

The social costs of proliferating charter schools

By IRIS C. ROTBERG

In the years since the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision overturned de jure school segregation, civil rights legislation and legal decisions have helped to increase the access of minority groups to integrated communities and schools, to higher education, to labor markets, and to substantial participation in the nation's political and civic life.

Since the turn of the century, federal education policies have favored the expansion of charter schools. It is perhaps understandable, given current inequities, that an alternative to traditional districts and schools might seem attractive. However, the fundamental problems have not been mitigated as charter schools have proliferated. Instead, the emphasis on charter schools has had the unintended consequence of increasing the segregation that was already undermining the school system.

A wide range of research shows the impact of charter schools on segregation by race, ethnicity, income, disability, language, culture, or religion — or a combination of these variables. As troublesome as this is, it is only one manifestation of a broader problem: Low-income, minority students are often treated differently — indeed, segregated — in ways that go beyond the lack of student diversity. Charter schools have exacerbated this segregation, which plays out in different situations and in different ways.

In some charter schools, students' civil rights and other legal protections

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are compromised in the absence of a centralized system with the organizational capacity and resources to support them.

In addition, large numbers of low-income and minority students are in districts where the competition between charter and traditional schools has led to resource constraints and inequalities over and above those already existing. These constraints are compounded by the fact that charter schools have more leverage than traditional public schools in determining which students enroll and are permitted to remain in the school. The competition between one set of schools that can shape its student body and another responsible for serving all students comes at a cost as traditional schools are weakened by budget losses at the same time they are responsible for educating increasing proportions of students with the greatest needs.

These trends have resulted in two types of school systems — one for low-income, minority students in high-poverty districts and the other for everyone else. But some states have gone even further and created “achievement” districts, operated primarily by charter schools, which group schools with low test scores into one district, regardless of their geographic proximity. Because of the strong correlation between poverty and low achievement, high-poverty students are further segregated by being assigned to these separate districts.

Many charter school students in high-poverty urban districts attend schools that use disciplinary or instructional techniques that are quite different from those used in districts that serve the rest of the student population. As a result, these students —

largely low-income and minority — are segregated by education program as well as by race and ethnicity.

In districts that are racially and ethnically diverse, the availability of charter schools may make it more difficult to integrate schools as students leave traditional public schools for the less integrated charter schools. As a result, transfers to charter schools function in much the same way as transfers to private schools, but with an important difference — charter schools are a tuition-free option.

In an education system as complex and varied as the U.S. system, there are exceptions. Charter schools are sometimes more diverse than traditional public schools, and some charter schools have education programs similar to those found in typical public or private schools or programs that could be readily applied in those settings. Excellent charter schools exist, as do excellent traditional public schools. However, research is clear on two points: Charter schools vary widely in student achievement — some higher, some lower, and many the same as traditional public schools. And charter schools generally exacerbate segregation.

These are important considerations to bear in mind. In the search for a silver bullet to “fix” the problems of American schools, it is important that we do not implement policies that risk further segregating both schools and students. ■

NOTE: This article was previously published in the Fall 2018 Division L Newsletter of the American Educational Research Association. It draws largely on key themes described in *Choosing Charters: Better Schools or More Segregation?* edited by Iris C. Rotberg and Joshua L. Glazer (Teachers College Press, 2018).