

Charter School and inequality in Public education

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Public Policy Process 20:834:524:90

November 11, 2019

Abstract

Primary and secondary Education correlates with numerous chronic issues that the most governments in the United States are fighting. Communities cannot fight poverty, unemployment, drugs, delinquency without first tackling the problem within our communities that is education. Without the proper knowledge, our minorities are most likely not going to be eligible to pursue higher education and, therefore, not obtain decent-paying jobs. Although public education is free, minorities living in urban and poor communities are mistreated in the public system. They do not receive equal education as their peers who live in the wealthier districts. The resources are scarce, and their education suffers. The charter school system is an innovation that could allow those children to opt for better education by choosing to attend one of those schools. While charter schools aim to change the norms and give parents the option of school of choice, they should be careful not to unnecessarily segregate an already stratified system. Policy makers need to ensure equity in the charter school system, otherwise it would defeat its purpose.

This paper is a revised, updated version of a piece for Public Policy Process 20:834:524:90, Fall 2019.

Introduction

Children are the future of communities. For children to become efficient and active members of society, they need a proper education. Education is, therefore, a critical factor in determining the path of every child. Poor education, whether one likes it or not, is the root of most social issues that society is experiencing poverty, drugs, incarceration. For sustainable changes to occur in those areas of social lives, there needs to be sustainable reform in our educational system. Education was considered a mechanism to ensure that citizens were making choices consistent with the democratic values of the republic and was also a means to maintain order. Through education, we transmit culture, promote integration provides training and social control. It is also how we contribute to innovation within communities. Through education we establish the norms of what ought to be done and consider proper. It was imperative then that schools be public entities to provide education equally to all regarding their social background. Although the federal government create policies on a broader scale at a national level, state and local withhold the authority to create accessibility policies. State education departments determine school district rules and guidelines, allocate funding, set teaching standards, and establish curricula, among other authorities they possess. But the system had its flaws, and a prevalent one was educational funding inequality, which substantially affects the quality of the education provided depending on the school district. The social division of society followed suit in the educational system. Schools in wealthy areas had better quality education and more resources, while those in poor neighborhoods struggled.

A history of inequality

Minorities have known well the scarcity of resources that hinder schools' operations and abilities to provide equal education. The Jim Crow laws of 1896, in the southern states have

created a separate but equal doctrine, where people of color were not allowed to in the same establishment as white folks. According to Hunter (2009), “The **separate but equal doctrine** enunciated in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) **legalized** the common practice of providing **unequal public education** for **black public-school students** in the United States” (p. 575). The ruling made it legal for southern governments to create different facilities for black and white for most public facilities, including but not restricted to public transportation, restrooms, train cars, schools. While they were to be equal, facilities designated for people of color, were often unfunded and uncared for. Therefore, black schools lacked resources to provide education to their pupils. Such rules had created a significant gap between black or minority students and white students; the latter received a superior education while the former received a substandard one.

The substandard education received by black students, have hindered their capacity to fully integrated society. They have been deprived of the privilege of creating a better future for their future family. Hunter (2009) also relates that “These conditions have created significant obstacles for Black students and the public educational system, and some would say even lessened their ability to operate in the global economy” (p.2). The Jim Crow laws not only have segregated communities into black and whites but, at the same time, have drawn major socio-economic lines. Because people of color were not to exercise a specific function or occupy a particular position reserved for the whites, they had to accept jobs that paid close to nothing and condemn to stay in poverty. Their low status in society robbed them and their children of all the opportunities that were available supposedly to all citizens.

School District funding scheme

Each school district received funds from their property tax revenues and subsequent federal aid. Segregation automatically reduced the funds used towards the education of the children living in minority districts. Owens et al. (2016) explains, “First, between-district income segregation may lead to inequalities in the financial resources available to school districts” (p. 1161). High-income children have access to more resources, and better teachers than do children with low-income. A sizeable portion of school funding is raised mainly through property taxes, therefore, funding available for the low-income student will sustain considerable variation. Income segregation thus implies variation in school funding between school districts. As it is explained by Cochran & al. (2012),

Because of the uniquely American tradition of local control, local tax sources, primarily the property tax, generate over 40 percent of elementary and secondary school revenues. The result is a system in which local school district funds are limited by the value of taxable properties, which varies widely from district to district within a state. This unequal distribution of resources works to the disadvantage of residents of poor districts (p.319).

This would imply that the low value attributed to properties in minority communities, would later affect the amount of funding that would be allocated to school districts. Hence the type of education you receive depends highly on your location and social status. Therefore, students in minority communities are at a disadvantage because of restrictions and burdens put upon their elders for generations. The marginalization of their communities will always be a barrier between them and the education they deserve to pull themselves out of poverty.

Charter schools: the promise of school choice

The introduction of charter schools have provided parents in less favorable school districts the opportunity to enroll their children in programs they deem more fitting to them. And, they could do this switch without the financial burden that would have come with private schools. The charter schools could be a public or private entity granted authorization to operate a school by the state's Boards of Education. They enjoy more autonomy than would traditional public schools and are at most exempt from particular state and local regulations. It is tuition-free, publicly funded and provides educational choices to students and parents. The option of choice integrated into the public-school system has somewhat contributed to allowing students in impoverished school districts to attend charter schools that offer tailored education that caters to the student's individual needs and has also provided an avenue of access for equal opportunity (May, 2006). They have the capacity and resources to create strategies that cater to their student's improvement. These are opportunities that the students might not have had access to if they were to attend the regular school system. Charters schools offer a tailored education appropriate to the needs of the children. Some of them have built-in programs, such as arts and science, which are a tremendous help in preparing the students for college. Wilson (2016) reported that "Charter schools, as 'instruments of civil society as well as places of teaching and learning,' provide new opportunities for parents and community groups to create schools relevant to their needs and values" (p.920). This argument is what makes the choice of charter school so compelling to parents. Charter schools are opening doors to the underrepresented and offering them the possibility to receive the proper education that each student deserves.

