

## ***Charter Schools and Socio-Economic Gaps in Education***

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An inherent gap within the American educational system exists as a direct result of socio-economic disparities present in today's society. This rift is best highlighted in today's college admissions process, which struggles to offer equal opportunity to students from different socio-economic backgrounds. Due to the abundance of challenged neighborhoods that exist in America today, these educational issues exist from the onset of a child's education. Improving the education of the youth in these communities would help bridge the gap that is evident in higher education. An effective way of bringing quality education to students in poverty-ridden communities is the charter school system. Examining charter schools shows that, despite both support and criticism for the system, many students from poor communities have benefitted from the narrowly tailored curriculum and more progressive and unrestrained teaching methods that charters employ. The gaps that exist in our education system become apparent in today's college admission process. The implementation of charter schools can help bridge these dichotomies.

The socio-economic divide that plagues many American communities ultimately leads to a divide in education. Many students in poverty-ridden regions struggle to receive the same quality of education that wealthier communities do. Joel Klein, former chancellor of New York City's Public Schools, stated that "Poverty matters: its debilitating psychological and physical effects often make it much harder to successfully educate kids who grow up in challenged environments" (Klein, 2012). Failing to receive a quality education at such a young age prohibits equal opportunity later on in the education system, for example when students apply to college.

The college admissions process is where this dichotomy manifests itself. Many students from struggling socio-economic backgrounds, who have not been educated on the same level as other students, fail to get into the colleges they desire. Their disadvantaged educational past is to blame for diminishing their chance at admissions. The admissions practices, moreover, have received a fair amount of criticism over the past half-century as a result of these inequalities. The problem is that universities struggle to achieve a competitive admissions system that considers the academic and extracurricular merits of every student while preserving a diverse community. According to the Supreme Court case *Grutter v. Bollinger* 539 U.S. 306 (2003), diversity in education is a compelling state interest. That is, admissions systems that work to secure diversity are constitutional under the Strict Scrutiny Test based on the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment (Raines, 2006). Different universities employ varying systems that strive to accomplish diversity amongst their student body. The University of Texas Austin, for example, uses the Top 10% Rule, which

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admits every high school student in the top 10% of their graduating class. This is one example of an admissions system that strives to secure diversity in higher education.

Attacking this issue earlier in the educational process would promote equality in the admissions process. Students who receive poor educational benefits at an early age struggle to overcome these deficits as they pursue higher education. Opportunities elude grammar and high school students that are subjected to poor school environments. They lack the motivation and resources to fully pursue a successful academic career. Thus, they fall behind students who are educated in wealthy school districts and benefit from increased educational resources. Consequently, socio-economic gaps form. Developing a way to ensure equality at the beginning of the education system can help bridge these gaps. Charter schools may be one method of addressing these needs.

### *What are charter schools?*

Generally, charters are privately run schools that receive government funding. Often, a group or organization that has an agreement with the state government pioneers the process. Government funding supports most charters: “A public charter school is a publicly funded school that is typically governed by a group or organization under a legislative contract or charter with the state or jurisdiction” (Institute of Education Sciences). Although they are reinforced by a government contract, these charter organizations, many of which are supported by corporations, have autonomy from specific state and local educational regulations. However, they are held accountable for certain standards that are demanded by the charter agreement. Charter school boards, both for-profit and not-for-profit, have the responsibility of satisfying these contractual standards however they see fit. In other words, they have the power to determine curriculum, teacher salaries, and the overall mission of the school. Attendance is free at these charters, but parents must usually submit a separate application to enroll a child in a charter school, and spaces are often limited (Pascual, 2014). This gives charters the power to deny access to certain students. Finally, “charter schools are privately run institutions, often based on a theme like science and mathematics, or the study of non-English language” (McKeon, 2014). The governing boards of charters can establish an educational theme or mission for their schools. Charter schools incorporate the independence of private schools and the state funding of public schools.

