

# **UCLA**

## **K-12 Integration and Diversity**

### **Title**

Segregated Choices: Magnet and Charter Schools

### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7x1335xp>

### **Authors**

Pfleger, Ryan

Orfield, Gary

### **Publication Date**

2024-04-11

### **Data Availability**

The data associated with this publication are within the manuscript.

### **Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

# SEGREGATED CHOICES: MAGNET AND CHARTER SCHOOLS



Ryan Pflieger and Gary Orfield

APRIL 11, 2024

The Civil Rights Project



*Proyecto Derechos Civiles*

Suggested Citation:

Pfleger, R., and Orfield, G. (April 2024). *Segregated Choices: Magnet and Charter Schools*. Los Angeles, CA: The Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles, UCLA.

© 2024 Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles, UCLA

## **Acknowledgements**

The authors appreciate the insightful comments provided by Jenn Ayscue and Genevieve Siegel-Hawley. This report is based on research funded, in part, by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the Civil Rights Project funders.

## Foreword

Schools of choice became widespread in American education a half century ago as part of the effort to desegregate highly segregated big cities with large Black and Latino enrollments. The new system, magnet schools, became very popular with school district leaders as a solution to legal mandates and with many parents, who wanted the new choices. (Private schools, mostly religious schools, have always been a part of American education. They are now considerably smaller than they were a generation ago and serve about a tenth of American students.) Less than a quarter century later another, very different, system of choice schools—charter schools—emerged and rapidly grew. It was part of a movement highly critical of traditional public schools and deeply influenced by the Reagan era theories of testing and focus on traditional essentials, without the social goals of the magnets or the magnets’ commitment to highly distinctive schools with a city-wide membership. Charter schools at their outset were concentrated in poor Black and Latino areas, promising better options because of the commitment of their founders and the freedom they were given from the school district bureaucracy. Magnets had received strong federal incentives in the 1970’s but government poured resources and bipartisan support into charters from 1991 through the Trump period.

Most of the original legal framework for magnet schools has now been stripped away by court decisions but magnets still enroll millions of children. Charter schools, supported by public vouchers, arose out of a period in which the public schools were under attack, civil rights policies were being reversed in the courts, market ideas were very important to the conservative movement, and there was bitter conflict over voucher proposals. The idea of publicly supported schools run by private educators drew bipartisan support and strong business endorsement when it surfaced in 1991. Conservatives saw it bypassing the public-school boards and the teachers’ unions. Opponents saw it as at least keeping public resources in nonsectarian schools in the public sector. Charters were

supported heavily by business groups and three Republican and two Democratic presidents. They spread very rapidly. Charters have been criticized for weak civil rights policies and high segregation.

This report analyzes growth in both school sectors and their changing racial composition. It reports the levels of segregation and diversity in these two systems, important because of strong evidence that diverse schools produce educational gains and substantial lifelong benefits in terms of college, employment and other key life goals (reardon, Heewon & Weathers, 2022). Segregation has been increasing in U.S. schools for more than three decades and choice is a possible way to cross lines of racial divisions. Is there a significant difference between these systems? What can we learn about possible ways to improve the outcomes of choice programs?

One reason to focus on choice is that the American public favors the idea of choice and prefers to use choice as the method to deal with segregation in unequal schools. Though mandatory orders produced a higher level of desegregation, the constraints of an increasingly conservative Supreme Court and national administrations meant that few major mandatory plans have been implemented in the last four decades, and most of the older plans have been dismantled by the courts. A 2019 national Gallup survey reported that while only 43% favored mandating busing students to desegregate schools (and only a third of whites), 79% of Americans favored magnet schools to reduce segregation, including three-fourths of whites and even 72% of Republicans. Almost nine-tenths of Blacks and Latinos favored it (McCarthy, 2019). If the public supports something to resolve a serious issue and fixes on a method, it is very important to analyze how that method is working.

Magnets, the first large systems of choice-based schools in American history, grew out of the effort to desegregate the large city schools through a method designed to include few or no involuntary school transfers. A series of Supreme Court decisions obligated urban districts to break the historic pattern of intentional segregation of students of color in inferior schools. Large plans

simply reassigning students to different schools to produce desegregation were very controversial, especially at the beginning. Innovations by educators and community groups and political choices by federal and local officials led to the emergence of many hundreds of new magnet schools designed to attract students to voluntarily cross racial lines by creating new and valued educational options, special programs moving beyond core educational requirements. They were of intense interest to many parents.

The first magnet schools were developed under *voluntary* local desegregation plans; some were in university towns with voluntary desegregation efforts. Magnet schools, later often created under *court order* in desegregation plans, could offer special educational programs and approaches not available in regular schools, because desegregation plans created systems for transporting students from segregated neighborhoods to diverse schools elsewhere. In 1967, Evanston IL turned the segregated black Foster School into a laboratory school, attracting students from the entire district, including children of Northwestern University graduate students. Another school, established with support from the University of Illinois, was the Booker T. Washington school in Champaign, which became a magnet school in 1968. It was the first school in the world to use touch screen computers, invented at the University. There was also a magnet school established in Washington state in 1968. These were local ideas to attract whites to voluntarily enroll in a historically segregated school in a nonwhite neighborhood. By the early 1970s, Boston, Minneapolis and other cities were developing magnet schools and Cincinnati was starting on what became an influential plan (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

The Supreme Court's 1973 decision in the *Keyes* case about Denver, Colorado set the stage for major desegregation orders for city school systems outside the South. Citywide plans could be ordered whenever the civil rights lawyers proved substantial discriminatory action by local officials through evidence and testimony. Almost every city that was sued was found guilty. These were

constitutional violations and required remedies. Major cities were then faced with an enormous challenge. Mandated transfers were highly controversial and were opposed by the Nixon administration. There was a hunger for less coercive plans. Many cities already had been losing white population to white suburbs since World War II, and housing segregation confined the growing Black and Latino populations to the central city. The cities were supposed to remedy a history of discrimination for a growing majority of nonwhite students with a shrinking minority of white and middle-class students. School districts feared that the white decline would accelerate with mandatory plans requiring white students to attend historically black or Latino schools in segregated neighborhoods, while nearby all white suburban districts had no desegregation.

The Supreme Court made the challenge greater. Many civil rights leaders and city school officials thought that the suburbs must share in any viable urban desegregation effort given the severe housing segregation trends. Some high federal Courts of Appeals agreed. President Nixon's Administration assailed the idea. The Supreme Court, with four Nixon appointees, ruled in the 1974 *Milliken v. Bradley* decision, setting rules that made it almost impossible to include suburbs. That meant whites could avoid desegregation by moving to the suburbs. Legal constraints lead urban school administrators to magnet schools. So did many political leaders, including Sen. Daniel Moynihan of New York and Charles Glenn of Ohio, responding to the magnet system successes by the Buffalo and Cincinnati districts. Both were sponsors of federal aid for magnet schools which led to the enactment of the Magnet Schools Assistance Act. Several national models emerged in the 1970s as large Northern and Western cities were faced with court orders to desegregate. When the Milwaukee school district, in one of the nation's most segregated cities, lost a desegregation lawsuit in 1976, it responded with a sweeping magnet school plan that produced substantial desegregation (Nelsen, 2016). After a federal court found Buffalo, NY guilty of illegal segregation in 1976, the city developed an ambitious magnet school program which became central to its educational strategy and



was hailed as a national model (Orfield & Ayscue, 2018, pp. 47–48). Many of these plans were successful in creating new schools with special missions in old buildings, opportunities that both minority and white families desired for their children. Magnet enrollments grew rapidly.

