

Are charter schools and vouchers a civil rights cause?

No. Charter schools, vouchers, and other choice options increase the segregation of students. This results in separate, unequal schools that isolate black and Hispanic students, English language learners, and students with disabilities in schools with fewer resources and less experienced teachers. Segregation robs all children of the benefits of learning with others who have different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.

This is why

Charter schools are highly segregated by race, ethnicity, income, and ability level. Even under a lottery system, charter schools explicitly or indirectly increase the probability of segregation. Vouchers began in the South after desegregation. States and local governments gave funds to parents to send their children to private schools, commonly known as segregation academies.

While segregation among all schools has increased, charter schools worsen the trend. Black students in charter schools are far more likely than their public school peers to be educated in intensely segregated settings. Students with learning disabilities or whose first language isn't English are not allowed to enroll in some charters. Other charters have curriculum or expectations that exclude them.

Many common charter school practices lead to more segregation. In many cases, charters use admission and placement tests to discourage struggling students from enrolling, use grade repetition to weed out weaker students, and use “no excuse” discipline practices to drive away more difficult students by repeatedly suspending and expelling them.

Charter schools and vouchers create more “white flight” and “bright flight” schools. Often, white parents use these options to flee schools with higher percentages of non-white students. And choice options tend to lure the more motivated and compliant students away from public schools.

Segregation is not inevitable. Several public school districts—Wake County in the Raleigh, North Carolina area; Lansing, Michigan; and Cambridge, Massachusetts—have been successful in their efforts to integrate students. Charters and choice will undo such efforts.

Integration is beneficial to all students' academic and social-emotional development. During the years of strong integration policies, the achievement gap dramatically narrowed on measures taken by the National Assessment of Education Progress. When students are exposed to other students who are different from them, they learn valuable social-emotional skills that last a lifetime.

Look at the facts

A **comprehensive analysis** found 70% of black charter school students attend intensely segregated minority charter schools – double the share of intensely segregated black students in public schools. Half of Latino charter school students attended racially isolated minority schools.¹

A **national study** of charter school operated by education management organizations (EMOs) found only one-fourth of these schools had a racial composition similar to public schools. Over 70% had extreme concentrations of either high-income or low-income students. These schools consistently enrolled a lower proportion of special education children than public schools. And well over half the charters did not have a population of English language learners (ELLs) similar to public schools.²

Research in **North Carolina** found that one in five charters has enrollment that is more than 90% white. Only about one in 20 public schools has such a large white population.³ A study of **Delaware** charters found more than three-quarters of them are racially identifiable as either mostly white or mostly minority schools.⁴

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A study of **Pennsylvania** charters found black students transferring to a charter school ended up in a school that was even more racially isolated than their public school.⁵

Research on **Boston** charters found more than half of the schools enroll fewer than 15% of students with special needs compared to the district average of 21%. In nearly 1/3 of charter schools in **Massachusetts**, special education enrollment is 10% or lower than it is in the state’s urban districts.⁶

In **Arizona**, a study found white students exiting public schools where the average non-white population was 30% enrolled in charters where the average non-white student population was 18%.⁷

A **national study** found black students and disabled students are suspended from charter schools at much higher rates than white and nondisabled students.⁸

Many studies have found that **voucher programs** lead to more segregation because those parents who tend to use them are more educated and have a higher socioeconomic status than those who do not.⁹

Studies have shown magnet schools are more effective than charters and choice for improving the performance of low-income students and increasing integration.¹⁰

There is **overwhelming evidence** white students attending racially integrated schools do not suffer academically and tend to develop critically important non-academic skills that help them do better in life.¹¹

WHAT PRIVATIZERS BELIEVE	WHAT WE BELIEVE
Charter schools and vouchers are a civil rights cause.	Increased segregation is a civil wrong.
Children and families need options to leave failing schools.	Children and families need a public education system that works for all children.
Segregation is inevitable.	Segregation is deliberate and must be opposed.

Bottom Line

The Civil Rights Movement taught us that separate schools for different children will never be equal. Concentrating low-income and minority students, students whose first language isn’t English, and students with disabilities in segregated schools is not a solution for improving the well-being of all children. We need a public system that is about advancing the well-being of all, not just helping some families and children get ahead while leaving the rest behind.

¹ "Choice without equity: Charter school segregation and the need for civil rights standards." Frankenberg, E., Siegel-Hawley, G., & Wang, J. (2010). Los Angeles, CA: The Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles at UCLA. Retrieved December 7, 2014.

² "Schools without diversity: Education management organizations, charter schools and the demographic stratification of the American school system". Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit. Miron, G., Urschel, J. L., Mathis, W, J., & Tornquist, E. (2010).

³ "The Growing Segmentation of the Charter School Sector in North Carolina," Helen F. Ladd Charles T. Clotfelter, and John B. Holbein, National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research, 2015.

⁴ "ACLU: Delaware charters causing resegregation," Matthew Albright, USA Today, December 3, 2014.

⁵ "School Choice, Racial Segregation, and Poverty Concentration: Evidence From Pennsylvania Charter School Transfers," Stephen Kotok, Erica Frankenberg, Kai A. Schafft, Bryan A. Mann, and Edward J. Fuller, Sage Publications, 2015.

⁶ "The Effects of Market-based School Reforms on Students with Disabilities Curt," Dudley-Marling and Diana Baker, Boston College, 2012.

⁷ "Academic and Racial Segregation in Charter Schools Do Parents Sort Students Into Specialized Charter Schools?" David R. Garcia, Education and Urban Society, 2008.

⁸ "Charter Schools, Civil Rights and School Discipline: A Comprehensive Review," The Center for Civil Rights Remedies at the Civil Right Project, March 2016.

⁹ "Educational Vouchers: Effectiveness, Choice and Costs," Henry M. Levin, Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, Vol. 17, No. 3, 373-392 (1998).

¹⁰ "Turnaround Schools That Work: Moving Beyond Separate but Equal," Richard D. Kahlenberg, The Century Foundation.

¹¹ "3 Ways White Kids Benefit Most From Racially Diverse Schools," Kristina Rizga, Mother Jones, 2016.