Charter schools were created with the concept of student performance and achievements, and they have a higher level of accountability to parents. This aspect is not prevalent in traditional public schools as they do not cater to the student's individual needs but rather to the

needs of the majority. Some believe that it is time that schools grow out of that model and provide the type of education that the children ought to receive. Charter schools can offer that, because they are not caught up with the extensive bureaucratic regulations to which public schools are subject. Lubienski (2003) explains, “efforts to free schools from burdensome bureaucratic regulations are intended to undercut monopolistic political control of public education, giving educators in charter schools the opportunity and motivation to experiment with new instructional strategies (p. 396). The charters have the liberty to craft a curriculum that matches their student needs and they can adjust it as they see fit to enhance student learning and overall performance. In traditional public schools, there is too much emphasis put on the administrative obligations and not enough of the needs of children, which is needed to ensure their performance is at the same level as kids that are in a better school district. Charters schools gave the parents the choice to get out of that system.

Charters: More or Less Equality?

There is more than one way for charter schools to impact the performance of students within their districts. Because they deal with less red tape than traditional public schools, charter schools could focus more on students’ improvement than their traditional counterparts. They can hire more teachers and could use their resources more efficiently than would traditional public schools. They can allocate more time to address students’ weaknesses and help them effectively. They can also incite improvement, because they can provide students with a more tailored education that is not on-size-fits-all, unlike traditional public schools. Most importantly, they can provoke competition with traditional public schools by forcing them to provide better education to pupils to secure funds that would otherwise go to charters if the students should choose to transfer there. Ertas (2013) reported, “Market-based theories of school choice favoring

competition in education argue that increased parental choice will enhance the efficiency of not only choice schools but also nonchoice schools by stimulating improvement in the entire system (p.1). By deciding which school their children should attend, parents are forcing traditional schools and charters to compete to do business with them. The choice factor will help parents satisfy their need of getting what is best in term of education, and not settle for what is mandated by the government. At the same time, it forces traditional public schools to work on the array of services they offer, to maintain the competition. If this theory was to be true, the result from charter schools could be beneficial even for those students whose parents have not decided to switch to a charter. The competition would force public school to do a better job at educating its pupils.

Opinions on the prominence of charters and results from various studies are divided. Most traditional public schools see charters as a threat and have constantly criticized their mere existence as having negative impacts on districts whether legitimate or frivolous. Still, this is more on a financial level, as charters lower the funding they would typically receive. On an academic note, the results have also been mixed. Advocates for charter schools claimed that they should be performing more efficiently and effectively than public schools and creating competitive market pressures that serve to improve achievement in public schools (May, 2006). However, this is just an assumption, those claims have yet to be verified by actual data. There is no evidence of charters being better schools.

Charter school's racial and social balance

Several have been wary of charter schools building more segregation into the public system. Although most parents choose which schools their children should attend, the charters also have the choice in who attends their schools. Charters use a variations of admission process.

Some use a lottery system, others use a first-come-first-served policy or a combination of both (Ascher and Wanba, 2003). Although it seems fair, it presents certain challenges as charters tend to undermine the notion of racial and social balance as they seem to target specific groups within their community. A report from the 2010 UCLA Civil right projects showed that 70% of black charter students are enrolled in intensely segregated schools, and 43% of them attended schools that were populated with over 99% of minorities (Mead and Green, 2012). Those numbers are higher than the representation in traditional public schools. Some fear that those statistics are not in favor of equity in the educational future of charters. Schools with a concentration of minorities tend to have higher teacher turnover and lower education outcomes. Most importantly, they tend to have less funding per student.

While charters do increase racial and ethnic segregation, it cannot be compared to segregation of the *pre-Brown* era. Parents have chosen those school to take advantage of the unconventional advantage of charters over traditional public schools. Nevertheless the segregation of minorities in charters school can in the future hinder students ability to live and work in a diverse environment. This continue to put minorities at a disadvantage. Their limited access to other social networks prohibit effective integration in society whether it is everyday life or work. Therefore the racial and social imbalance among charters can be damaging to minority students. Thus, policymakers, should be concern about the impact of segregation within the charter schools and consider including more civil right protection in policies regarding charters in general.

Conclusion

The history of race and income segregation has led our public education system to provide an unequal education nationwide to students based on their socio-economic status and

race. Despite many attempts by policymakers to remedy the issue, the problem remains. The rise in charter school enrollment has proved that parents in low-income communities care about the education their children are receiving and would like their kid to perform and seize the many opportunities available to them. While charters have indeed provided parents in minority communities the option of school choice, some have been concerned about their demographic inequity. Some schools seem to be highly segregated with minorities and low income students. But, while it might make sense since charters aim at reducing the educational gap in the public school system for minorities, segregation can be detrimental. The segregation of minorities in charters and traditional public schools hinders their capacity to fully function in a diverse workplace or in general. for lack of exposure to other social group. We urge policy makers to make sure that there are clauses that encourage more diverse student bodies, so the pupils can gain from the benefits it brings.

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