You could attract students across racial lines from far away if you could offer schools that provided a wonderful new educational opportunity for enough students to create an exciting and “magnetic” opportunity. Students could go to performing arts schools, schools built around computers, or Montessori schools, for example. In return for these opportunities, the schools had to be committed to educating students from all groups and recruiting and retaining a highly diverse mix of students. Under desegregation orders the plans usually had specific racial goals and methods, money to start the new programs, recruitment staffs, and free transportation to overcome residential segregation.

To facilitate desegregation, about half of magnet schools were placed in Black or Latino neighborhoods with few local white residents. They were staffed with diverse groups of educators motivated by the school’s special educational goal. Other magnets were placed in diverse areas and some in white communities. They featured special training and equipment needed to deliver the special service. Some proved to be extremely attractive to parents and students and regularly attracted many applicants. Typically, admission was based on interest, not tests, and overdemand was solved by lotteries, adjusted only to maintain a high level of diversity. When the schools were oversubscribed, 58% chose students by lottery, within the desegregation guidelines. Only a fifth used specific selection criteria (Orfield & Ayscue, 2018, p. 170). Magnets typically had specific desegregation requirements and used recruitment and selection mechanisms to try to meet them. Magnet schools tended to get supplemental funds for the training and implementation of special programs, and the staffing was often done outside the normal local contract, enabling selection of a staff committed to and able to implement the program. Some of these schools, especially in their

early stages, were funded by the Magnet Schools Assistance Act and the federal desegregation assistance program in the 1970s. The idea spread rapidly. These schools usually could serve only a fraction of the total district's population and did not always attain their goals. Where a magnet occupied only part of a regular school there was often internal stratification.

In 1976 the federal magnet school support program began. It received about \$30 million per year until the first year of the Reagan Administration (Blank, Levine, & Steel, 1996, pp. 155-156). The goal was to help with startup costs related to training, equipment and supplies, and other needs. The number of districts with magnet schools went from 14 to 138 in eight years from 1975-1983. By 1991 there were more than 2,400 magnet schools in 230 districts which enrolled nearly a fourth of all U.S. students. The magnet schools served 1.2 million students (Blank, Levine, & Steel, 1996, pp. 156-157), by far the largest program of public school choice in U.S. history to that point.

Many magnet schools originated in federal court desegregation plans or desegregation plans negotiated by the Office for Civil Rights or under a court order. When a court or federal civil rights officials found a constitutional violation in local segregation the courts had broad power to order whatever expenditures they believed were required to implement the plan. That became a key source of major funding for magnets. The magnets were created to produce voluntary school desegregation. Initially, there was a lot of bipartisan support for magnets, including fulsome praise from President Reagan. A strong critic of desegregation orders, he nonetheless admired the choice process inherent in magnets. In a 1987 speech in a Washington suburb, he praised magnet schools and promised a substantial increase in federal funding (Miller, 1987).

In the first federal evaluation of the magnet program in 1983, 60% of the schools were reported to be fully desegregated and many more had substantial diversity (Blank, Dentler, Baltzell, & Chabotar, 1983). A 1996 evaluation showed that about two-fifths of those receiving federal funds were fully desegregated (Steele & Eaton, 1996). Magnet schools had spread rapidly and, in many

places, were very popular. Sometimes they became the local showcase schools in troubled districts which rarely got positive publicity. Magnet schools were riding high in the 1970s and early 1980s and were strongly linked to school integration policies. Before it became common to use lotteries when there was too much demand, there were often items on local newscasts showing lines of people waiting for many hours for a chance to get in when there were still open spaces.

Magnet schools were a big change and, of course, there were limits and challenges. Some schools were opened as magnets and they failed to attract interest; they really weren't magnetic, and they just became magnets-in-name-only, often segregated neighborhood schools. Another problem was the inherent jealousy. When some schools became magnets with all the special dimensions, the others could feel that they had been implicitly designated as inferior and they resented students leaving for magnets. Although there was a strong outreach for students of color, the most informed and connected families tended to figure out the system and get more access while the least connected did not make choices or act in time. When the schools became very popular, white or Asian families with high scoring students tended to resent the admission of what they saw as students of color with weaker records, having less merit. People would use schemes and try to pressure local officials for admissions. As the courts became more conservative there was more support for the white plaintiffs. Getting the benefits of magnets without running into the backlash was a challenge. Over time, that challenge became much worse once the special resources and court orders were out of the picture.

Then things turned strongly against magnet schools as they faced a constellation of negative forces. The first was a major Supreme Court policy change in the 1991 *Dowell* decision which held that desegregation orders were temporary and should be dissolved by the federal courts after a limited time. The new magnet schools were built to last and their high level of diversity depended on race conscious recruitment and admissions. The Supreme Court decision permitted school districts

to return to neighborhood schools, even if they were segregated and unequal, unless civil rights groups could prove that it was intentionally done to discriminate, an almost impossible standard. When court orders were dropped, guaranteed funding did too. The second challenge was the emergence of a new kind of choice school much closer to the conservative idea—charter schools which were outside the control of school districts and free of most regulations, with none of the complex desegregation responsibilities. The third was a major shift in national education policy under President Reagan which dismissed social and civil rights concerns as distractions, focused on tests and accountability and math and science (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

As both desegregation requirements and funds disappeared, and policy shifted radically, of course, the basic assumptions of magnet schools changed, though some of these schools voluntarily continued what had been successful integration policies. In 1991 the Supreme Court's decision in the *Dowell* case led to the shutdown of most major desegregation plans by the end of the decade, taking away critical resources and power for magnet schools and producing steadily increasing segregation across the U.S. In 2007, in the Court's *Parents Involved* (PICS) case, the Court went further. Some districts had such successful magnets that they continued the old process without a court order. But in its 2007 decision, a divided court ruled that any voluntary plan that included considering the race of individual students was unconstitutional. For decades the courts had encouraged magnet plans which required considering race positively in recruiting and enrolling students, because it was critical to maintaining integration. It had been required in some plans and permitted in many. Now, suddenly, the dominant pattern was illegal. Justice John Paul Stevens, a Republican nominee, noted the radical shift in the courts, concluding: "It is my firm conviction that no Member of the Court that I joined in 1975 would have agreed with today's decision." The

decision meant that the plans could no longer operate in the way they had been designed and, often, successfully implemented (PICS, Stevens' dissent).

Magnet schools still existed but they often lost funds and shut down. They lost their explicit desegregation goals and mechanisms. They were forbidden to consider individual students' races or to hold seats to insure representation of students of color. Many shut down as court ordered budgets vanished. Many others lost their integration. Many of the most successful became exam schools or had special criteria that made them elite and favored privileged students while integration fell.

Congress did keep a small magnet school program, but it lost any coherent focus on racial integration. When the Obama administration commissioned the Civil Rights Project to examine its workings our research showed that it no longer had a significant impact on integration. The Administration did not release the report.

The turn against desegregation and the attacks on public schools' perceived failures produced major changes. In a 2003 report, resegregation was evident, with 40% of those receiving federal magnet grants showing increasing segregation (Christenson et al., 2003). Another analysis found almost no remaining focus on desegregation by 2010:

In 2010, 37 school districts received MSAP [Magnet School Assistance Program] grants that funded a total of 154 magnet schools.... 22% indicated they would seek to reduce MGI [minority group isolation] by less than 5% over the three-year span of the grant, 37% sought to reduce MGI by 5-10%, and 23% set a loftier goal of reducing MGI by 10-20%. Only 8% of the 154 magnet schools sought to reduce MGI by more than 20%. Despite the relatively modest goals set by most MSAP grantees, only 14 magnets (11% of grantees) met their stated goals (Ayscue & Siegel-Hawley, 2019, p. 9).

