

# Segregation in charter schools, research shows

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When the charter school system was first proposed and developed two decades ago, it was heralded, in part, as a promising means of achieving classroom diversity. However, the incidence of racial isolation in those schools is strikingly higher than in traditional public schools, according to a Penn State researcher.

“I’m not surprised that segregation exists in charter schools, but I’m a bit surprised at how extensive it is,” said Erica Frankenberg, assistant professor of educational leadership in the College of Education.

“One of the claims of charter schools was that they would pull students across boundary lines, thereby increasing integration,” Frankenberg said. “Among non-charter public schools, district boundary lines are a major contributor to segregation.”

As of 2009, 40 states as well as the District of Columbia have passed legislation authorizing charter schools. Frankenberg’s findings show that, in 15 states, nearly 70 percent of the [black students](#) in charter schools are attending hypersegregated schools, which are defined as having at least a 90 percent minority population. In four of those states, 90 percent of black students attend hypersegregated schools.

These percentages have remained quite steady since 2000. They far surpass the percentages of black students who are enrolled in similarly segregated educational environments in traditional public schools: 36 percent of black students in non-charter public schools were in 90

percent to 100 percent minority schools.

Charter schools have been booming. Since 2001, overall enrollment in these schools has nearly tripled to more than 1 million students.

Correspondingly, there has been a nearly threefold growth in the number of black students who are attending hypersegregated charter schools.

After two decades, the promise of integrated charter schools has not held up. It might be that, in some instances, school choice is actually a deterrent to integration, Frankenberg said.

Frankenberg recently co-authored an article titled “*Choice Without Equity: Charter School Segregation*,” which appears in the journal *Educational Policy Analysis Archives*. Her co-authors, Genevieve Siegel-Hawley and Jia Wang, are Frankenberg’s former colleagues at The Civil Rights Project at UCLA. The researchers show that, in the charter schools, concentrations of low-income students overlap with concentrations of minority students. “In other words, instead of policy offering parents a real choice out of high-poverty, racially isolated schools, charter schools simply intensify patterns of isolation prevalent among traditional public schools,” write the authors.

“What’s also somewhat unusual is how there are pockets of white segregation in charter schools together with the extensive segregation of minority students, particularly blacks,” she said.

“We still have a segregated, unequal society,” Frankenberg said, “and since choice systems presume full information and knowledge about options as well as equal resources to be able to attend a school -- without some policies that specifically try to address the inequality that exists like some magnet schools have done -- it’s unlikely that, at the very least, charter schools won’t be segregated.”

Magnet schools, as opposed to charter schools, are part of the regular public school system, explained Frankenberg. “Traditionally, magnet schools were begun as a way to allow choice but comply with school desegregation orders,” she said. “Often, districts designed magnet schools with a theme to attract students from all backgrounds, and also had different types of civil rights policies and goals.”

The growth of charter schools and their high racial isolation should be a concern to policy makers and administrators, who can play a leading part in desegregation. While funding from federal, state, and local education agencies has increased to support the boom, Frankenberg believes that any hope for charter school integration would require changes in the education policies at every governmental level. “The way charter school policy, and even funding, is structured in each state is a likely contributor to these patterns of segregation,” she said.

The federal government recognizes the importance of reducing racial isolation and, as Frankenberg points out, the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama already is promoting choice and innovation. “Congress could address this issue by, perhaps, giving a funding preference to charter schools that will actively recruit and provide transportation for [students](#) from multiple districts -- a step that might reduce racial isolation,” she said.

But, as Frankenberg and her co-authors note, “Little state or federal direct action has been taken to change or correct racial isolation in charter schools despite numerous past reports by The Civil Rights Project and others highlighting this persistent and growing problem.”

Many states, as a part of their charter school legislation, have provisions in place to encourage diverse enrollments. “More states could adopt such provisions, and all states should hold charter schools accountable for complying with these provisions,” Frankenberg said.

Additionally, she said, "The federal government's Office of Civil Rights could issue guidance about [civil rights](#) and charter schools -- prior guidance was archived during the Bush administration. They could also provide technical assistance to help [charter schools](#) serve more diverse enrollment."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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