Marquis Carter Grant, M.Ed

Exceptional Student Teacher

Doctoral Student, Argosy University

Title: Charter Schools: Are They Really The Answer?

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Abstract

Charter schools have become a leading alternative to traditional public education, where children of color have historically experienced low academic performance and dismal results on state-mandated testing. Whether these institutions are, in fact, the answer to what ails education is a matter of debate. Those who support charter schools point to the flexibility these institutions have to create more comprehensive, student-focused curricula that caters to the learning styles of the students being served. As a result, students experience more academic and personal success. Opponents argue that charter schools are nothing more than band-aids for an even bigger problem, namely the demographics that continue to divide students along color lines. Without major reform, the disparity between racial groups will grow even wider, fueled by the segregation being caused by charter schools. Regardless of these debates, there can be no question that the charter movement has changed the meaning of education for students who would otherwise be left behind.

Charter Schools: Are They Really The Answer?

African American and other minority students have experienced a history of poor

academic quality in public schools. The decision in the historic Brown v. Board of

Education case was intended to provide equal opportunities for minorities in theory and

in practice but, some four decades later, many are of the opinion that segregation is still

alive and well. Although citizens are no longer separated by physical location, there

exists an enormous divide that keeps minorities from achieving the same measure of

success than their white counterparts. According to Frankenberg & Lee (2003), we are

now 15 years into an era of resegregation of our nation's schools, and black and Latino

students are more isolated than they have been for decades. For some, the emergence of

charter schools across the country offered a glimmer of hope that children of color would

finally have a chance to break the barriers that kept them functionally literate. Nationally,

according to 2007-08 federal data that the study cited, black students account for 32

percent of charter school enrollment (Anderson, 2010). While this number may appear to

be insignificant, it actually overshadows the percentage of African American students

who attend public school.

Impact of NCLB

There are few Americans who are not familiar with education's most controversial

legislation, *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* What many do not know is that the act had a

previous life as the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)* prior to being

revised into its current state. What *NCLB* aimed to do was to finally hold educators

accountable for the acquisition of knowledge in the classroom. There were serious

questions as to how an African American child and a Caucasian child in the same

classroom could still be mentally segregated. How the same teacher could teach a group of children but only a select few, usually those from better demographics, managed to meet grade level expectations while the others fell below standards. *NCLB* made it clear that no more excuses were allowed. Children were to be given the same playing field and equal opportunities to excel. While districts attempted to figure out how they would meet federal mandated improvements, black and Hispanic children began an exodus away from public schools. By being more responsive to the needs of parents, students, and the community at large, and by allowing parents and students to choose schools that deliver the type of education that they feel best meets their needs, charter schools can improve the match between what schools offer and what "parents/consumers" prefer (Buckley & Schneider, 2007).

Mixed reviews

Charter schools have been met with mixed review across the country. The introduction of *NCLB* brought about a surge in the number of charter schools that were approved for operation in counties from coast to coast. Although the charter school movement is little more than a decade old, there are now more than 2,300 charter schools across the nation (Frankenberg& Lee, 2003). Parents saw charter schools as an alternative to an academic system that they believed had failed their children, who were often retained, reported as behavior problems, or referred for special education services because teachers could not produce significant results from them. As Brouilette (2002)pointed out, charter schools represented the kind of do-it-yourself attitude towards education. Urban areas are particularly fertile ground for the development of charter schools because there is a great need to find ways to improve education in the face of poor resources and overcrowding in

the public schools (Schwartz, 1996). Schools in inner city districts faced conditions not too far removed from those prior to the *Brown* case, where African American students received their education in dilapidated buildings with books, if available, were outdated and falling apart at the seams. Frustrated with these conditions, parents chose a different path; one that would allow their children a sense of dignity that was lacking in public schools.

In his own study, Hill attributes the freedom from the bureaucratic rules and regulations as part of the success in charter schools (cited by Buckley & Schneider, 2007). Hill, like many others, believes that the relationship between parents and these schools is strengthened, as accountability is first and foremost to the families not the states. In larger cities, at least, data indicates that charters have proven to be a major factor in the improved performances of minority students. For example, in New York City, a recent review of data provided by the city's Department of Education reveals that African-American charter-school students were 60 percent more likely than their traditional public-school counterparts to earn a seat in one of New York City's "specialized" high schools last year (Winters, 2010). Similar data has been reported from cities across the country, leading proponents to declare charter schools to be the answer for students who have historically struggled in traditional classrooms. Most charter school supporters share a perception that , amid the current push for educational standardization, something of value has been lost (Brouilette, 2002). Because of its flexibility in reforming education, charters are better equipped to focus on areas that often go lacking in traditional schools, including cultural diversity in student population and staff, greater emphasis on learning styles and differentiated learning, and disproportionalities in special education referrals

and standardized testing. However, no data was gathered as to whether diverse teaching staff, innovated curriculum, and emphasis on learning styles have played a role in the positive data trends being reported.

Resegregation

An argument could be made that charter schools are, by practice, doing nothing more than reestablishing the same segregation boundaries that years of civil rights movements sought to destroy. In an article for the *Washington Post*, Anderson (2010) points out that seven out of 10 black charter school students are on campuses with extremely few white students, according to a new study of enrollment trends that shows the independent public schools are less racially diverse than their traditional counterparts. Due to the concerns about charter schools accelerating the segregation of public schools, sixteen states have regulations in place that require or encourage charter schools to take positive action to ensure diversity (Mathis et al., 2010). However, these regulations are of no effect if non-minority parents have no interest in sending their children into alternative settings, particularly if they have not been met with the same negative experiences as their minority counterparts.

Future implications

The need for further research exists, as there are divided opinions as to whether charter schools are truly the answer to the academic problems that have plagued minorities for decades. One critic of charter schools, UCLA professor Gary Orfield, is doubtful as to whether these types of environments are offering minorities any more advantages than public schools. These assertions appear to be supported by a report to the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, which concluded that with the charter

schools that participated in the study, there was no statistically significant impact on student achievement (Gleason et al., 2010). Orfield points out that racially segregated schools tend to face more problems than integrated schools in teacher retention, graduation rates and other areas. (Anderson, 2010).

Few studies exist that can offer any comparative data that would confirm or refute whether charter schools have leveled the playing field for students who otherwise would have fallen through the cracks in a traditional school system. Since the mid 1990s, charter schools have more than quadrupled in size and, if this trend continues, they will continue to grow to the point that they outnumber public schools in some areas. Because charter schools are primarily located in urban areas, the national or state comparison groups used by these studies do not provide a relevant comparison (Mathis et al., 2010). What the data indicates is that information that has been collected about student performance, lack of diversity, and other core issues that have been associated with charters may not accurately reflect the true nature of these entities. Without more comprehensive studies that would allow data to be compared between charter and public schools, the results of their effectiveness will continue to be a guessing game.

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