As the courts changed, white parents of high scoring students who did not get into the most popular magnets began to file lawsuits demanding that the set asides of seats for students of color to guarantee integration be forbidden and that school admissions be changed to “neutral” factors like test scores (which were, of course, strongly related to race and class given the inequality in segregated school preparation). In the more conservative era, a single parent’s lawsuit could bring down a district’s entire magnet approach. This happened, for example, in a lawsuit against Boston Latin school, the nation’s oldest school, a high achieving exam school which had a set aside to guarantee significant Black and Latino representation in a school system with few whites (Wedge, 2022; *Wessmann v. Gittens*, 1998). It also happened in Charlotte when Mecklenburg County, the first district where the Supreme Court had approved busing, was forced to abandon a plan its board and voters believed to be successful and wanted to retain, leading to dramatic resegregation (Mickelson, Smith & Nelson, 2015).

Some schools retained staff and values from the integration experience, benefitted from a record of successful diversity and strong programs and retained significant diversity. The data we examine in this report is from a two-decade period that begins a decade after the 1991 Supreme Court decision dismantling desegregation plans and a few years before the Parents Involved decision which forbade assignment of students on the basis of race. So the diversity we report shows that the magnet mechanism, even without its legal framework and tools, can produce and retain some diversity. When compared with charter schools these schools are significantly less segregated. Something of the initial promise remained even when the requirements and supports were removed.

Magnet schools are now prevented from using race directly to assure integration, but they can use any other criteria, and some produce some significant diversity. Districts still under court order or where proof of a new violation generates a new order can still consider race directly.

Berkeley CA uses the race of neighborhoods rather than the race of individuals in allocating priority

access. Districts can give preference to students in concentrated poverty schools or to students with another home language or to students who want courses about a particular racial/ethnic group, each of which can produce some diversity.

*-Gary Orfield*

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .....	2
Foreword.....	3
Table of Figures and Tables.....	14
Executive Summary.....	15
Magnets in the Last Two Decades.....	17
The Charter Surge .....	20
The Analytic Sample .....	26
Results .....	28
Discussion, Outstanding Questions and Recommendations .....	32
References.....	36
Appendix.....	40
Analytic Sample: Findings Robust to Alternative Inclusion Thresholds.....	40
Data and Measures .....	40
Districts in the Analytic Sample.....	43
Calculating Exposure .....	44

## Table of Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Charter and Magnet School Enrollment, 2000–2021.....	25
Figure 2: Exposure to White Students by Choice Type, 2000–2021.....	28
Figure 3: Racial Composition of Magnet and Charter Schools, 2000–2021 .....	29
Figure 4: Percentage of Intensely Segregated Schools, Magnet vs. Charter, 2000–2021 .....	30
Table 1: Descriptive Statistics, by Analytic Sample Inclusion, 2000 and 2021 .....	42



## Executive Summary

Comparing charter and magnet schools is important, yet complex. Different cities have different demographics and legal and educational histories. Some have a significant presence of only one of the two types, among other differences. This analysis describes levels of diversity in a comparable subset of schools to enable policy-relevant comparisons between charter and magnet schools. We examine schools in districts that had at least five charter schools and five magnet schools in any year since 2000. This selection includes most of the 100 largest school districts since both types of schools developed mostly in large urban districts. This sample is especially relevant to choice policies because it allows comparisons in the same districts where both types of school choice have been tried at a significant level. This study describes the level of segregation in recent decades in large districts which had a significant presence of schools of both types.

The new data on school segregation produced for this report supports the following major findings:

- Charter schools grew rapidly in the last 20 years with enrollment eventually surpassing magnets schools by more than 1 million students in recent years. Charter school enrollment grew especially fast: up approximately 900% since 2001.
- In 2021, magnet schools were less segregated than comparable charter schools along multiple measures. The average Black student in a magnet school was in a school that was 15% white compared to charter schools where the average black student was in a school that was only 8% white. Over the last 20 years, Latino to white exposure increased in magnets and decreased in charter schools.
- The charter sector had a higher proportion of intensely segregated schools than the magnet sector, and the gap between the two sectors increased over time. The proportion

of intensely segregated charter schools, with less than 10% white students, increased from 45% to 59% from 2000 to 2021. A different trend was observed for magnets. The share of magnets that were intensely segregated was nearly the same in 2000 and 2021: 34% and 36%.

In the school districts where both forms of choice were tried, magnets have done better than charters at modestly integrating students. An obvious explanation for this is that a basic mission of magnets, especially initially, was to address racial isolation. Policymakers interested in gaining the benefits of integration through choice might look closely at magnet schools. Nonetheless, magnet schools are not the only, or even the best, ways to produce substantial integration. The kinds of integration plans that increased integration substantially in the 1960s and 1970s did not primarily involve magnets. The higher segregation in charter schools observed in this analysis, coupled with other studies with similar findings, suggests that reforming charter schools, if not advancing alternatives like magnet schools or something even more powerful, is needed to address segregation and its well-documented harms.

# Segregated Choices: Magnet and Charter Schools

Ryan Pflieger and Gary Orfield

## Magnets in the Last Two Decades

This report examines racial composition and isolation in magnet schools over the last 20 years—following the end of most desegregation plans. One central original purpose of magnet schools was to increase integration by giving families a choice to attend special schools. Indeed, the primary purpose of what is said by some writers to be the first magnet school, an elementary school in Takoma, Washington that was converted in 1968, was to reduce segregation (Wang & Herman, 2017). Magnet schools can be understood as attempts to attract, like physical magnets attracting metal, whiter and wealthier students to schools that were segregated. However, according to several scholars (e.g., Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2008), an initial period of growth in magnet schools with an integrative mission was followed by defunding and a shift away from integration in terms of media attention, policy, and legal viability.

Magnet schools are a kind of school choice that research suggests induce greater racial and class diversity than other forms of choice, like charter schools (see e.g., Riel, Parcel, Mickelson, & Smith, 2018). Given the interest and possibility of magnet schools, especially as a viable alternative to other forms of market-based school choice, a look at the racial composition of these schools over the last couple decades remains an important baseline.

Research to date has tentatively concluded that magnet programs exert mixed effects on racial segregation, with success contingent on a multitude of factors. In a study of large urban districts with magnet schools in the early 1980's, magnet schools were reported by Blank (1983) to have a significant positive impact on desegregation under certain conditions. These conditions included a strong policy commitment and effective implementation of a district-wide desegregation

plan. The authors reported that 40% of urban districts that developed magnet schools with an attempt to desegregate were successful. The districts with the most success desegregating coupled magnet schools with other desegregation efforts like pairing, two-way busing, and mandatory assignment. Significant desegregation was reported in approximately two-thirds of magnet schools. But magnets were no panacea. The study produced evidence that magnets were sometimes used as white havens and there were several kinds of pressures that prevented desegregation in magnet schools. Although the study found that magnet schools were associated with integration, it was not designed to analyze causal relationships. Comprehensive desegregation of school systems through magnets, the study reported, is nonetheless possible, although the pressures of “white flight” and significant resistance to nearly every form of desegregation were barriers to magnets’ desegregative effects.