Charter programs offer a number of benefits for educators, parents, and students alike. Teachers and administrators have the freedom to employ their own educational methods. Administrators can establish curricula that satisfy educational standards while maintaining a flexible system. In the classroom, most charter teachers can break the cookie-cutter effects of administrator oversight. Teachers can employ innovative and experimental instructional practices that can specifically cater to the group of students in front of them. An essential aspect of quality teaching is individuality. Every teacher must have the ability to bring his or her own personal touch to the classroom, they “must own their classrooms” (Howard, 2010). Charters allow this freedom to flourish. In public schools, teachers are subject to bureaucratic restriction. One New York

public school teacher commented on the suffocating bureaucracy of the public school system: "Sometimes I feel like a robot regurgitating the scripted dialogue" (Howard, 2010). While charters have oversight, they also have the freedom in the classroom to foster progressive educational reforms. The former president of the American Federation of Teachers, Albert Shanker (1988), saw charter schools as a way to empower teachers, free them from overly bureaucratic regulations, and strengthen their voice in school and curriculum decision-making. Charter schools recognize that teachers are the frontline of the education process and strive to give them a voice.

The charter system's progressive approach to education also enables change and reform to take place more freely. Most charter schools do not have to contend with teacher unions. Therefore, they are able to push reform without much protest. Public school reform has become such an effort to mobilize due to the ongoing contention from public school teachers. From a conservative perspective, the unions' staunch opposition to meaningful education reform makes serious attempts at reform quite impossible to accomplish (The Heritage Foundation, 2010). The charter system is adaptive, whereas the public school system is ineffectual.

For parents, most charter schools offer a non-traditional means of public education that fosters a collaborative environment. Many of these schools encourage teacher and administrator collaboration, but also work with local businesses to offer students innovative classroom experiences. For example, STEMcivics charter school in Trenton has a partnership with The Liberty Science Center that allows their teachers to hold classes at the Science Center and allows students to utilize their resources (Pizzi, 2014). Partnerships that parallel this example create innovative and advanced experiences for students enrolled in charter schools.

With increased freedom to manage their schools, charter administrations can better tend to parental concerns: "On charter campuses, school leaders are permitted more freedom in managing their school, allowing them to respond in the best interest of both parents and students" (Texas Charter Schools Association). Parents can thus become an integral part in their child's education. Moreover, the charter system establishes a way "for parents and teachers to cooperate with each other, to build a new structure" (Shanker, 1988).

For parents with children who have special needs, charter schools that focus on educating special needs students are extremely advantageous. Special needs charters can receive the appropriate amount of funding and can give students the needed amount of attention in comparison to public schools that need to allocate funds for other students as well. Ultimately, these schools "provide more choices to families with special educational needs or students who feel underserved by local schools" (Resmovits, 2011).

Finally, charter schools give students in struggling districts an alternative to the failing schools in their communities. In many cases, these alternatives turn out to be successful options. New York City Success Academies' students can be used as an example of this. The Success schools are performing at the same level as NYC's best schools—gifted and talented schools that select kids based solely on rigorous tests—even though gifted schools have far fewer low-income and

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minority students. In short, with a population that is considered much harder to educate, Success is getting champion-league results (Klein, 2012). Whether it is taking them out of poorly maintained buildings or extending their school days, disadvantaged students find more opportunities for success in the charter school system.

Many charters have recognized the underserved segments of urban areas and have offered those students viable alternatives. Charter systems create practical instructional programs that promote progress amongst the deprived. AFT's former President Shanker envisioned "a plan that says that learning mathematics or social studies is more than repeating and regurgitating back things on standardized examinations," overall a system that helps develop "creativity and other aspects of intelligence" (Shanker, 1988, p. 15). Through the targeting of students with particular needs, charter schools offer many students access to advanced education that struggling public school districts can not achieve.

### *Charter school debates*

Many cities have benefitted from the implementation of charter schools. In New York City and Chicago, charters have replaced under-used and struggling public schools. The state has been able to take money from failing public schools and reinvest in alternative options, including charters. In New York City, many charter schools in struggling districts have proven to outperform traditional public schools. For example, "a charter school in the South Bronx outperforms every school in the state outside of New York City, including in the wealthy suburbs" (BloombergView, 2014). The success of these NYC charters has been attributed to the system's "greater flexibility in staffing and scheduling" as well as their "more rigorous classrooms" (Harris, 2014). This type of success has also been experienced in other cities across the country. Charters in Chicago have proven to increase learning time in areas of need for minority students. *The Economist* (2014) applauds a 2013 study by Stanford University, which found that the typical Illinois charter pupil (most of them in Chicago) gained two weeks of additional learning in reading, and a month in math, over their counterparts in traditional public schools (see National Charter School Study, 2013).

