

October 3, 2018

Submitted to the Michigan Civil Rights Commission

MCRC-Comments@michigan.gov

Re: Hearings on Discrimination in Michigan's K-12 Schools

Honorable Co-Chairs and Members of the Commission:

Thank you for taking a sincere interest in the issue of unjust discrimination in Michigan's K-12 schools. Our state must continue to strive toward the goal of providing all young people fair and equal access to educational opportunities that can help them meet their potential and prepare them for a successful life and career.

The academic challenges in Michigan's public education system and their disproportionate impact on students of color in urban, low-income communities are both well-documented. But the causes for them are less clearly understood. At a previous public hearing held by this Commission, some panelists placed [significant blame](#) for these challenges on policies that give families greater access to enroll in public schools outside the district where they live.

These options include public school academies (charter schools) and the Schools of Choice program – in which most, but not all, districts agree to accept a predetermined numbers of students by school or grade level. Neither charters nor accepting districts are allowed to discriminate or select among applying students based on race, family income or academic ability. Charter schools and Schools of Choice give more parents a choice over where their children attend school. This type of option used to only be available to parents who had the means to purchase a home in the school district of their choosing.

The reported numbers bear out that low-income and minority families rely on these options more than other groups. African-American students are particularly more likely to use Schools of Choice. The 2017-18 breakdown of students attending charter schools is even more telling: about one-half of students are black, one-third are white, and the rest represent various minority groups. Three in four charter students are deemed "economically disadvantaged." These numbers contrast significantly with the conventional school district population that is 70 percent white, only 14 percent African-American, and less than 50 percent low-income.

Racial minorities are more likely to attend charter schools not just because these schools are more prevalent where they live, but because they are actively seeking better options. A major gauge of quality that parents recognize are the measurable academic outcomes. Multiple studies have found that Michigan charter schools provide students with months of additional learning in key subject areas.

In 2017 the Mackinac Center sponsored a statewide phone survey of more than 800 parents who have exercised public school choice to determine their satisfaction. Eighty percent of these parents, including 76 percent of nonwhite parents, rated their new school an A or B. Also of note, 70 percent of minority parents said their experience with school choice has raised their expectations of how far their child will go in his or her education, while less than 10 percent offered the opposite answer.

This year the Mackinac Center sponsored a follow-up, online survey of more than 1,400 charter school parents that went into greater depth to understand why they are making educational choices and how the experience has worked for them. Most of the satisfaction numbers were higher than recorded in the previous year's survey: 80 percent of minority parents assigned their charter school an A or B, while 91 percent of them would recommend charters to other parents.

Even more telling were parents' responses identifying what drove them to select a public charter school. African-American and Asian-American parents most strongly identified with a number of factors that were important in their decision – from the quality of the academic program and teaching staff to the need for better safety and discipline. This suggests these groups not only considered a wide variety of factors before making their choice, but also that they are more likely to believe the district schools available to them fall short by these measures.

Individual answers support that observation. Asked for the main reason why they decided to enroll in a charter school, some minority parents gave answers that offer poignant reminders of why these policies exist. Here are a few examples to consider, in parents' own words:

"It was more diverse and had higher state test scores."

"My child's cognitive learning disabilities weren't being met in the traditional structured environment."

"The school my children were attending had a lot of violence, racism and bullying and nothing in place for discipline."

"Too many distractions in traditional school."

"The academic curriculum was at a higher standard than his previous elementary school."

"My child was 'falling through the cracks' at a traditional public school.... I knew a change was necessary for my child's success."

"I enrolled my kids into a charter school because my children were being bullied in public schools and nothing was being done."

"It didn't matter if it was a charter...I was looking for a good school"

Addressing the important problem of unjust discrimination must entail protecting the rights of individuals to choose the educational experience that works best for them. Public charter schools and other educational options continue to operate in diverse communities and communities of color because, evidence shows, families demand them and are overwhelmingly satisfied with what they offer. For the sake of all families who now or in the future may find themselves in need of quality educational options, the state of Michigan should help ensure they are provided with the best possible information and access.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of these submitted remarks. Please don't hesitate to let me know if I can answer any questions or provide any additional supporting materials.

Regards,



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