

Failed Promises: Assessing Charter Schools in the Twin Cities
Institute on Race and Poverty, Univ. of Minnesota Law School
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After two decades of experience, most charter schools in the Twin Cities still underperform comparable traditional public schools and intensify racial and economic segregation in the Twin Cities schools. This is the conclusion of a new report issued today by the Institute on Race and Poverty at the University of Minnesota Law School.

Entitled “Failed Promises: Assessing Charter Schools in the Twin Cities,” the new study evaluates the record of charter schools in terms of academic achievement, racial and economic segregation, and their competitive impact on traditional public schools. The study finds that rather than encouraging a race to the top, charter school competition in fact promotes a race to the bottom in the traditional public school system.

“The Twin Cities is the birthplace of charter schools. Education reformers look up to Minnesota as the state with the longest track record with charter schools. But before they rush into expanding the charter sector in their states, they should take a closer look at the Twin Cities experience,” said Myron Orfield, Director of the Institute on Race and Poverty. “Rather than being a solution to the educational problems faced by low-income students and students of color, charter schools are deepening these problems.”

This reexamination of charter schools is timely. It comes as the next administration considers charter schools among the many alternatives to reform K-12 education. The study is one of very few to evaluate the academic performance of charter schools and their competitive impact on traditional public school systems within the context of racial and economic segregation.

“Research shows that students in segregated poor schools do worse than students in low-poverty schools,” said Tom Luce, one of the authors of the study and Research Director at the Institute. “Because of this, the way charter schools sort students racially and economically is likely to affect how students perform academically. This is why the report is careful to account for school characteristics when comparing achievement rates in traditional and charter schools.”

The study shows that although a few charter schools perform well on standardized tests, most offer low income parents and parents of color an inferior choice—a choice between low-performing traditional public schools and charter schools that perform even worse. The Institute’s analysis of proficiency rates in elementary schools finds that in both reading and math, a lower percentage of charter school students reached proficiency compared to students who attended comparable traditional public schools. For reading proficiency, the average difference is nearly 9 percentage points and for math it is nearly 10 percentage points.

Charter schools also perform worse than the schools participating in another public school choice program—The Choice is Yours Program. The program is based on the principle of moving low-income students to effective middle-class public schools in the suburbs. The report shows that, all else equal, suburban schools participating in the Choice is Yours Program outperform other comparable traditional public schools as well as charter schools. The clear implication is that the Choice is Yours Program provides better alternative schools than the charter system does.

“The poor performance of charter schools should not come as a surprise given how segregated they are,” said Baris Gümüş-Dawes, one of the authors of the study and a Research Fellow at the Institute. “Racially segregated schools have high concentrations of poverty. The average poverty rate in

segregated schools in the Twin Cities metro is 81 percent, compared to 14 percent in predominantly white schools. Research shows that high-poverty schools are associated with a wide range of negative educational and life outcomes. Low test scores is only one of these negative outcomes. Racially-segregated schools with high student poverty rates lead to high dropout rates, low college attendance rates, low earnings later in life, and greater risk of being poor as adults.”

Racial and economic segregation in charter schools intensifies these problems in the Twin Cities. Students of color are much more likely to be in segregated settings in charter schools than in traditional schools. In 2008, 89 percent of black charter students attend school in segregated settings compared to just 38 percent of black traditional public school students in the Twin Cities metro. Similarly, Hispanics and other students of color are more than twice as likely to be in segregated settings in charter schools as in traditional public schools. Charter schools also have higher poverty rates than traditional schools—50 percent versus 22 percent in 2008; and they are more likely to be intensely poor—60 percent of them have poverty rates above 40 percent, compared to 31 percent of traditional public schools.

Even when compared to the highly segregated traditional public schools in the Minneapolis and St. Paul school districts, charter schools are still more segregated than their traditional public school counterparts. In Minneapolis, for instance, 96 percent of all students of color who attended charter schools did so in segregated settings compared to 80 percent in traditional public schools in 2008.

In St. Paul, 88 percent of all students of color in charter schools attended segregated schools in 2008 compared to 73 percent of students of color in traditional public schools.

The presence of predominantly white charter schools with low poverty rates in St. Paul’s racially diverse school district also suggests the possibility that charter schools are facilitating white flight. Eleven percent of the district’s white students attend predominantly white charter schools in a district where there are no predominantly white traditional schools.

Charter schools in the Twin Cities metro perform worse than comparable public schools academically—measured by test scores—and socially—measured by segregation rates. “But the problem is not only with the academic and social performance of charter schools,” said Orfield “charter schools also hurt traditional public schools by triggering further segregation in the traditional public school system.”

Charter schools can compete with public schools in many ways, including areas of interest, ethnicity, risk factors or other characteristics. However, many charter schools in the Twin Cities choose to compete in ethnic niches by offering “ethno-centric” or “culture-specific” programs to their students. “We find that some school districts, in turn, are creating ‘ethno-centric’ schools and programs of their own to compete with these charter programs and to protect their ‘market share,’” said Orfield. “This is a real problem because when the niche that schools choose to compete in is an ethnic niche, it deepens segregation in the overall public school system.”

The study finds that charter school competition has deepened segregation in the traditional public school system in two important ways. First, school districts have responded to charter competition by sponsoring racially segregated and in some cases “ethno-centric” charter schools of their own. Second, districts have initiated “ethno-centric” programs within traditional public schools and have promoted “ethno-centric” magnet schools in their districts. The study concludes that “Overall, charter school competition in ethnic niches has been particularly detrimental for students of color and low-income students because this type of competition intensifies racial and economic segregation in metro schools and exiles these students to low-performing schools.”