A curriculum that caters to the needs of the kids has a direct correlation with the success of those students. As experienced in Chicago, minority students are exposed to an environment that promotes learning and education. This not increases performance in charter schools, but also helps underprivileged students overcome the obstacles established by socio-economic gaps.

Adversaries argue that charter schools create more problems than they solve. Diane Ravitch, a former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education and a current professor and educational policy analyst, is one major challenger. She contends that government spending on charters takes resources away from public school students: "Charter schools weaken the regular public schools. They take money away from neighborhood public schools and from the district budget. As charter schools open, regular public schools must cut teachers and close down programs to pay for them" (Ravitch, 2012). By pouring funds into charter organizations, the government fails to allocate resources by need, she claims.

States are, rather, setting aside a large part of their budget to fund charter initiatives. Many cities in the U.S. are negatively impacted by this redistribution of educational funding. In Middletown, Connecticut, for example, areas without a strong tax base suffer from a decrease in state funds: “Magnet and charter schools hurt districts like Middletown’s which itself has a large population of students in need, and a tax base which makes it difficult to raise the dollars needed to fund its own schools” (McKeon, 2014). As the state reinvests educational funds in charter organizations, public schools lose out on funding. Consequently, public school students experience a decrease in educational resources.

Although New York City has experienced success, the state government is under criticism for its support of charter schools. Governor Andrew Cuomo has recently awarded charter school organizations a significant portion of the state’s 2014 budget while also awarding many charters with property tax incentives. Many education coalitions in the city, specifically the Alliance for Quality Education (2014), are attacking the governor’s plans: “Governor Cuomo’s appearance is extremely troubling considering he is simultaneously severely underfunding public schools. The Governor repeatedly says ‘money doesn’t matter’ in education, but when it comes to giving funding to privately-run charter schools, it’s all about the money.” In this example, the state of New York is pushing legislation that works to secure the success of charter schools. However, the reallocation of funding to charters leads to the underfunding of many public schools.

Similarly, Newark, New Jersey is experiencing educational reform at the hands of state backed superintendent Cami Anderson. Her sweeping “One Newark” plan is set to close six public schools and put some under the management of charter schools in an attempt to revitalize struggling Newark school districts. This plan, however, is criticized for moving too fast. Rather than an all-encompassing charter school plan, many students, parents, and educators are calling for more resources to be put into certain districts. The “One Newark” plan focuses on sweeping education reform with charter schools at the forefront. Newark and its attempts at reform have become a polarizing issue within New Jersey and continue to spark conversation about the merits and drawbacks of the charter school system.

The issue of state funding for charters also leads to the question of “pay-for-play” politics. With many corporate-backed charter school enterprises, challengers claim that government policies in support of these charters are political favors. In New York, Governor Cuomo receives a lot of support from wealthy businessmen who also happen to support charter schools. The recent pro-charter policies put forth by New York State have come under significant scrutiny because of the governor’s connections with Wall Street backers who support charter schools. Celia Green, a member of New York’s Communities for Change, an economic justice advocacy group, argues that the governor has abandoned an education for the kids and is, rather, supporting an education based on corporatization: “The governor needs to stand for all our school children not only corporate charter chains that are backed by billionaire hedge fund managers” (Vinocur and Karol, 2014). This issue encompasses a much

larger one, that education is becoming a politicized and corporatized entity rather than a social instrument to improve the lives of the youth. The implementation of charter schools propels this question to the forefront of educational debates.

*Race, poverty and charter schools*

It is also argued that charter schools inherently foster social and racial stratification. In many cases, charters have a predominantly minority or white student population. This fact leads many to the conclusion that charter schools, through admission ceilings, create segregation that is detrimental to the students' learning and development: "Charters are either very white places or very non-white places. [Charters] are accelerants to the normal segregation of public schools" (Butrymowicz, 2013). States have claimed that the presence of segregation in charters is detrimental to the students' learning and have thus proposed racial balancing statutes. Their reasoning behind adopting such policies is that "desegregated schools: (1) have a positive correlation to academic achievement; and (2) increase the likelihood of minority students to achieve long-term success in society" (Green, 2001, p.68). These policies suggest that, based on the lack of diversity in charters, they are not beneficial alternatives to struggling school districts.