An initial investigation into the Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP) by Steele & Eaton (1996) centered on minority group isolation, defined by minority enrollments exceeding 50%, across approximately 100 school districts and over 650 schools. This study examined racial isolation both before and after districts were awarded federal MSAP grant funds. These grants correlated with nearly half of the schools achieving desegregation objectives such as reducing or eradicating minority group isolation. The authors characterized this success as "modest," noting that 29 additional schools became minority isolated by the grant's conclusion. Existing demographic trends, such as escalating minority enrollments preceding the receipt of MSAP funds, complicated the reduction of minority group isolation. In 90% of the districts studied there was an increase in the minority share during the MSAP award period. The study concluded that success in desegregation was closely tied to overall demographic conditions, with a lower likelihood of success in districts with high and growing proportions of minority students.

These two early studies, albeit constrained by their scope and ability to ascertain the causal impact of magnet schools, found positive impacts. For example, Blank et. al wrote, “Positive racial integration is advanced by magnet schools” (p. 220). During this turbulent era of school and social change, magnet schools primarily sought to diminish segregation. Despite significant variations in implementation across schools and districts, and the presence of substantial obstacles, local and federal backing for magnets likely facilitated some integration, especially when other alternatives like busing met steep political barriers.

Since the 1991 Supreme Court decision that led to the dissolution of most major large urban desegregation plans and the 2007 PICS decision which forbade race-conscious assignments, magnets operated under a constitutional framework that made it ever more difficult for them to integrate. Consequently, recent studies show minor positive and sometimes inconsistent desegregation effects. For instance, research in the mid-2000s on "converting" magnet schools discovered that a shift from a traditional to a magnet school correlated with a slight uptick in diversity, but only in one specific type of converting magnet (Kitmitto, Levin, Betts, Bos, & Eaton, 2016). Additionally, a study in Philadelphia (Saporito, 2003) revealed that the gains in desegregation within magnets were offset by a rise in segregation in neighborhood schools.

Magnet programs are not all the same and some may be more likely than others to increase integration (Goldring & Smrekar, 2000; Siegel-Hawley & Frankenberg, 2013), and our present analysis gives a high-altitude look at the general landscape. We did not attempt to empirically discern variation in magnet schools’ success in terms of integration or student outcomes (e.g., whole school magnets vs. in-school magnets), but reviews of related research are available (e.g., see George & Darling-Hammond, 2021).

## The Charter Surge

As public schools came under strong criticism in the reform proposals growing out of the Reagan Administration, mostly notably in the report *A Nation at Risk*, there was strong interest in alternatives within the public school systems. The interest in school choice focused on magnets until the development of the charter school movement that began in 1991. *A Nation at Risk* portrayed American education in crisis, called for schools to turn back to the essentials and blamed school districts and teachers for not demanding enough and holding the schools accountable.<sup>1</sup> The Reagan administration and education reform groups that emerged across the country, with heavy business support, wanted alternatives to regular public school operations and politics. Charter schools became their favorite choice.

Many studies, although not all, conclude that charter schooling is associated with higher racial segregation (Bifulco & Ladd, 2007; Cobb & Glass, 1999; Garcia, 2008; Howe, Eisenhart, & Betebenner, 2001; Miron, Urchel, Mathis, & Tornquist, 2010). A prior report by the Civil Rights Project extensively explored segregation in charter schools and concluded that “charter schools make up a separate, segregated sector of our already deeply stratified public school system” (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2010, p. 5). Garcia (2008) found “students leave district schools with more exposure between White students and minority students to attend charter schools with less exposure between White and minority students” (p. 598).

The Civil Rights Project compared charter schools and regular public schools in extensive studies of the Washington, DC public school system and the New York City system, by far the nation’s largest. In both of these heavily nonwhite school districts which have recently been gaining white students from a very small base, the studies showed that charter schools, though much more

---

<sup>1</sup> United States National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. Washington: U.S. Dept. of Education, 1983.

recently created and more able to recruit students from larger areas because they are not zoned, were substantially more segregated than regular district public schools. In some major parts of NYC there was virtually no white enrollment in charters but a slowly rising share in the public schools (Orfield & Ee, 2017; Cohen, 2021). One-sixth of NYC students were in the growing charter sector but substantially more segregated than the regular system. Cohen (2021) reports about NYC, “Ninety-five percent of black students and 91% of Latino students attend intensely segregated charter schools, compared to 80% of black and 70% of Latino students attending intensely segregated traditional public schools. Whereas 15% of black students attend apartheid traditional public schools, over half (51%) of black students in charter schools are in apartheid charter schools. The shares for Latino students are also astonishingly high: 13% in apartheid (0-1% white students) traditional public schools versus 41% in apartheid charter schools” (p. 12).

Although our reading of the research is that the majority of the evidence suggests that charters are highly segregated—and disproportionately segregated compared to available policy alternatives—agreement is not universal, and critics hold that particular elements of the context of segregation must be considered. To address this concern, we briefly summarize different approaches to studying segregation in charter schools and some of the variation in results.

One way to examine segregation between charter schools and public schools<sup>2</sup> is to simply examine the racial composition of the two sectors. In this regard, charter schools enroll a significantly disproportionate share of students of color compared to the prevailing racial composition in the US, which is some evidence that charter schooling is not a policy movement that desegregated schools in the US. But this kind of comparison (between charters and public schools),

---

<sup>2</sup> We use *charter schools* and *public schools* as an alternative to *public charter schools* and *traditional public schools* or other variants. Charter schools do not exhibit several important “public” features (see e.g., Greene, 2019). These labels are shorthands that obscure lots of complexity, which may not be essential to completely explore for the purposes of analyzing segregation.

like all comparisons, only tells part of the story. The “correct” way to compare charters to determine levels, types and causes of segregation is disputed. In order not to cherry pick schools, we used the rather neutral criteria of significant presence of both types of schools of choice in the same districts within the study period. Constructing helpful comparisons – that might point to a magnet or charter “effect” – are further complicated by the fact that schools are not sited randomly, but rather might be located in places with residential segregation, histories of school segregation and other factors that make their racial compositions not distributed randomly. Our justification for this selection criteria and comparative approach, described below in the Analytic Sample section, derives from prior methodological considerations and findings from studies of charter segregation, which are outlined next.

As prior reports from the Civil Rights Project argue (e.g., Frankenberg et al., 2010), some comparisons require thinking about special features. For example, merely examining *intra*-district segregation patterns for charter schools would not account for the fact that charters can draw students from across district lines in some states, yet this is rare. Frankenberg et al. report that higher segregation in charter schools holds regardless of whether the comparison is to the “surrounding district or nearest public school” (p. 5). Using counterfactual frameworks that attempt to reduce bias in describing causal relationships by modeling what would have been the case without charter schools, some research finds that charter schools primarily increased segregation (Bifulco & Ladd, 2007; Cobb & Glass, 1999), while others find no substantial effect on segregation (Zimmer, Gill, Booker, Lavertu, & Sass, 2009). A subset of studies finds chartering, on average, increased segregation, although not in all locations and geographic types (e.g., Monarrez, Kisida, & Chingos, 2022). Another way to examine research on segregation related to charters is to group studies into two categories: longitudinal and area-based studies (Whitehurst, Reeves, & Rodrigue, 2016). When



Whitehurst et al. (2016) reviewed these types of studies they concluded both approaches found charters were associated with increased segregation.

Charter schools were not founded to enhance diversity and have not been accountable for that purpose. They emerged as the courts were dissolving desegregation plans and the country was focusing on test scores in basic subjects. Charter schools were designed to realize the vision of their founders and the best known became famous for intense focus on those goals and increased test scores. There is not convincing evidence that they perform better than regular public schools for similar groups of students.

