

Published Online: June 1, 2012

Published in Print: June 6, 2012, as **Studies Spotlight Charter Schools Aimed at Diversity**

Updated: January 30, 2013

Studies Spotlight Charters Designed for Integration

By [Jaclyn Zubrzycki](#)

Nearly six decades after *Brown v. Board of Education*, the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision that ushered in an era of efforts to integrate public schools, charter school advocates and researchers are shining a light on a number of those independent public schools that are integrated by design.

Two new reports—one from the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools, another from the Century Foundation and the Poverty & Race Research Action Council—examine charter schools that have racially and socioeconomically diverse enrollments as part of their school missions. Researchers and advocates say that there is increasing demand for such schools, but that national educational priorities and policies are not necessarily stacked in their favor.

“Charters have always had the potential to be incredibly diverse schools,” said Amy Stuart Wells, a professor of sociology and education at Teachers College, Columbia University. “They’re not bound to residential patterns,” she said, which means that their student populations need not reflect the less diverse neighborhoods where they might be located.

But [research](#) from the Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles, at the University of California, Los Angeles, indicates that many charter schools are more racially segregated than regular public schools, many of which have also become less diverse in recent decades.

“Charters could be more integrated than traditional public schools. The great tragedy is that they’re more segregated,” said Richard D. Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation, a Washington think tank. “The charter school community is recognizing that to the extent that it’s seen as segregated, that’s a negative thing.”

Fresh Focus

The [brief](#) from the Washington-based National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, or NAPCS, highlights six high-performing charter schools, three of which specifically formed to create a more diverse alternative to existing neighborhood schools. The remaining three focus on serving disadvantaged children.

The NAPCS brief, “A Mission to Serve: How Public Charter Schools are Designed to Meet the Diverse Demands of Our Communities,” presents both approaches as potentially effective, but says that “the past decade or so ... has seen a noteworthy rise in high-performing public charter schools with missions intentionally designed to serve racially and economically integrated student populations.” These schools differ from charter schools that are required to be diverse in order to meet targets set by districts or authorizers.

And the [report](#) from the Century Foundation and the Poverty & Race Research Action Council, or PRRAC, a Washington-based civil rights policy organization, titled “Diverse Charter Schools: Can Racial and Socioeconomic Integration Promote Better Outcomes for Students?,” focuses exclusively on seven diverse high-performing charter schools and their strategies for recruiting and maintaining integrated student enrollments. A few of the schools were also profiled by the NAPCS.

The spotlight on integrated schools represents a shift in focus for the charter movement, said Mr. Kahlenberg, who is also one of the Century Foundation-PRRAC report’s authors and a leading proponent of policies that foster socioeconomic integration of schools.

That report suggests that the benefits of having more integrated charter schools may outweigh the successes of a few of the more well-known charters, some of which are more racially isolated. “If charter schools were uniformly producing high achievement levels, then there would be real logic to packing as many poor kids into charters as you could,” Mr. Kahlenberg said. But those schools have mixed results.

“So we’re suggesting that the charter community should be looking at a variety of options, including integrated charters,” Mr. Kahlenberg said.

Both reports also include recommendations for federal and state policymakers, including suggesting that charter schools be permitted to receive federal startup funding even if they use a weighted lottery—rather than a random drawing—in order to create an integrated student population.

No one has tallied just how many integrated-by-design charter schools exist, but the increasing number of charter school incubators with an interest in diversity, such as the Rhode Island Mayoral Academies incubator that supported the development of socioeconomically diverse charter schools like Blackstone Valley Prep in Cumberland, R.I., indicates that the number may be on the rise.

Integrated Design

Currently, though, only a small percentage of the nation's more-than-5,000 charter schools are designed with diversity in mind. The integrated schools tend to be designed to “solve a concrete problem in a very specific neighborhood or city,” said Renita Thukral, the senior director of legal affairs at the NAPCS. Some schools, like Capital City Public Charter School in the District of Columbia, are located in neighborhoods that are themselves diverse or going through a transition. Others, like Blackstone Valley Prep, are situated to be accessible to neighborhoods with different populations.



Oliver Beglinger, from left, Joe Blaugrand, and Hyurk Ju Lee work with fellow student Lauren Boylston, facing away, on a science experiment with Legos in their 5th grade class at Larchmont Charter School in Los Angeles. The school uses projects and other hands-on approaches to make learning more engaging for students.

—Jamie Rector for Education Week

Many of the schools also use weighted lotteries to help ensure diversity. Larchmont Charter School in Los Angeles, for instance, gives students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch a 2-to-1 weight in its lottery. “They get two tickets in the hat,” said Executive Director Gene Straub.

In San Diego, the High Tech High public charter schools use ZIP codes to help ensure a balance of students from different communities.

Even before charters host a lottery, and especially if the lottery is unweighted, school staff members and founders must recruit students from each community they hope to educate. The schools highlighted in the two reports hosted meetings, sent representatives door to door, and advertised in local newspapers until they built reputations strong enough to ensure full lotteries that yield a school with students from a variety of backgrounds.

At Larchmont Charter School, Mr. Straub said that 2,000 families had entered a lottery for the 2012-13 school year’s incoming kindergarten class, which will have 66 students—and whose slots are already partly reserved for siblings of current students or the children of staff members or school founders, who can make up as much as 10 percent of the student body.

Mr. Straub said that the school continued to weight applications from students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, as they represent a smaller portion of applicants overall.

