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Charter Schools Are Driving Segregation in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

New UCLA Civil Rights Project study shows charter schools contribute to re-segregation

Charter Schools in Charlotte and Mecklenburg County are directly and indirectly undermining school district efforts to desegregate public schools, according to a new study released today by the Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles at UCLA with researchers at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

"Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools were once the nation's bellwether for successful desegregation. Today, the district exemplifies how charter schools can impede districts' efforts to resist re-segregation," said Roslyn Arlin Mickelson, UNC Charlotte's Chancellor's Professor and professor of Sociology, Public Policy and Women's and Gender Studies at UNC Charlotte. "This research has important implications not only for schools and communities in the Charlotte Mecklenburg region, but for the national debate over the growth and role of charter schools in our nation's education system."

Amid a federal push for the expansion of charter schools, the new study of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) in North Carolina *[Charters as a Driver of Resegregation](#)*, by Jennifer Ayscue, Amy Hawn Nelson, Roslyn Arlin Mickelson, Jason Giersch, and Martha Cecilia Bottia, describes how charter schools directly and indirectly contribute to resegregation in traditional public schools. The study illustrates how charter schools undermined the capacities of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools leaders to effectively redesign student assignment boundaries to achieve the district's goal of breaking up high concentrations of poverty.

"Prior research has consistently demonstrated that charters tend to be more segregated than traditional public schools," said Jennifer Ayscue, a researcher with the Civil Rights Project. "This study of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools is important because it describes how charters also drive segregation in traditional public schools."

Two central findings of the study emerge:

- The departure of some middle-class, academically proficient students who are white or Asian from traditional public schools for charters directly made the task of socioeconomic and racial desegregation mechanically more difficult. Their departure to the charters leaves fewer middle class white and Asian students in the traditional school, thereby contributing to more segregated schools in both sectors.

- The proliferation of charters in Mecklenburg County served as grist for the political activism of suburban parents who threatened a middle-class exodus from CMS to the charter sector if new assignment boundaries did not honor their current neighborhood school assignments. These threats indirectly undermined policy actors' initial willingness to act boldly and decisively in revamping pupil assignments to curb segregation.

In 2016, CMS was the most racially segregated large school system in North Carolina. While national discourse presents charter schools as an alternative to underperforming schools of poverty, in Charlotte, the majority of charter schools are located in suburban areas and serve primarily academically proficient, middle-class students who are white or Asian.

In an effort to reinstate diversity as one of its priorities, and break up high concentrations of poverty in the district, CMS adopted a new student assignment plan in May of 2017. The new plan *affects less than 5%* of the district's students and only modestly shifts concentrations of poverty. Most of the schools with intense concentrations of educational and economic privilege or disadvantage will remain as they were under the former assignment plan—as will the racial isolation that accompanies socioeconomic segregation.

“Charter schools in Charlotte-Mecklenburg are not only segregated, but they fuel political opposition to reducing unequal education in racially and economically segregated schools,” says Professor Gary Orfield, co-director of the UCLA Civil Rights Project. “I believe many charter school leaders care deeply about and are committed to high quality education, but without strategies and measures to increase diversity, charter schools contribute to school re-segregation in Charlotte, North Carolina, and as our research shows, in communities across the country.”

A summary and copy of the full report is available online [here](#).

About the Civil Rights Project

The Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles is co-directed by UCLA Professors Gary Orfield and Patricia Gándara. Founded in 1996 at Harvard University by Orfield and Christopher Edley, Jr., CRP's mission is to create a new generation of research in social science and law on the critical issues of civil rights and equal opportunity for racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. CRP has commissioned more than 400 studies, published more than 15 books and issued numerous reports monitoring the success of American schools in equalizing opportunity and providing the authoritative source of segregation statistics. The U.S. Supreme Court, in its 2003 Grutter v. Bollinger decision upholding affirmative action, and in Justice Breyer's dissent (joined by three other Justices) to its 2007 Parents Involved decision, cited the Civil Rights Project's research.

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