



School Choice Breaks Down Racial Barriers

By Ben DeGrow

Summary

Some people say school choice, including through public charter schools, promotes racial segregation. But school choice provides options to families seeking a better life for their children, and most studies show it actually improves integration.

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Opponents of school choice seem to be working overtime to discredit programs that give students in tough circumstances a better chance to succeed. These critics would be well-advised to ensure their own house is in order first.

One of the latest lines of attack is a dubious Associated Press claim that public charter schools are increasing segregation because they are more “racially isolated.” How richly ironic that school board member Christopher Profeta from Grosse Pointe, a wealthy district that actively works to keep Detroit kids out of its schools, trumpeted the article on social media.

Robin Lake, director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, pointed out how the whole premise of the AP story was discredited years ago by careful research. Rather than causing segregation, charter schools are providing an essential service in communities of color. In fact, parents in these communities are choosing to enroll their children in charters because of the painfully evident failure of traditional school systems:

Lake wrote:

America is inexcusably segregated today, but it is ridiculous to imply that charter schools are to blame. Decades of housing choices, largely driven by suburban and intra-urban white flight, are reinforced today by inequities that are hardwired into our neighborhood school systems where funding, quality teachers, and other resources are unfairly distributed.

A number of Michigan school districts predominantly serve minority students. And our state’s public charter schools tend to serve poor and minority students at even higher rates than in other states. Not surprisingly, they are located where the need is greatest, and their doors are open to whoever chooses to enroll. Often that means students choose to enter a school with a similar racial composition, but offering greater odds of learning success. But in some cases, choice may lead them to schools where the student population looks different.

The Schools of Choice program gives Michigan families more options to get a suitable education, by letting them enroll in traditional districts outside their home district boundaries. Yet this policy has limits, as a small number of districts refuse to participate.



Don't blame charter schools for racial segregation.

Perhaps the best-known example of a district keeping out kids from other communities is wealthy Grosse Pointe, on the outskirts of Detroit. In 2011, Grosse Pointe's then-state Rep. Tim Bledsoe infamously declared that a school district must be able to "control its boundaries and who is allowed to attend your schools."

In recent months, the school district has garnered attention for its controversial anonymous tip line, staff investigations and residency documentation requirements, all put in place to enforce strict controls on who can attend school. To his credit, board member Profeta says he backs efforts to relax some of these stringent requirements.

New choice programs offer hope to students whose pursuit of a better educational experience is limited by lines on a map and where their parents can afford to live.

Eight out of nine gold-standard studies find private school choice actually improves racial integration. Enhancing access to Michigan's current range of educational choices also could provide benefits. State-funded, parent-directed transportation scholarships could help the most disadvantaged families reach a school that serves them well.

The more that opponents continue to sling mud at educational choice programs, the more they hurt their own credibility. But they also risk keeping some of the state's neediest students from finding a path to success. They should drop their debunked arguments and instead work to open more doors to quality education.

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