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# Halifax Co. charter switch shows NC's retreat from integration

BY MARK DOROSIN AND ELIZABETH HADDIX  
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In February, the state's Charter School Advisory Board approved the conversion of Hobgood Academy, a private school in Halifax County, to a publicly funded charter school. The decision, which will result in the school receiving up to \$2 million in taxpayer money that would otherwise go to the already underfunded public schools in the county, sadly ignores the racialized history of the school and the continuing legacy of segregated education in Halifax. It also contradicts school choice advocates' purported reliance on a market-based theory of education.

In the late 1960's, as desegregation was finally coming to North Carolina, a number of private schools — "segregation academies" — were opened to allow white parents to pull out of integrating public schools. Hobgood Academy, founded in 1969, is a textbook example of these attempts to preserve segregated education, and has maintained that profile throughout its existence, with a student body that is 88 percent white. Halifax County Schools, the public school district in which Hobgood is located, is just 4 percent white.

The decision to approve a charter for Hobgood demonstrates the state's steadfast refusal to consider the issue of racial segregation in charter schools. The willingness to provide millions of taxpayer dollars to support Hobgood's survival ignores not only its legacy as a white educational enclave in Halifax, but also the reality that the entire county continues to struggle with the challenges of racially divided schools. Three public school districts serve the county's approximately 6000 students. In addition to the county district, Weldon City Schools is 3 percent white, while Roanoke Rapids Schools is 60 percent white. Additionally, these districts are already handicapped by the significant diversion of funds to existing charter schools.

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If Hobgood had been a public school, it would have been legally required to take affirmative remedial measures to address its segregative practices and create a racially diverse student body. It never did so. In its charter application, Hobgood promises to recruit “students who will reflect the racial and ethnic composition of the town of Hobgood and Halifax County Schools.” But how realistic is it to believe that any significant number of African American or Latinx parents would choose to send their children to a school that was designed to, and for decades has, excluded them?

Hobgood acknowledges that its motivation for converting to a charter is financial. The school enrollment has been declining for years, although it has been propped up by relying on the state’s private school voucher program (18 percent of the school’s students are voucher recipients).

Given Hobgood’s declining enrollment, the decision to award the school a charter belies the market-based theory relied upon by many school choice advocates. The premise is that schools that effectively serve the educational needs of students will be chosen by parents, and those schools will thrive; conversely, parents won’t choose schools that fail to meet their needs, and as a result those schools will be forced out of the “marketplace.” Which seems to be exactly what was happening with Hobgood Academy. But rather than allow the so-called “competitive education marketplace” to function as school choice proponents insist it should, the state is now providing Hobgood a taxpayer-subsidized bailout.

The decision to grant a charter to Hobgood Academy — despite its legacy of segregation, its failure to attract students, the racially stratified education system in Halifax County, and the already substantial local impacts of existing charters — demonstrates that the charter approval process is broken. As a result, even more resources are being drained from the traditional public schools, which continue to educate the majority of our children.

*Mark Dorosin and Elizabeth Haddix are co-directors of the Julius L. Chambers Center for Civil Rights.*

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