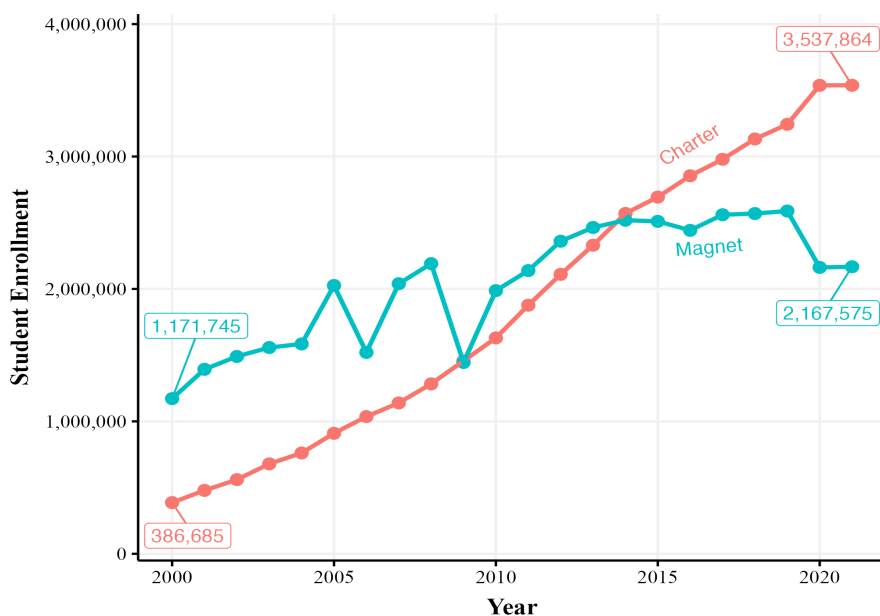
Charter schools were embraced by those pessimistic about public schools and believing in the power of markets and autonomy. They were heavily supported by the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations over a 28-year period. None of these administrations focused seriously on magnet schools. The Bush administration heavily invested in efforts that resulted in a doubling of the nation's charter schools. President Bush's Department of Education also provided unprecedented support for America's public charter schools. His White House reported as his second term ended:

Since 2001, more than \$1.6 billion has been invested in 1,890 charter schools across America. Since the President took office, the number of charter schools has more than doubled. The President also worked to expand choice beyond the public school sector. The Administration defended private school choice all the way to the Supreme Court. And in June 2002, the Court declared that private school vouchers were constitutional – freeing the President to pursue legislation that would put scholarship money in the hands of low-income parents with children in failing public schools. The following year, the President called on Congress to provide scholarships to some of the District of Columbia's poorest children so they could attend the private or parochial school of their choice (Thiessen, 2009, p. 81).

Support for charter schools reached a peak during the Obama Administration which embraced the neoliberal, market-oriented vision and employed the massive flow of federal stimulus dollars for recovery from the Great Recession to force feed expansion of the charter sector. The effort was heavily supported by the President and his Education Secretary Arne Duncan. The Obama Administration inherited the most serious economic crisis since the Great Depression, the Great Recession of 2007-2008. As a result, it had the opportunities presented by huge flexible emergency funding needed to stimulate economic recovery. So there were school systems across the country battered by declining tax resources from state and local government, urgently needing help and a federal government with massive resources. The federal government also had leverage because almost all school districts were facing sanctions from the failure to meet the intense academic demands of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002. The law provided massive sanctions which the school districts were willing to do a great deal to avoid. This gave a rare opportunity to institute massive changes. The administration insisted on school districts lifting their barriers to expansion of charter schools, greatly increased charter school funding, and prescribed charter schools as a remedy for failure of schools to meet academic standing (without enforcing similar requirements on charters). Under these conditions, charters more than doubled in the Obama years and almost all states lifted their prohibitions or raised their caps on charter school numbers. The Obama charter school surge was summarized in a Washington Post report: “Promising to promote the expansion of charter schools was one of the ways that states could win some of the money in Obama’s signature \$4.3 billion Race to the Top funding competition. Today, 6 percent of U.S. public school students attend charter schools, up from about 3 percent when he took office in 2009. (It was 2 percent in 2004)” (Strauss, 2021). Charter schools drew the support of critics of public schools and teacher organizations as well as believers in markets as social policy solutions. Charter laws did not make diversity a requirement or hold charters responsible for segregation. Some were

explicitly designed to serve primarily a given racial or ethnic group. Many tended to reflect the high stakes testing emphasis that took hold in the Reagan period and was embraced by following administrations.

**Figure 1: Charter and Magnet School Enrollment, 2000–2021**



Source: Common Core of Data.

*Note:* The CCD is an authoritative source of data on public schools, but as others have noted (Wang & Herman, 2017), the magnet designations in these data are incomplete. Magnet enrollment in 2006 and 2009 appears to be artificially low because of data collection problems.

Our analysis of the US Department of Education’s Common Core of Data (CCD) found there were 2,843 magnet schools in 2021, enrolling 2,167,575 students (Figure 1). This was up approximately double over 20 years: from 1,390 schools and 1,171,745 enrolled in 2000. Non-magnet and non-charter schools continued to dwarf choice-school enrollment, but both types of choice school grew over the last 2 decades. Charters, however, grew much faster. There were 7,193 charter schools in 2021, enrolling 3,537,864. Charter enrollment was up approximately 900% over 20 years: from 386,685 enrolled in 1,611 schools in 2000. The number of regular public (i.e., not

charter and not magnet) schools and enrollment mostly increased during this period, although there was a reported decrease in regular public schools from 2019 to 2020.

## **The Analytic Sample**

Charters often physically reside inside the boundaries of a traditional school district but operate independently and therefore are classified in the available data as distinct from the school district that encompasses them. The following analysis associates charters with their geographic district to facilitate comparison between magnets and charters. The same process was applied to magnets, which are also sometimes authorized separately than the enclosing geographic district. We used the Composite School District Boundaries file for 2021 provided by NCES/EDGE to geocode schools into encompassing school districts, based on their latitude and longitude in the CCD. This method is similar to Preston, Goldring, Berends, & Cannata (2012). We exclude a small number of schools listed simultaneously as magnet and charter in the CCD. When we refer to “districts” in the following analysis we mean the combination of the traditional school district and the schools that are physically in that district’s boundaries.

We only include districts with at least five magnets and five charter schools in one of the study years (2000–2021). That is, if a district in any year had five of each choice type, then all magnets and charters in that district were included. This means we include only districts that had a sufficient quantity of each type of school to facilitate comparisons. Schools with missing geographic information were removed. The small number of schools the CCD listed as both charter and magnet were designated as “Other” in the analytic sample so as not to make the focal comparisons ambiguous. Note that many schools with “magnet” in the school’s name are not designated as such in the magnet field of the CCD (164 in 2021—this could be a sign of an undercount of magnets or that former magnet schools continue to use the name. There are also likely schools listed as “magnet” in the CCD that do not exhibit the core integrative properties associated with many early

magnet schools. See the Appendix for a more detailed discussion of the data, including problems with magnet designations. The CCD represents the best available data and can be used to create empirically informed policy analysis, but has some clear shortcomings.

