

---

## CREATING CHARTER SCHOOLS THAT REDUCE SEGREGATION IN MASSACHUSETTS JULY 10, 2009

---

Charter schools are officially the new “it” in educational reform. For President Barack Obama, his Education Secretary Arne Duncan and, most recently, Boston Mayor Thomas Menino, “more charter schools” are the stock answer for all that ails America’s schools. Governor Deval Patrick is expected to file legislation soon that would lift the current cap on charter schools for some school districts. Mayor Menino filed a bill Thursday that would enable school districts to convert underperforming schools into in-district charter schools.

A review of research measuring the promise of charter schools against what actually happens to real children in real classrooms strongly suggests that it is unrealistic to expect that charter schools, alone, will reverse the vast and growing educational inequalities in the Commonwealth. There is no solid evidence that charter schools – just by virtue of being charter schools – do any better for students than traditional public schools.<sup>1</sup> As a recent, rigorous and, unfortunately widely misrepresented Harvard/MIT study concluded, some charters in the city of Boston do better than the city’s public schools. Some charters do not do better.<sup>2</sup> In several other cities, the most recent being Minneapolis, studies show that generally, students in charters either did less well than similar students in public schools or the same as students in public schools.<sup>3</sup> Despite the moderately encouraging findings about the success of some of Boston’s charters, there is no research consensus about educational benefits of charter schools. One thing, however, is clear: Research demonstrates that, unchecked, charter schools

***Racially and economically diverse charter schools should be viewed as only one part of a larger effort to reduce social, educational and economic inequalities in the United States.***

---

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., MARTIN CARNOY ET AL., THE CHARTER SCHOOL DUST-UP: EXAMINING THE EVIDENCE ON ENROLLMENT AND ACHIEVEMENT (2005).

<sup>2</sup> THOMAS KANE, ET AL., INFORMING THE DEBATE. COMPARING BOSTON’S CHARTER, PILOT AND TRADITIONAL SCHOOLS (2009), available at [http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~pfpie/pdf/InformingTheDebate\\_Final.pdf](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~pfpie/pdf/InformingTheDebate_Final.pdf). Thomas Kane responded to the use of this report to support broad charter school expansion, commenting that “Our report did not offer a blanket endorsement of charter schools. Indeed, our failure to find robust effects of the pilot schools (particularly in middle school grades) should be a warning that additional flexibility for schools does not ensure results for kids.” Thomas Kane, Harvard Graduate School of Education, *Professor Kane Comments on Mayor Menino’s Charter School Initiative*, [http://www.gse.harvard.edu/blog/news\\_features\\_releases/2009/06/professor-kane-comments-on-mayor-meninos-charter-school-initiative.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/blog/news_features_releases/2009/06/professor-kane-comments-on-mayor-meninos-charter-school-initiative.html).

<sup>3</sup> INSTITUTE ON RACE AND POVERTY, FAILED PROMISES: ASSESSING CHARTER SCHOOLS IN THE TWIN CITIES (2008), available at [http://www.irpumn.org/uls/resources/projects/2\\_Charter\\_Report\\_Final.pdf](http://www.irpumn.org/uls/resources/projects/2_Charter_Report_Final.pdf). Minnesota is the state with the longest history of charter schools. The IRP analysis finds: “Despite nearly two decades of experience, charter schools in Minnesota still perform worse on average than comparable traditional public schools. Although a few charter schools perform well, most offer low income parents and parents of color an inferior choice—a choice between low-performing traditional public schools and charter schools that perform even worse.” *Id.* at 1. The report goes on to state that “charter schools have intensified racial and economic segregation in [Minneapolis and St. Paul schools].” *Id.* Similarly, other researchers found that in Florida, Michigan, Texas and Pennsylvania, test scores in charter schools that had been operating for more than three years did no better than public schools did. In Michigan, three studies found lower test score levels in charters than in similar public schools. MARTIN CARNOY ET AL., *supra* note 1, at 43. In North Carolina, a study of students who had attended both charters and public schools demonstrated that the students did far less well in charter schools. *Id.* at 44.

tend to worsen already high levels of racial and economic segregation.<sup>4</sup> And here, too, the research consensus is clear: Racial and economic segregation in schools tends to engender and exacerbate inequality over the short and long term.<sup>5</sup>

It need not be this way. Properly designed and regulated, we could refashion charter schools into tools for *increasing* racial and economic diversity, which, research shows, actually *does* tend to enhance the educational experience and outcomes for all groups.<sup>6</sup> That said, research on the benefits of racial and economic diversity in schools is far stronger and clearer than the research literature advocates often use to justify the creation of more charter schools. Across the nation, educators and elected leaders are exploring regional solutions for vast and growing unequal opportunities.<sup>7</sup>

***The research on the benefits of racial and economic diversity in schools is far stronger and clearer than the research literature advocates often use to justify the creation of more charter schools.***

Employing a new, regional vision for charter schools, Massachusetts could take the lead in providing high quality education in settings that approximate the larger, increasingly diverse democratic society our students must join as adults. Incentives to create charter schools that enroll students from several racially and economically distinct school districts – say, one city and several suburbs – could result in better schools that, as research suggests, are better equipped to reduce inequalities.<sup>8</sup> Why not take what we have learned from the well-functioning charter schools and attempt to replicate that in desegregated settings?

