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Iris Rotberg: Charter Schools Exacerbate Segregation

Posted by [dianeravitch](#)

There has long been evidence that charter schools are more segregated than the districts in which they operate, and a few scholars—like Gary Orfield at UCLA have systematically documented the segregating consequences of charters. Public officials tend to shrug off such concerns as irrelevant to the quest for higher test scores or just an unfortunate fact of life over which they are powerless.

But now there is a [scholarly research review](#) by Iris Rotberg of George Washington University. It appears in the Phi Delta Kappan with ample documentation.

Rotberg writes that the Obama administration's Race to the Top has promoted charter schools, implicitly encouraging segregation. Despite Arne Duncan's belief that the research is not in on the matter, Rotberg shows that the research is decisive and unambiguous.

She writes:

“The fact is we don't have to guess about the consequences of one of the Obama Administration's most visible policies: the national expansion of charter schools. We need only turn to a large body of relevant research showing that charter schools, on average, don't have an academic advantage over traditional public schools (Gill et al., 2007; Gleason, Clark, Tuttle, & Dwoyer, 2010), but they do have a significant risk of leading to increased segregation (Booker, Zimmer, & Buddin, 2005; Gulosino & d'Entremont, 2011).”

Reviewing numerous studies, she reaches this conclusion:

“There is a strong link between school choice programs and an increase in student segregation by race, ethnicity, and income.”

She also finds that **“The risk of segregation is a direct reflection of the design of the school choice program.”**

She notes here:

“Charter schools, even under a lottery system, also choose — sometimes explicitly and sometimes indirectly — and increase the probability of segregation. They limit the services they provide, thereby excluding certain students, or offer programs that appeal only to a limited group of families (Furgeson et al., 2012; Welner, 2013). Some charter schools also exclude students from consideration because their parents can't meet the demanding parent involvement requirements, or they expel students who haven't met the school's academic or behavioral requirements (Miron, Urschel, Mathis, & Tornquist, 2010; Heilig, Williams,

McNeil, & Lee, 2011). Charter schools also choose where to locate which, in turn, influences enrollment options given the transportation difficulties for low-income students (Gulosino & d'Entremont, 2011; Jarvis & Alvanides, 2008; Ozek, 2011).

"In some communities, charter schools have a higher concentration of minority students than traditional public schools (Booker, Zimmer, & Buddin, 2005; Institute on Race and Poverty, 2008). In others, charter schools serve as a vehicle for "white flight" (Bifulco, Ladd, & Ross, 2008; Ni, 2007; Renzulli & Evans, 2005; Heilig, Williams, McNeil, & Lee, 2011). School segregation increases in both cases — in the charter schools students attend and in the traditional public schools they would have attended (Institute on Race and Poverty, 2008). This outcome can be offset only if the choice program has a specific goal to increase diversity.

"However, the federal role in encouraging charter school diversity has been minimal. Although legislation in some states includes provisions on diversity, without oversight, the legislative language has had little effect. Advising charter schools to be diverse will not make it happen (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2009; Siegel-Hawley & Frankenberg, 2011)."

Rotberg points out:

" Even beyond race, ethnicity, and income, school choice programs result in increased segregation for special education and language-minority students, as well as in increased segregation of students based on religion and culture.

"Special education and language-minority students are under-represented in charter schools, unless the schools are specifically targeted to these population groups (Arcia, 2006; Sattin-Bajaj & Suarez-Orozco, 2012; Scott, 2012). Even when the students are selected in a lottery, they are discouraged from attending charter schools when the schools do not provide the services they require.

"Perhaps less visible, but clearly growing, are charter schools that target specific religious and cultural groups (Eckes, Fox, & Buchanan, 2011). Some of these schools were formerly private religious schools, schools that are likely to attract specific religious groups (for example, by offering extensive language instruction in Hebrew, Arabic, or Greek), or schools designed to appeal to families with particular social or political values. Such niche schools often result in the segregation of students by religion or by social values — a type of stratification many countries now struggle with that has not traditionally been prevalent in U.S. public education. As charter schools proliferate, so do these schools — a trend that will almost inevitably lead to a public school system that is increasingly fragmented."

What to conclude: the Obama administration's support and encouragement of charter schools (building on the precedent of the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations) is promoting segregation by race, class, language, religion, and culture.

In education policy, the Obama administration has actively undermined the Brown decision and used federal policy and federal billions to undermine public education and school desegregation. Those are strong words, but the research and evidence support them.

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 21 Replies