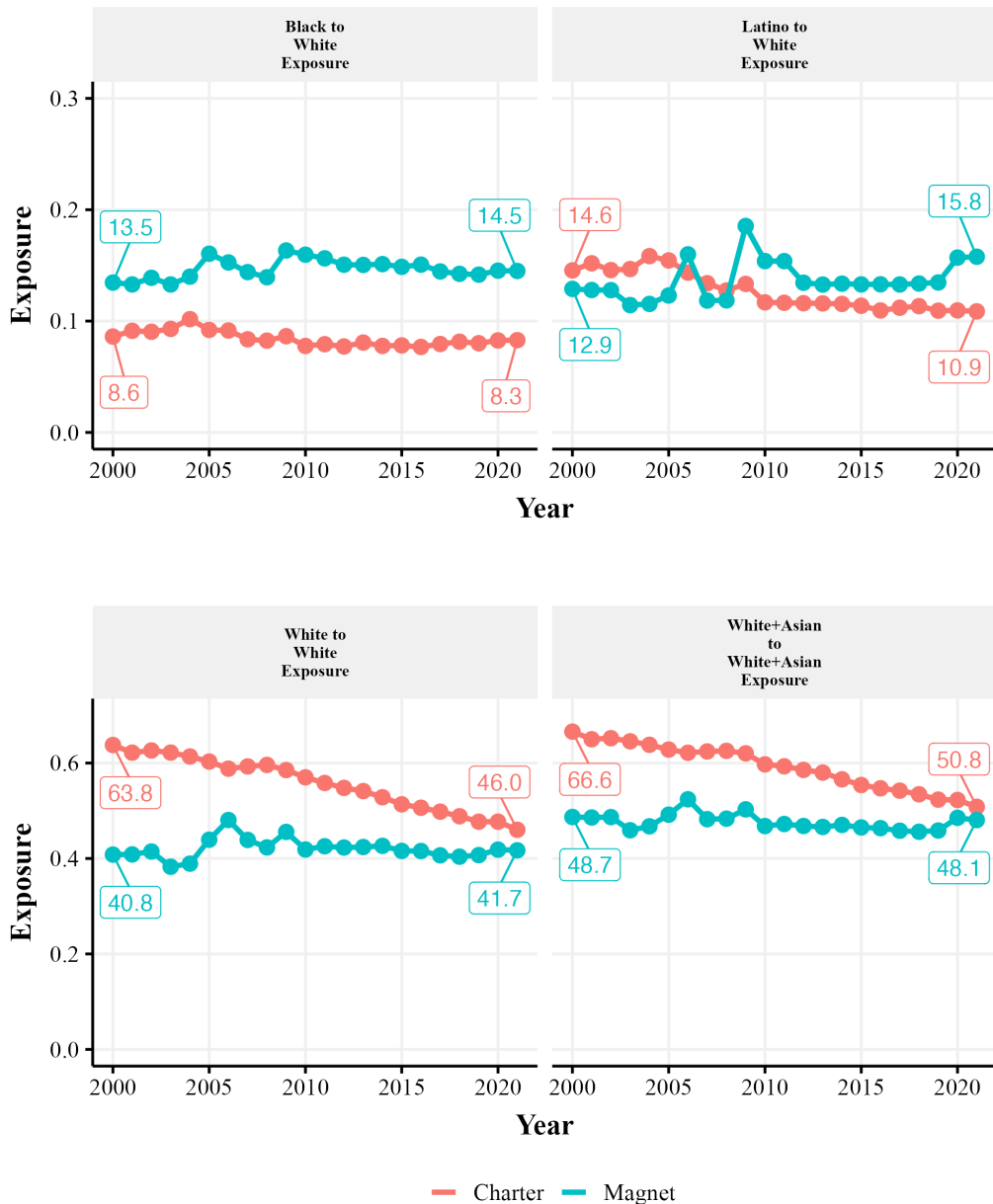
The comparisons this method facilitates are useful in several ways. The magnets and charters are grouped together geographically and are all located within the same school district boundaries (although both choice types are not necessarily restricted to enroll students within those boundaries. Charters may have more flexibility and there are a few interdistrict magnets). We exclude districts with no or only a few of either type of choice school. This is the primary goal: we are comparing the two choice types in districts that contained at least a minimum of each choice type. Our comparisons are meaningful for a large number of students across a large range of districts and states and the districts include a large share of the total student enrollment in both types of publicly funded choice schools.

The analytic sample includes 96 geographic school districts (as of 2021, see Appendix for list). Approximately 43% of all charter students and 59% of all magnet students were included in the sample as of 2021. Magnets had larger average enrollments than charters (894 vs. 423), which could suggest magnets were more likely to be high schools, which are often larger. However, magnet and charter schools in the analytic sample served similar grades, with a mean highest grade of 8.0 in magnets and 8.3 in charters (both had the same median highest grade: 8). The analytic sample includes schools in most of the largest cities, including New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, Miami, and Clark County/Las Vegas (See Appendix for list). Also included are smaller cities like Atlanta, Anchorage, and Little Rock, AR. Some geographic districts, such as Chicago, Los Angeles, and Broward County, have, on average, dozens of both charter and magnet schools each year. Some geographic districts have more magnets than charters (e.g., Guilford County and Prince George's County), while others have more charters than magnets (e.g., New York City and Philadelphia). The

analytic sample is thus a collection of schools across a wide swath of America in terms of size, grades served, region, and relative composition of magnets to charters.

## Results

Figure 2: Exposure to White Students by Choice Type, 2000–2021

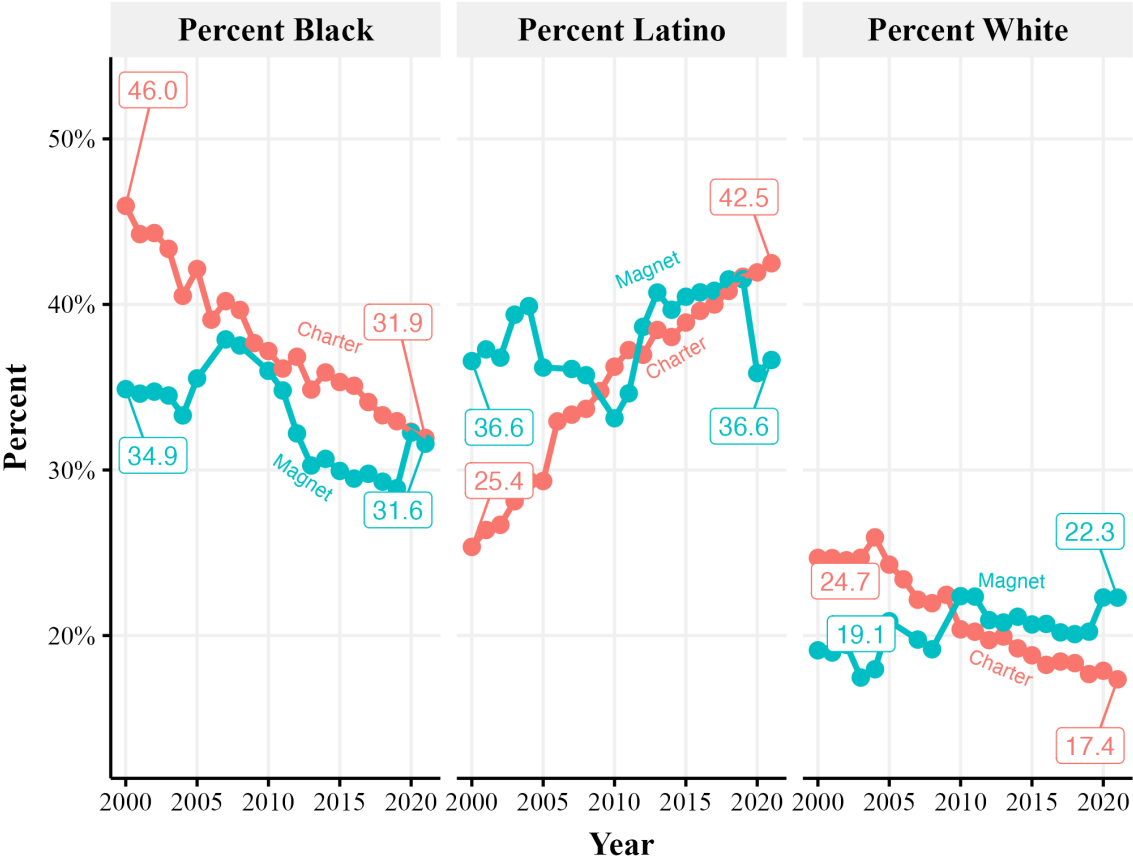


Source: The Common Core of Data.