Racial stratification is inherently connected to socio-economic disparities in the American educational system. This reality is impossible to ignore. However, the mere presence of racially divided schools does not directly correlate to a poor education. As a society, we have been wired to believe that anywhere there is a racial imbalance or anything that is predominantly black there must be inferiority (Justice Thomas in *Missouri v. Jenkins*, 1995). Simply because many charter schools are located in urban areas and are predominantly African American does not mean that these schools are failing to educate successfully. Justice Clarence Thomas argues that racial stratification should not and does not prohibit success in education in his concurrence in the 1995 Supreme Court case of *Missouri v. Jenkins* 515 U.S. 70 (1995). As Thomas notes in this concurrence, "The continuing 'racial isolation' of schools after *de jure* segregation has ended may well reflect voluntary housing choices or other private decisions." In other words, if all *de jure* segregation has been eliminated by the state, the racial makeup of a school is simply happenstance. Inferring this "separation" of races to be segregation suggests "black inferiority:" "After all, if separation itself is a harm, and if integration therefore is the only way that blacks can receive a proper education, then there must be something inferior about blacks. Under this theory, segregation injures blacks because blacks, when left on their own, cannot achieve. To my way of thinking, that conclusion is the result of a jurisprudence based upon a theory of black inferiority." Racial imbalances, Thomas claims, are therefore not unconstitutional and disadvantageous to students. This distinction is incredibly important when considering the charter school question and the racial stratification that occurs.

As already mentioned, diversity in the context of higher education has been ruled a compelling state interest by the Supreme Court in *Grutter*. In the classrooms of higher education institutions, it can absolutely enhance the students' learning experience. However, it is important to note that a lack of

diversity in the context of K-12 education does not necessarily lead to a poor education. Diversity is compelling. However, it is not necessary for success. This is a growing sentiment amongst minority communities, specifically African Americans:

African-Americans have become more supportive of all-minority neighborhood schools due to their frustration with persistent gaps in academic achievement between blacks and whites and the inconvenience of mandatory desegregation policies. They have also begun to reject the notion that all-black schools are academically inferior and reduce the motivation of black students to learn. (Green, 2001, p.74)

The presence of a racial imbalance in school systems does not constitute poor educational experiences for children in elementary schools and high schools. It does not, moreover, prohibit a student's potential for success.

When discussing socio-economic divides, it is important to acknowledge the connection between race and poverty. The fact that the majority of the children living in poverty are minorities is a reality that cannot be ignored. Diversity as a compelling state interest also ties race into the discussion. Considering this, however, it is important to understand racial imbalance in schools as a product of socio-economic disparities. Racial imbalance, moreover, is not necessarily detrimental to a student's future. Assuming such a thing would, as Justice Clarence Thomas argues, infer a minority inferiority complex:

In effect, the court found that racial imbalances constituted an ongoing constitutional violation that continued to inflict harm on black students.

This position appears to rest upon the idea that any school that is black is inferior, and that blacks cannot succeed without the benefit of the company of whites. (Justice Thomas, *Missouri v. Jenkins*)

Of course, diversity is beneficial and compelling, however, it is not a requirement for success. Racial divides are inevitable to avoid in many communities across the country. This separation should not connote ineptitude and should not become a question of race. Rather, the American education system can acknowledge these realities, and promote equal education through the employment of the charter school system.

Although the state funding of charter schools can lead to disadvantaged public school students, the emergence of charter schools in poorer districts does succeed in creating opportunities for students that might not have experienced the same resources in their failing public schools: "In New Jersey, students enrolled in urban charter schools learn significantly more in both math and reading compared to their traditional public school peers" (Parker, 2013). In addition to charters in New Jersey, charter schools in New York and Chicago succeeded in better educating students. Charters encourage education and give more resources to students in struggling socio-economic areas. These success stories should not be overlooked.

In conclusion, charter schools can help bridge the socio-economic gap present in the education system. Through increased resources, tailored curriculums, and government support, charters create improved learning environments for an underserved population of students. They offer parents a viable alternative to the local public school and give teachers more freedom in the

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classroom. In all, charter schools can help level the playing field for a number of students who would otherwise fall into the socio-economic gap. However, it is important to note that success in the classroom is determined by the amount of effort and care that parents, teachers, and administrators put into their schools. “Simply changing a school's governance structure—for example, from regular public to charter, or from charter to regular public—does not magically lead to better results,” as the AFT urged. What occurs in the classroom and school ultimately affects the students the most. Although charter schools have proven to offer an improved education for a number of disadvantaged students, the reform debate will continue until all students have full access to a high quality education.

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