Not an Easy Task

Using a weighted lottery can help create diversity, but it makes a school ineligible for federal charter startup funds, said Mr. Kahlenberg. Guidance from the federal Charter Schools Program permits schools to use weighted lotteries only in order to comply with Title IX, the law against sex discrimination in federally funded education programs, or with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This usually arises in districts where there is an active desegregation plan, though schools often still shy away from using race in lotteries, tending, for instance, to increase recruiting efforts to underrepresented populations.

“This is a disincentive to charter schools that want to proactively take steps to integrate,” Mr. Kahlenberg said of the rules governing federal startup money. Thus, charter schools hoping to achieve diversity might ask for contributions from well-off parents, and often rely on support from private foundations.

At the same time, some states require charters to have racial, socioeconomic, special education, or English-language-learner students in proportions that reflect the demographics of the district in which they are located—which may not reflect the demographics desired by school founders.

There is disagreement, however, on what an integrated student population looks like. As Thomas A. Saenz, the president and general counsel of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, noted: In Los Angeles, where more than 70 percent of students in the public school district are Latino, for instance, is a school whose population is 20 percent Latino diverse?

“You need an appropriate demographic comparison,” he said.

Though engineering integration takes work for charter schools, said Philip Tegeler, the executive director of PRRAC, “to not choose it is a choice in and of itself. You’re basically accepting the social engineering that already exists by refusing to choose diversity as a possibility.”

Cream of the Crop?

At the same time, charter schools seeking to promote integration sometimes find themselves subject to a criticism common to charter schools—that they “cream” the most likely-to-succeed children from the regular public schools in their neighborhoods. Charter schools with larger white populations than surrounding public schools may be particularly susceptible to this claim, as “some early charters were perceived as white-flight schools,” said the NAPCS’s Ms. Thurkal.

While researching *Gentrification and Schools: The Process of Integration When Whites Reverse Flight*, a book to be published in July by Palgrave Macmillan, Jennifer B. Stillman, now a research analyst for the New York City department of education’s office of innovation, found some New York City parents in changing neighborhoods who felt that diversity-focused charter schools competed with efforts to integrate regular public schools.

“The charter schools were able to start off as diverse schools,” she said, while many of the regular schools in the city had very few white children.

Even with a lottery system, there is concern that schools intended to be diverse can wind up as racial or socioeconomic enclaves that resemble private schools, said Michael J. Petrilli, the vice president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, an education research and advocacy group in Washington.

Intentional efforts to recruit minority and disadvantaged students actually make the resemblance between charters and private schools stronger, added Ms. Wells of Teachers College, as many private schools have long reached out to lower-income students. She also expressed concern that charter schools may achieve racial diversity without serving students with learning or physical disabilities, though some states require charters to have targets for these populations; New York state, for instance, recently re-emphasized its intention to enforce such targets.

Despite concerns, the charter schools highlighted in the NAPCS report are often both high-performing and remarkably diverse. In 2010-11, for instance, E.L. Haynes Public Charter School in the District of Columbia had an enrollment that was 54 percent African-American, 31 percent Hispanic, 12 percent white, and 3 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, and 70 percent of the overall student enrollment was eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, according to the NAPCS report.

Balancing Philosophies

Once charter schools have attracted diverse enrollments, “there’s a lot of work done to make sure they’re serving all students, that they’re integrated in practice,” said Halley Potter, a policy associate at the Century Foundation and another author of its new report.

Part of the challenge stems from different expectations about education and schooling.

The “no excuses” philosophy popular in many charter schools, which focuses on discipline and more-traditional teaching practices, has garnered attention for some positive results with

disadvantaged students, but “middle-class parents generally aren’t interested in that,” said Mr. Petrilli.

On the other hand, several models of progressive education that place less emphasis on basic skills have not been consistently demonstrated to be effective for more-disadvantaged students, he said.

The reports illustrate schools attempting to strike a balance.

In Denver, the DSST (formerly the Denver School of Science and Technology) charter schools and San Diego’s High Tech High have a science and technology focus that appeals to parents from different backgrounds. Blackstone Valley Prep in Rhode Island uses a model that resembles the no-excuses model, but refers to it as “high expectations” and also advertises arts and language programs.

Those schools also use different strategies to avoid resegregation through tracking; the DSST, for instance, offers honors classes not as separate classes but through additional assignments within the same classroom.

Cultural gaps between families and students from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds can go beyond educational philosophy. At Community Roots, a progressive charter school in New York City, a staff “community-development coordinator” is tasked with making sure parents and students from each of the school’s communities is served and represented. At Blackstone Valley Prep, a parent committee is beginning to offer Spanish and English lessons to parents to bridge the language gap between residents of different communities.

Mr. Straub of Larchmont Charter School said building the school culture there takes a significant amount of commitment and work.

“You can’t take this and put it in a box and ship it out. These really are schools of choice,” he said. “Communities have to say, ‘We want this model, we understand what it takes to have this model,’ ” he said.

Meanwhile, charters overall still make up just a small fraction of the nation’s public schools, with approximately 2 million of the nation’s 55.5 million K-12 students attending some 5,600 schools—“a drop in the bucket,” said the Century Foundation’s Ms. Potter.

But as existing diverse charter schools have begun to expand—DSST now has five schools, for instance—and as more schools with similar missions sprout up, such charters may still have a broad impact, said Mr. Kahlenberg.

“The charter school model initially was meant not as a replacement for public [education], but as a laboratory for experimentation,” he said. “When you have a heterogeneous population, how do you ensure that there isn’t tracking within the school that resegregates? How do you make sure teachers are trained to address children with a wide variety of needs?

“This is one of the issues charters can be helpful with.”

Coverage of parent-empowerment issues is supported by a grant from the Walton Family Foundation, at www.waltonfamilyfoundation.org.