Note: Includes schools in the analytic sample. Caution should be used in interpreting these trends. In particular, peaks and valleys around 2009 may be an anomalous artifact of dirty data. Numerous states had missing magnet data for some years. Also, this chart includes just schools in cities and suburbs.

The trends in Figure 2 indicate important differences in racial exposure between the two choice types. Compared to charter schools, Black and Latino students had more exposure to white students in magnet schools, especially in the last decade. In magnet schools the average Black student was in a school that was 14.5% white in 2021 and the average Latino student was in a school with 15.8% white students. In charter schools, the comparable exposure statistics were 8.3% and 10.9% white.

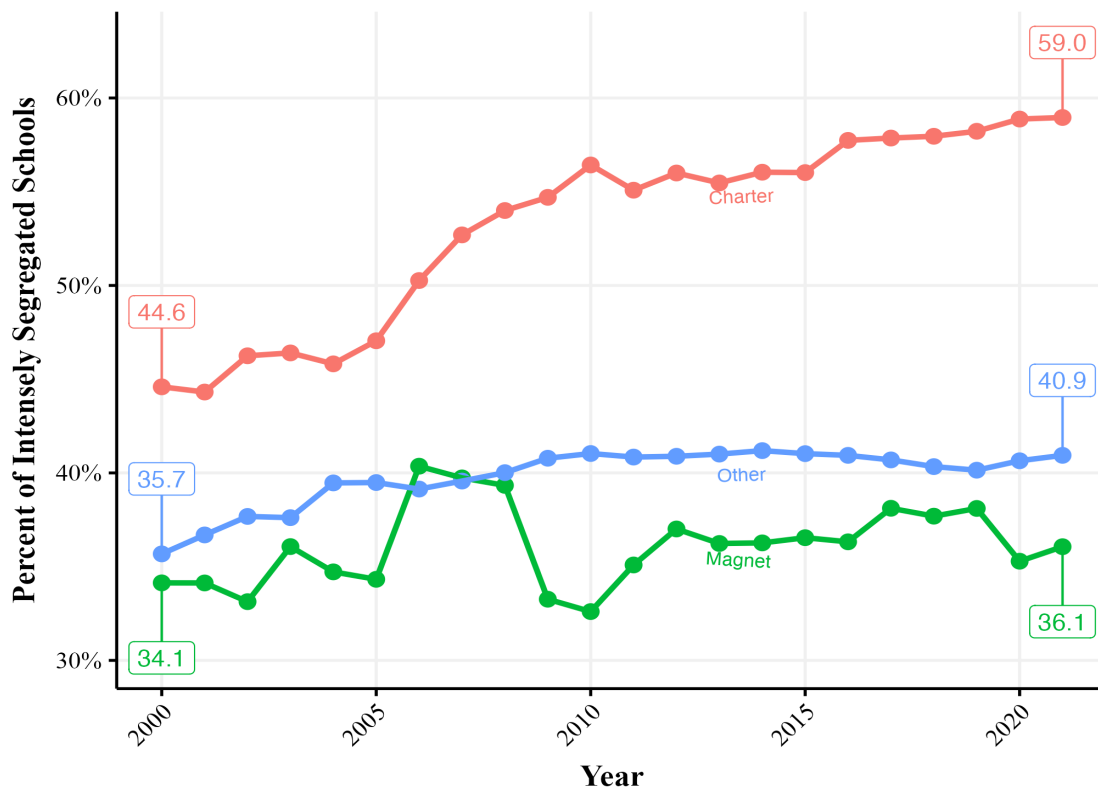
**Figure 3: Racial Composition of Magnet and Charter Schools, 2000–2021**



Source: The Common Core of Data.  
 Note: Includes schools in the analytic sample. Magnet data was anomalous for 2006 and 2009 (because magnet designations were missing from select schools in those years; notice the trend breaks in enrollment Fig. 1), so those year-choice types are removed from this figure.

A comparison of racial compositions in magnet and charter schools is presented in Figure 3. In both school types, the proportion Black decreased over time, but much more so in charters. This could be related to the increasing proportions of Latinos in central city districts and the large Black suburbanization. From 2000 to 2021 charter schools went from almost half Black to less than one-third Black. The proportion Black in magnets decreased 3 percentage points over the same period. The proportion Latino nearly doubled in charters over 20 years but did not change in magnet schools. White students made up a higher proportion in charters than magnets 20 years ago, but in recent years magnet schools saw a higher white enrollment.

**Figure 4: Percentage of Intensely Segregated Schools, Magnet vs. Charter, 2000–2021**



Source: The Common Core of Data.  
 Note: Includes schools in the analytic sample.



The charter sector had the highest proportion of schools that were intensely segregated, as defined by schools that were greater than 90% Black, Latino, Multiracial & American Indian (Fig. 4). Over the last 20 years charter schools became increasingly intensely segregated. As of 2021, 59% of charter schools in the analytic sample were intensely segregated. In contrast, magnet schools in the same geographic districts were considerably less segregated, with only 36% being intensely segregated. When the same analysis was conducted with a 99% threshold (i.e., examining even more segregated schools), the gap between magnets and charter also grew substantially from 2000 to 2021.

### **Limitations**

The comparisons between charters and magnets are comprehensive for the geographic districts in the analytic sample. Generalizations to those geographic districts, which were most of the largest in the US, are partly justified because we examined all schools in these districts. However, the average differences between charters and magnets we observed may not hold in districts that have had fewer or no charter and magnet schools and were thus excluded from our analytic sample.

The analytic sample was constructed to provide fair comparisons between charter and magnet schools. By examining only geographic districts with both forms of school choice, we have tried to avoid the possibility that magnet schools are located in very different environments than charter schools. If that was the case, then the differences observed could be due to a factor (e.g., siting decisions that place charters in more segregated districts) that may not be directly relevant to a charter-magnet debate. In future research, holding “all else equal” besides the primary components of the choice types could advance a more causal understanding of segregation. Our method is insufficient to make causal claims, although it does provide useful descriptions that take into account geographic and district context.

We included a small, yet important, set of *measures* of segregation, but the set was not exhaustive. Using a lengthier battery of measures of segregation, along with other processes and

outcomes of schooling, could be useful for speaking to different components of why segregation remains important. Subsequent research can analyze segregation by social class, English learner status, and disability status in addition to race. In addition, future research can examine the opportunities to learn associated with segregation in the two choice sectors. An analysis by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2016) found that charters segregated by race and class had fewer resources to learn than magnets with the same high level of race and class segregation (as measured by math, science, and advanced placement courses). For example, the study found 83% of high-poverty and >75% Black or Hispanic magnet schools offered AP courses compared to 32% of the same category of charter schools.

## **Discussion, Outstanding Questions and Recommendations**

The findings of higher segregation in charters than magnets are consistent with much prior research. The different levels of segregation are substantial and observed consistently. The possibility for the reduction of prejudice through school integration is a goal more likely to be achieved in magnets than charters for the simple fact that charters are more segregated. However, it is important to note that although magnet schools tend to be less segregated than charter schools, relying solely on them as a desegregation strategy is unlikely to result in substantial integration, especially between districts. Therefore, a more comprehensive policy approach is needed to effectively tackle the issue of school segregation.

