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RESEARCH-BASED OPTIONS FOR EDUCATION POLICYMAKING

Do Choice Policies Segregate Schools?

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From the outset, school choice advocates have contended that choice policies would advance integration.¹ Choice can give children the opportunity to attend a school outside of highly segregated neighborhoods, with the hope that market forces will drive integration.² Buttressing the integration claims, these advocates assert that charter schools, the most common and most extensively studied form of school choice,³ enroll a greater proportion of students from low-income families and students of color than do traditional public schools.⁴

Yet the weight of the research evidence does not support such claims,⁵ and a key flaw in the arguments concerns the level of aggregation. By aggregating charter school enrollments from highly segregated white schools and from highly segregated Black or Hispanic schools, an advocate can show overall charter enrollments that contain a nice mix of students. Aggregating enrollments across schools washes out school-level segregation.⁶

While some choice school enrollments are genuinely integrated, the overall body of the research literature documents an unsettling degree of segregation—particularly in charter schools—by race and ethnicity, as well as by poverty, special needs and English-learner status.⁷

- **Race** – “At the national level, seventy percent of black charter school students attend intensely segregated minority charter schools (which enroll 90-100% of students from

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under-represented minority backgrounds), or twice as many as the share of intensely segregated black students in traditional public schools. Some charter schools enrolled populations where 99% of the students were from under-represented minority backgrounds.”⁸ In a detailed case study of Indianapolis charter schools, Stein found “higher degrees of racial isolation and less diversity.”⁹

- **Poverty** – The effects of choice plans on segregation of children eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch shows a similar pattern. Gary Miron and his colleagues found that economically challenged students attending charter schools operated by charter corporations (educational management organizations or EMOs) are stratified between schools. Seventy percent of EMO-managed charter schools studied were found to be very segregated by high income or low income.¹⁰ Examining Pennsylvania transfers, Kotok et al. confirmed the same segregative pattern.¹¹
- **Dual Language Learners (DLL)** – DLL students, also sometimes termed “English language learners,” were also under-represented in charter schools. One-third of the nation’s EMO-run charter schools had a population similar to the host district, but this distribution was highly skewed, with well over half the schools being segregated. These students were also generally under-enrolled; DLLs represented 11% of public school students while EMO-operated charter schools only enrolled 4.4%.¹²
- **Students with Disabilities** – Charter schools claim they serve similar percentages of students with disabilities.¹³ Yet, the GAO reports that charter schools enroll a lesser proportion of such children than do traditional public schools (8% versus 11%).¹⁴ Miron’s examination of EMO-operated charters reports the same trend, but with a larger difference (7% vs 13%).¹⁵ Furthermore, charter schools tend to serve less severe and less costly disabilities.¹⁶ These patterns arise for various reasons. Some charter schools have an admirable mission to serve specific populations of disabled children and thus are segregative by definition.¹⁷ A study of Denver’s charter elementary schools suggests that such stratification trends may be at least partly due to the disproportionate movement of non-special-needs students into charter schools, rather than students with disabilities moving out.¹⁸ Other patterns and practices point to access issues at both pre-enrollment and post-enrollment stages.¹⁹ Market forces themselves can drive segregated environments.²⁰

Some research studies in this area compare the enrollment in the choice school to the enrollment of the district within which the school is located;²¹ other, more fine-grained analyses examine patterns of movement between choice schools and public schools by tracking individual students as they move from traditional public schools to charter schools. With some variation in detail, they report a general pattern of increased racial isolation and growth of the achievement gap.²²

Parents with greater formal education and who are more affluent are more adept at maneuvering within the choice system. Because wealth and education are so strongly correlated with race, ethnicity and English-learner status, all of these forms of stratification are facilitated and exacerbated by choice. These more advantaged families are able to tap into social networks, to provide transportation, and to provide the ancillary financial and parental supports sometimes required by choice schools.

The Resegregation of America's Schools

Even without school choice, America's schools would be shockingly segregated, in large part because of housing policies and school district boundaries.²³ School choice policies that do not have sufficient protections against unconstrained, segregative choices do exacerbate the problem.²⁴ In an eight-state study, Zimmer *et. al.* found that Black students tended to self-segregate.²⁵ Garcia found a similar tendency to self-segregate by White, Black and Native American students.²⁶ Income distribution also plays a role, as residential patterns in communities, districts, towns, and suburbs result in enclaves separated by race and by wealth. Proximity and convenience, formal and informal social mechanisms, and the scarcity of realistic and convenient alternatives also have an effect.²⁷ Moreover, while many choice schools are scrupulously fair about their processes, not all behave in this fashion. Welner describes a dozen approaches that charter schools, for instance, sometimes use in order to shape their student enrollment.²⁸ These practices may take place pre-enrollment, during enrollment or—in the case of push-out policies—after enrollment.²⁹ The result of these forces is highly segregated schools, no matter the predominant racial or ethnic group.³⁰

Conclusions and Recommendations

To be sure, there are outstanding choice schools and substandard choice schools. Yet choice was marketed to policymakers as a breakthrough strategy for innovation and for high achievement. As a group, they have neither proven to be innovative hotbeds³¹ nor delivered on high achievement.³² After an extensive survey of the literature, Epple, Romano and Zimmer recently concluded, "Taken as a whole, the evidence suggests that, accounting for differences in population served, charter schools are not, on average, producing student achievement gains any better than TPSs [traditional public schools]."³³ CREDO's massive work in this area finds some statistically significant differences but not meaningful effect sizes.³⁴ Most troubling is the side effect of contributing to and advancing the resegregation of schools and society. This raises the specter of separate and unequal educational opportunities and is not compatible with the goals of a democratic society.

Recommendations

1. The expansion or renewal of charter schools and other forms of school choice should be contingent on law and policies that result in equal opportunities for all.³⁵
2. Current choice laws and policies must be realigned to ensure diversity via choice policies that include constraints on stratification caused by unlimited choice. Instead, choice policies should be the result of deliberate policy choices grounded in our larger societal goals for our schools, including the valuing of diverse communities and integration of socioeconomic levels, race, and language.³⁶
3. For all choice plans, viable choices must be available, practical and convenient for a community's least advantaged families.
4. Municipalities must assure socioeconomic and racial diversity in their housing plans and codes.³⁷

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