter schools had intensified segregation.

Their answer: charter growth has led black and Hispanic students to attend schools that are slightly more segregated, but its impact on overall segregation levels has been small.

What’s more, this modest impact of charter expansion on within-district segregation has been offset by a *reduction* in segregation between school districts within the same metropolitan area. Charter schools in some settings may now be playing the role originally envisioned for magnet schools, which aimed to improve racial balance by attracting suburban families to city schools. As a consequence, schools in metropolitan areas where charters have expanded the most are no more segregated than they would be without a charter presence.

These results come with important caveats. First, a state-by-state analysis shows that there are some places, such as Louisiana, New Mexico, and Oklahoma, where charters’ impact on within-district segregation has been more pronounced. Policymakers in those states would do well to bear this in mind as they consider further expansion.

Second, their study shows that any hopes that charter schools would enhance integration have not yet been fulfilled. Yes, there are a growing number of diverse-by-design charter schools that use strategic site location and carefully designed enrollment lotteries to recruit racially and economically diverse student bodies. Yet it would take far more work along these lines—not to mention a dramatic expansion of the charter sector—for this model to make a dent in the number of racially isolated schools.

The main takeaway from the study is clear, however: politicians concerned about school segregation have no good reason to single out charter schools for special criticism.

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MISSION STATEMENT In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.