

# There is no evidence to suggest that charter schools increase school segregation.

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*Charter schools are a controversial part of the US education system, with opponents expressing concern that more advantaged students will tend to choose them, taking resources away from traditional public schools and potentially increasing how segregated they are. In a new study of charter schools in Little Rock, Arkansas, [Gary Ritter](#) and colleagues find that levels of segregation were very similar in both charter and public schools. They also find that only around 1 percent of students transferred from public to charter schools, compared to 16 percent who leave the school district for other destinations.*



In the world of US education policy, the controversy over the nomination of Betsy DeVos as Secretary of Education shows that debate continues over the merits or downsides of charter schools. US charter schools are, as many education observers know, roughly equivalent to “academies” in the United Kingdom.

Charter schools can seek waivers from some requirements that apply to traditional schools such as teacher licensure, teacher contracts, and length of the school day or year. Like traditional schools, charter schools are public and are free for students to attend. Unlike traditional schools, students can attend regardless of where they live. Traditional school enrollment is determined by a student’s address. If charter schools receive applications from more students than they can serve, students must be selected by random lottery. Charter schools cannot selectively enroll certain types of students such as those with higher academic ability.

Opponents of charter schools fear that given freedom of choice, more advantaged students would congregate in better charter schools with an abundance of resources while the less affluent will be left behind in traditional public schools with depleted resources, resulting in greater levels of segregation and decreasing school quality for low-income students.

It is plausible, on the other hand, that increased schooling choices could have the opposite effect and foster greater racial and economic diversity within schools and increased school quality for all students. In traditional US public school systems, students’ schooling options are almost entirely a function of where their families live. Household income largely constrains housing choices, resulting in neighborhoods are largely segregated along racial and class lines. As such, students attend schools that are as racially and economically segregated as the neighborhoods in which they reside. Charter schools, however, have the potential to detach schooling choice from housing choice; students can cross racially segregated neighborhood and district boundaries. As a result, charter schools could lead to lower levels of segregation than that which exists in traditional school systems.

Research concerning charter schools and their effect on racial integration shows mixed results. Adding to the confusion of this literature is the fact that there is no single working definition for important terms such as integration and segregation. Some studies have [defined segregation](#) by labeling schools as “racially homogeneous” or “hyper-segregated” if they meet a certain threshold, such as having 90 percent or more of their students represented by a single race, or 90 percent or more from underrepresented racial backgrounds.

The concept of *integration* is even more challenging as it is not an absolute term and requires a reference to a broader community. For example, we would not want to argue that all schools must serve students populations that are 25 percent Asian, 25 percent Black, 25 percent Hispanic, and 25 percent White to be considered integrated. While this might be a reasonable benchmark in a community with the above four groups roughly equally represented, it would not be reasonable in a town like Little Rock, Arkansas, where the vast majority of students are

either Black or White.

Thus, making integration meaningful, in our view, requires the identification of a broader community for reference and comparison. We argue that racial integration in schools may be best understood as the extent to which the students in a larger geographic area (such as the metropolitan area in the United States) are distributed evenly among the schools in that area.



## Back to Little Rock

In our research, we analyzed the impacts of the increasing presence of charter schools on the racial composition of schools in the urban area of Little Rock. The setting for this research is particularly noteworthy; in 1957, after state and local officials refused to comply with the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision mandating desegregation, President Eisenhower ordered the United States Army into Little Rock to enforce the court's order. Racial segregation in Little Rock public schools continues to be a concern, and the recent expansion of charter schools in the region has brought up new fears with regard to the district's desegregation efforts. We compared the integration in public charter schools to the integration in the traditional public schools that students would likely have attended in the absence of charter schools. This allowed us to assess how student transfers to charter schools have affected the racial balance of traditional schools in Little Rock.