There is plenty of reason to believe that these schools would be tremendously popular to families in and around Massachusetts' cities. In a recent Pew/Kaiser poll, nearly 60 percent of people surveyed said that "integrated" schools made schools better for students.<sup>9</sup> (Only 7 percent said they thought "integration" made schools worse.<sup>10</sup>) In Connecticut, the names of thousands of families are sitting on waiting lists for racially diverse regional magnet and charter schools. Likewise, thousands of families in Boston and Springfield are on waiting lists to take part in the METCO desegregation program, through which students who live in the city choose to attend schools in suburbs.

---

<sup>4</sup> See INSTITUTE ON RACE AND POVERTY, *supra* note 3. See also, ROSLYN MICKELSON, ET AL., EDUCATION POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE AT ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY, SCHOOL CHOICE AND SEGREGATION BY RACE, CLASS, AND ACHIEVEMENT (2008), available at <http://epsl.asu.edu/epru/documents/EPsL-0803-260-RPRU.pdf>; David R. Garcia, *The Impact of School Choice on Racial Segregation in Charter Schools*, 22 EDUC. POL., 805 (2008).

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., DOUGLAS MASSEY, ET AL., THE CONTINUING CONSEQUENCES OF SEGREGATION: FAMILY STRESS AND COLLEGE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE, 85 SOC. SCI. Q. 1353 (2004); NATIONAL ACADEMY OF EDUCATION, RACE-CONSCIOUS POLICIES FOR ASSIGNING STUDENTS TO SCHOOLS: SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH AND THE SUPREME COURT CASES (2007), available at [http://www.naeducation.org/Meredith\\_Report.pdf](http://www.naeducation.org/Meredith_Report.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Roslyn Mickelson, *Twenty-first Century Social Science on School Racial Diversity and Educational Outcomes*, 69 OHIO ST. L.J. 1173 (2008); Brief of 553 Social Scientists as Amicus Curiae in Support of Respondents, Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1, 551 U.S. 701 (2007) (Nos. 05-908 & 05-915); Brief of the American Educational Research Association as Amicus Curiae in Support of Respondents, Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1, 551 U.S. 701 (2007) (Nos. 05-908 & 05-915). These briefs, and more information about these voluntary integration cases, can be found at

[http://www.naacpldf.org/volint/add\\_docs/volint\\_school\\_amicus.html](http://www.naacpldf.org/volint/add_docs/volint_school_amicus.html). See also ERIC HANUSHEK, JOHN KAIN & STEVEN RIVKIN, NEW EVIDENCE ABOUT BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION: THE COMPLEX EFFECTS OF SCHOOL RACIAL COMPOSITION ON ACHIEVEMENT (2004), available at <http://edpro.stanford.edu/hanushek/admin/pages/files/uploads/race.pdf>; DOUGLAS HARRIS, CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS, LOST LEARNING, FORGOTTEN PROMISES: A NATIONAL ANALYSIS OF SCHOOL RACIAL SEGREGATION, STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT, AND "CONTROLLED CHOICE" PLANS (2006), available at <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2006/11/pdf/lostlearning.pdf>; Shelly Brown-Jeffy, *The Race Gap in High School Reading Achievement: Why School Racial Composition Still Matters*, 13 RACE, GENDER & CLASS 268 (2006); Kathryn Borman, et al., *Accountability in a Post-Desegregation Era: The Continuing Significance of Racial Segregation in Florida's Schools*, 41 AM. EDUC. RES. J. 605 (2004).

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., JENNIFER JELLISON HOLME ET AL., THE CHARLES HAMILTON HOUSTON INSTITUTE FOR RACE & JUSTICE, USING REGIONAL COALITIONS TO ADDRESS SOCIOECONOMIC ISOLATION: A CASE STUDY OF THE OMAHA METROPOLITAN AGREEMENT (2009); ANITA WADHWA, THE CHARLES HAMILTON HOUSTON INSTITUTE FOR RACE & JUSTICE, CROSSING THE LINE AND CLOSING THE GAP: INTERDISTRICT MAGNET SCHOOLS AS REMEDIES FOR SEGREGATION, CONCENTRATED POVERTY AND INEQUALITY (2009); MYRON ORFIELD, AMERICAN METROPOLITICS: NEW SUBURBAN REALITY (2002).

<sup>8</sup> Argun Saaticoglu, *Disentangling School- and Student-Level Effects of Desegregation and Resegregation on the Dropout Problem in Urban High Schools: Evidence from the Cleveland Municipal School District, 1977–1998*, \_\_\_ TCHRS. C. REC. \_\_\_ (forthcoming 2010) (on file with authors).

<sup>9</sup> PEW HISPANIC CENTER & KAISER FAMILY FOUNDATION, NATIONAL SURVEY OF LATINOS 29 (2004), available at <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/25.2.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

The Houston Institute recommends that Governor Deval Patrick and Massachusetts Education Secretary Paul Reville assign a working group to investigate the feasibility of creating racially and ethnically diverse regional charter schools. Such a working group would make recommendations to the State Board of Education and ideally include local parent and community leaders, students and educators from public and charter schools, government officials and university-based thinkers who understand these issues from a national perspective.

***We urge officials to put the achievement of racial and economic diversity high on the public education agenda.***

We urge officials to put the achievement of racial and economic diversity high on the public education agenda. Our nation and state are increasingly rich in racial, cultural and linguistic diversity. However, our communities and our public schools remain highly segregated by race and economic class. This is a recipe for poorly prepared citizens, a fragmented society and other huge costs to the Commonwealth. It also undermines the establishment of a cohesive, well-functioning democracy, in which we all have a stake.

Massachusetts can do better. A modern, egalitarian vision for charter schools can help us get there.