

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 Latinx 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 when 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 discouraged from enrolling in some charters. Other charters have curriculum or expectations that exclude them.

Many common charter school and voucher school practices lead to more segregation. In many cases, charters use admissions application requirements to discourage struggling students from enrolling, use grade retention to weed out weaker students, and use “no excuse” discipline practices to drive away more difficult students by repeatedly suspending and expelling them. Some ask for parental donations or do not provide busing or free lunches. Vouchers use admission criteria, testing, religious requirements, and remaining tuition payments to shape their student bodies.

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.

Voucher programs give public funding to private schools that can ignore civil rights laws. In a privatized system, children have no protection from discrimination against their religious beliefs or sexual orientation, or identity.

Look at the facts

A national study of charter schools **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.

A comprehensive analysis found 70% of black charter school students attend **intensely segregated**





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minority charter schools—double the share of intensely segregated black students in public schools. Half of Latinx charter school students attended racially isolated minority schools.

Research in **North Carolina** found that one in five charters has an **enrollment that is more than 90% white**. Only about one in 20 public schools has such a large white population.

A study of **Delaware** charters found more than three-quarters of them are **racially identifiable** as either mostly white or mostly minority schools.

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.

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.

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%.

An analysis of charter schools in **Nevada** found that the schools are **whiter and more affluent** than their nearby district schools. Black students and students with disabilities attending **Nevada** charters are more likely to be involved in **incidents resulting in suspensions** than their peers.

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

An analysis by the Huffington Post in 2017 found that at least 14% of religious schools that receive public money through any kind of voucher program have explicit policies that **discriminate against LGBTQ students** and/or their families.

Voucher programs can actually **endanger students’ civil rights** because federal civil rights protections don’t always apply in private spaces.

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.

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

| 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 would 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.