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**Stop Scapegoating
Educating kids should be focus**

By: Sarah McKenzie and Elise Swanson



The approved expansion of two Little Rock-area charter schools led many to express fears that charter schools skim off the easiest-to-educate students and leave "those other kids" for traditional schools. Specifically, concerns were raised that charters would decrease the white population of Little Rock School District and increase the district's percentage of poor students.

We at the Office for Education Policy also care about the interactions between public charter schools and traditional public schools and decided to investigate what the data had to say about these questions. We examined student-level enrollment and academic data from the 2008-09 to 2014-15 school years. We tracked annual student moves to understand who leaves the Little Rock district for charters and how those moves impact racial and socioeconomic integration.

We found that students who left the district for charters were typical, both demographically and academically, and their exits increased racial and socioeconomic integration in the district.

As a reminder, charter schools are public schools. Like traditional public schools, there is no cost for

students to attend. Unlike traditional public schools, to which students are assigned based on their address, open-enrollment charters are open to any student. Charters are authorized to serve a specific number of students, so students must apply for a seat. If more students want to attend than there are seats, students are selected through a random lottery. Students who are not selected can remain on a wait list. Charter schools cannot select or reject student applications based on demographic or academic characteristics. Charters must administer all state exams and abide by identical accountability requirements.

About 15 percent of students (excluding graduates) leave the Little Rock School District each year for some other schooling option. We were surprised to find that nearly half of these students (7 percent) leave the Arkansas public school system entirely--they move out of state, drop out, or select private or home school settings. Some (6 percent) move to other public school districts; half move nearby to the North Little Rock or Pulaski County districts, and half move to other public schools in the state. Perhaps surprisingly, given all of the attention given to charter transfers, only 2 percent (fewer than one of every seven who leave) of students transfer from the Little Rock district to charter schools each year!

What do we know about these students?

First, the 2 percent of students who transferred into area charters were representative of the district student population as a whole. Students who moved to charters were 64 percent black and 19 percent white, compared to the district population of 67 percent black and 20 percent white. Socioeconomically, 61 percent of students who moved to charters were eligible for free/reduced lunch, while 69 percent of district students participated. Students who left for area charters were not more likely to be white or economically advantaged than the overall district population.

Students who left for area charters performed similarly on state assessments as students who remained. In four of the six years examined, there were no statistically significant differences in scores between students who left for charters and those who remained in the district. However, students who left for charters were average performers in their school in all years examined. This finding refutes the argument that charters poach the best students.

Further, we found that when students exited the district for charters, the schools they left behind became less racially and/or socioeconomically segregated.



Our findings contradict critics' concern that charters increase racial and socioeconomic segregation. One fact we must acknowledge is that Little Rock district schools are already racially and socioeconomically segregated. Thus, when students exit, they are most often leaving segregated settings. We found that black students who leave tend to exit schools with an above-average percentage of black students, and white students leave schools with an above-average percentage of white students.

Residential segregation in Little Rock, as in many other cities throughout the U.S., results in racial and socioeconomic segregation of residentially assigned public schools. Charter schools allow for students to enroll regardless of ZIP code. Little Rock families who choose to sever the link between where they live and the school that their children attend are countering the racial and socioeconomic segregation of traditional public schools.

Those who are passionate about equity should stop demonizing charters and chasing the false argument that charters cause segregation; instead, we should focus our collective energy on providing an affirming and effective learning environments for all Little Rock public school students--regardless of sector.

A wise school leader once said that "the students don't care whether the sign outside the school says 'Charter' or not." They simply need effective teachers who care about them and prepare them for the future.

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