We first assessed the current state of racial segregation at charter schools using appropriate measures of segregation and integration along with an appropriate comparison group of traditional public schools (TPS). Second, we use student-level transfer data over multiple years to assess the effect of charter transfers on the racial mix of sending schools in Little Rock.

## What do we find? Three key themes emerged from our analyses.

**First**, we found little difference between integration levels of charter and TPS—neither sector is well integrated. In the city of Little Rock, 50 percent of minority students in TPS attended hyper-segregated minority schools compared with 43 percent of minority students in the Little Rock charter sector. When we define an integrated school as being within 10 percentage points of the community average, we find that just under a quarter of charter students in Little Rock and just over a quarter of students in Little Rock traditional schools attended integrated schools. Thus, in Little Rock at least, the concerns of charter critics—that charter schools are far more likely to be racially segregated—are

not supported by the data.

**Second**, we found that transfers from Little Rock TPS to charter schools did not result in meaningful shifts in the sorting of students by race. These results are similar to those reported by [others](#) who analyzed charters in eight states. Indeed, when we asked if charter transfers left the traditional schools more segregated, the answer was a clear no. Of the minority students who transferred into charter schools from the traditional sector, more than three-fourths left traditional schools that were disproportionately minority. Similarly, of the white students who transferred into charter schools from the traditional sector, more than two-thirds left traditional schools that were disproportionately white.

Overall, more than 70 percent of these transfers to charter schools actually *improved* the levels of racial integration at the TPS from which they transferred; because white students were exiting “white schools” and minority students were exiting “minority schools”.

**Finally**, we noticed something important and somewhat surprising. Despite all of the attention paid to transfers from traditional public schools to charter schools, it turns out that very few students actually leave Little Rock TPS each year for charter schools. In 2004-2005, 0.4 percent of the students in Little Rock TPS transferred to charter schools; this figure grew to only 1.2 percent of the Little Rock TPS student population in the 2009-2010 school year. On average, 16 percent of students transfer out of the Little Rock School District each year and the vast majority (87 percent) of those students left for destinations other than charter schools. Approximately half of these students moved to other traditional school districts in Arkansas and half left the Arkansas public system entirely by dropping out, continuing their education in another state, for private or home school options.

Clearly many students and families exercise school choice in a variety of forms, and those who seek out charters are a small piece of the pie. Those concerned that students who transferred from Little Rock TPS to charter schools are exacerbating racial segregation should consider turning their attention toward how the traditional sector is organized if they wish to relieve segregation in that sector.

## **So what? How should we make sense of this debate?**

Our research clearly shows that claims that charter schools increase segregation across the board are false. Yet, critics continually trot out this criticism. Is this because they are genuinely concerned about problems associated with racial segregation? Probably not; otherwise they would turn their attention to the more than 95 percent of US students in traditional public schools, many of which are intensely segregated. More likely, critics are using concerns over segregation as just another weapon in the ideological battle against charter schools.

Furthermore, to those minority families who have suffered from formalized segregation in the past or who currently suffer from residential segregation, it might be viewed as disrespectful when critics use the term segregation to malign charter schools. Segregation connotes a lack of freedom; it is the wrong term to use when referring to the results of active choices made by families of minority students. The fact that students leave segregated traditional public schools for similarly segregated charters **cannot** be viewed as an indictment of charters. Indeed, leaders of charter organizations state that they are honored to serve minority families who **choose** the charter schools after a search for attractive schooling options.

Critics have pushed for limitations on charter schools, in part because of the alleged racial segregation in these schools. Ostensibly, this anti-charter activism is aimed at preserving the [civil rights](#) of minority students and families. In our view, however, opposing charters for these reasons is wrong on two counts. First, there is not compelling evidence that charter schools increase racial segregation. Second, and perhaps more important, it simply does not make sense – and indeed seems contradictory – to place limits on school choice for minority families in the name of protecting the civil rights of minority families.

*This article is based on the paper [‘Urban School Choice and Integration’](#) in *Education and Urban Society*.*

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