

Charter segregation adds layer in Brown v. Board debate



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(Photo: Sanford Myers / The Tennessean)

Sixty years after the Supreme Court ordered an end to segregated schools, the problem of separate and unequal hasn't gone away — and some say charter schools are part of the problem.

About 6 percent (<http://www.ncsl.org/research/education/charter-schools-overview.aspx>) of Nashville public school students attend charter schools, but with the state's blessing and start-up money behind it (<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oii/csp/funding.html>), they're poised for exponential growth. The problem with that, critics say, is that charter systems pay more attention to student achievement than to racial diversity and, in some cases, end up with neither.

Charter advocates here and nationwide counter by listing a number of limitations on their recruitment, including the facts that they draw from already-segregated traditional schools and that school choice means just that — parents don't have to pick them. But at the same time, there's a new movement within the charter community locally and nationwide to open schools with a premium on racial balance ([/story/news/education/2014/05/06/nashville-charter-school-lands-m-gates-frist-grants/8734507/](http://story/news/education/2014/05/06/nashville-charter-school-lands-m-gates-frist-grants/8734507/)).

Today, just before Saturday's 60th anniversary of the landmark Brown vs. Board of Education U.S. Supreme Court decision that integrated public schools, renowned University of California-Los Angeles desegregation researcher Gary Orfield released a new report (http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/brown-at-60-great-progress-a-long-retreat-and-an-uncertain-future/Brown-at-60_post_051514.pdf) on the state of racial balance in U.S. schools.

Segregation overall is increasing after the 2007 Supreme Court decision ending the practice (<http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Supreme-Court-Schools-can-t-use-race-to-assign-2584155.php>) of assigning students based on race, and federal courts dropping oversight of school districts' desegregation plans, the report says. Tennessee is 13th most segregated in the nation ([/story/news/nation-now/2014/05/15/school-segregation-civil-rights-project/9115823/](http://story/news/nation-now/2014/05/15/school-segregation-civil-rights-project/9115823/)), it says, with only a quarter of black students attending majority-white schools when two-thirds of public school students in the state are white.

Orfield insists charter schools should seek diversity (<http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/choice-without-equity-2009-report>) — and states should enact laws that force them to — recruiting by socioeconomic status that often follows racial patterns. It's important because a half-century of research shows segregation robs children of opportunity, he says.

But for Cheryl Brown Henderson (http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/people/2004-05-14-cheryl-brown-henderson_x.htm), the daughter of Brown vs. Board plaintiff Oliver Brown, the decision to support charters is still more about opportunity. A former school guidance counselor, she runs a foundation in Mission, Kansas, devoted to studying Brown vs. Board's impact and improving education access for minorities.

Henderson doesn't buy that diversity should be a big concern for charter schools, and she questions whether traditional public schools were ever truly integrated. Many never reflected their districts' racial balance even after decades of busing, rezoning, magnet programs and other efforts.

"It's awfully arrogant for us to point fingers at people trying to ensure a world-class education access is afforded to all of our children," she said.

In the classroom

The issue came to a head in Nashville two years ago — first with a federal school rezoning lawsuit that included testimony about the district's overwhelmingly African-American charter schools, then with the school board refusing to approve a charter they said would be a vehicle for white flight. Today, enrollment at all 18 of the city's charter schools is overwhelmingly African-American.

Case in point: Of the 22 students in Kira Walmer's fifth-grade writing classroom at charter school Nashville Prep, two are white, one is Asian, one is Latino and the rest are African-American.

Walmer's energetic, snap-gesture-walk teaching style — a hallmark of high-performing charters nationwide — engages all in a writing exercise: "Why does your Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program score matter to you, Nashville Prep, your family and the world?" A quick show of hands reveals "college" is the most common word found in their answers.

The school's founder, Ravi Gupta, a Yale-educated lawyer who won an \$80,000 fellowship from Nashville's mayor to open a charter, is familiar with criticisms about lack of diversity. He counters by inviting critics to look at traditional public schools. Charters — including the two his RePublic Schools charter organization operates in Nashville — were born as options to poorly performing traditional schools in inner cities. They merely enrolled the kids who were already there.



60 years after Brown vs Board of Education, RePublic Schools co-founder Ravi Gupta defends the charter school model. Steven Harman / The Tennessean

But he'll be thinking about diversity more as RePublic looks toward opening a string of charter schools across the South, geared toward teaching students to write computer code. One will open this fall in Nashville and another is up for approval in Jackson, Miss (<http://www.clarionledger.com/article/20140111/NEWS01/301110005/>), to open in 2015.

Valor Collegiate Academy will open in August in South Nashville with 38 percent white students, making it one-of-a-kind in the city. It "will be the first college preparatory charter school in Nashville that serves a truly diverse background of students," its homepage brags in bold type.

Advocates watching

Diversity advocates will be watching. Iris Rotberg, an education policy researcher at George Washington University, published a March article in the journal "Education Week" pointing out that, on average, charter schools perform no better than traditional public schools yet lead to increased segregation — except in cases where local traditional schools are so segregated it can't get any worse.

Federal policies promoting charters as an option will only worsen the problem, Rotberg contends. She calls on the Obama administration to stop cheerleading for charter schools and instead focus on the damage of segregation.

"Integrated schools are a matter of ethics and decency. You can show results that academically and socially, they're better for all groups," she said.

"But the Brown decision said it best: Separate is never equal."

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Changing demographics

Enrollment trends in U.S. public schools from 1968 to 2011:

- 28% decline in white enrollment
- 19% growth in the number of black students
- 495% percent increase in Latinos

Source: The Civil Rights Project at UCLA

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