Future research could document how admissions policies and missions have changed over time for magnets. What might help magnets resist the pressures to shift toward exclusionary enrollment practices with academic requirements associated with segregation? For charters, why are they becoming more segregated than magnets? Do the stated goals and missions of the schools make a difference?

Several policy scholars and analysts have recently suggested several ways to revise choice policy to address segregation and improve school outcomes (Ayscue, Barringa, & Uzzell, 2023; Ayscue, Levy, Siegel-Hawley, & Woodward, 2017; George & Darling-Hammond, 2021; Orfield & Stancil, 2022) and we first highlight changes in funding. Funding to support school reforms is a central policy lever, one that has been tilted towards charters, and one that could be adjusted to make a dent in segregation. The charter sector has received substantial federal financial support including \$1 billion in pandemic relief loans that were forgiven (Sollenberger, 2020), and the federal Charter Schools Program awarded approximately \$160 million/year since 1994 (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). In fiscal year 2022, the Charter Schools Program made available \$440 million (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). The largest federal support for magnets is the MSAP, which was less than \$100 million/year for most of the last decade (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). There is also substantial private philanthropic support for charters (Baker & Ferris, 2011), but little for magnets. Changing these funding priorities could reduce racial segregation.

Public schools have been forbidden to consider the race or ethnicity of students in assigning them or admitting them to an individual school, even for the purpose of increasing integration, by the 2007 Supreme Court decision in the *Parents Involved* case. The decision, however, does not limit such standards for districts still under court orders or coming under them in the future. In those districts, which are still remedying historical discrimination, the magnet schools of choice may and should have specific desegregation goals and methods, including set-asides of seats to assure integration. The *Parents Involved* decision is about individual students. It does not restrict the use of other criteria, such as neighborhood segregation, which has been used in the Berkeley and Jefferson County (Louisville) plans. Technical assistance to help districts prepare such plans would be useful. Districts can consider many other methods that could increase diversity to some extent—factors such as home language in districts with large Latino populations. Districts and schools are not

prohibited from creating diversity goals or targeting recruitment to produce more applications from underrepresented groups. Interdistrict magnets such as those in Hartford, CT and San Antonio have a much better chance to be integrated. Dallas has been successfully developing schools not called magnets but with magnet characteristics and creating significant diversity in gentrifying neighborhoods, using methods that could be widely employed. The U.S. House of Representatives passed legislation in 2020 that would have aided voluntary desegregation efforts had it been passed by the Senate. The Biden administration is currently offering modest incentives for voluntary steps. In such efforts in the future and in the administration of the Magnet School Assistance Program there should be a clear focus on substantial increases in integration. These efforts on a substantially larger scale could offer more opportunities for integrated education, more important than ever given the recent research on lifelong effects. There is no reason why increases in integration could not be used as a criterion in awarding and renewing charter school authorizations.

There is also a possibility that there could be new court-ordered or Office for Civil Rights remedies for new violations. Many magnets have been converted to exam schools with very negative racial impacts. In many racially changing suburban communities there are zoning decisions, site selections, assignment of programs and design of choice methods that discriminate against families of color and reinforce segregation. Those may be violations of the Constitution and civil rights laws could trigger new remedies. Concerned citizens and civil rights organizations should monitor these issues and file complaints or lawsuits when needed. Once under such a legal requirement the magnet programs can use race-conscious methods to provide well-integrated schools. In some cases, school districts would be willing to settle such cases, agreeing to plans that would work effectively.

Experience in desegregation shows that it does not happen without leadership and support. If communities want voluntary and effective integration, they have to make a commitment. The same is true for state and federal authorities. If they want better outcomes school districts need

goals, technical assistance, and resources. In this period the leadership is not likely to emerge from the courts. Instead, educators, community organizations and state officials may provide the critical leadership needed.

## References

- Ayscue, J., Barriga, D., & Uzzell, E. (2023). Resegregation will not happen on our watch: The political and social context surrounding voluntary integration in Wake County Public School System. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 31.
- Ayscue, J., Levy, R., Siegel-Hawley, G., & Woodward, B. (2017). *Choices worth making: Creating, sustaining and expanding diverse magnet schools*.
- Baker, B. D., & Ferris, R. (2011). *Adding up the spending: Fiscal disparities and philanthropy among New York City charter schools*.
- Bifulco, R., & Ladd, H. F. (2007). School choice, racial segregation, and test-score gaps: Evidence from North Carolina's charter school program. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 26(1), 31–56.
- Blank, R. K., Levine, R. E., & Steel, L. (1996). Magnet schools in urban education. In B. Fuller, R. Elmore, & G. Orfield (Eds.), *Who Chooses? Who Loses?* Teachers College Press.
- Blank, R. K., Dentler, R. A., Baltzell, D. C., & Chabotar K. (1983). *Survey of magnet schools: Analyzing a model for quality integrated education*. Final report of a national study for the U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: James H. Lowry and Associates.
- Christenson, B., Eaton, M., Garet, M. S., Miller, L. C., Hikawa, H., & DuBois, P. (2003). Evaluation of the Magnet Schools Assistance Program, 1998 Grantees. Final Report.
- Cobb, C. D., & Glass, G. V. (1999). Ethnic segregation in Arizona charter schools. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 7, 1–1.
- Cohen, D. (2021). NYC school segregation report card: Still last, action needed now! Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles. Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5fx616qn>
- Board of Education of Oklahoma City v. Dowell*, 498 U.S. 237 (1991).
- Frankenberg, E., & Siegel-Hawley, G. (2008). *The forgotten choice? Rethinking magnet schools in a changing landscape*.
- Frankenberg, E., Siegel-Hawley, G., & Wang, J. (2010). Choice without equity: Charter school segregation and the need for civil rights standards. *Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles*.
- Garcia, D. R. (2008). Academic and racial segregation in charter schools: Do parents sort students into specialized charter schools? *Education and Urban Society*, 40(5), 590–612.
- George, J., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2021). Advancing integration and equity through magnet schools. *Learning Policy Institute*.

- Goldring, E., & Smrekar, C. (2000). Magnet schools and the pursuit of racial balance. *Education and Urban Society*, 33(1), 17–35.
- Howe, K., Eisenhart, M., & Betebenner, D. (2001). School choice crucible: A case study of Boulder Valley. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 83(2), 137–146.
- Kitmitto, S., Levin, J., Betts, J., Bos, J., & Eaton, M. (2016). What Happens When Schools Become Magnet Schools? A Longitudinal Study of Diversity and Achievement. *Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness*.
- McCarthy, J. (2019, September 17). Most Americans say segregation in schools a serious problem. Gallup Poll. p. 5.
- Mickelson, R. A., Smith, S. S., & Nelson, A. H. (Eds.). (2015). *Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow: School Desegregation and Resegregation in Charlotte*. Harvard Education Press.
- Miller, J. A. (1987, January 27). Reagan to seek hike in magnet-school aid. *Education Week*.
- Miron, G., Urschel, J., Mathis, W. J., & Tornquist, E. (2010). Schools without diversity: Education management organizations, charter schools, and the demographic stratification of the American school system. *National Education Policy Center*.
- Monarrez, T., Kisida, B., & Chingos, M. (2022). The effect of charter schools on school segregation. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 14(1), 301–340.
- National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Nelsen, J. K. (2016). *Educational Segregation and Desegregation*. Encyclopedia of Milwaukee. <https://emke.uwm.edu/entry/educational-segregation-and-desegregation/>
- Orfield, G., & Ayscue, J. B. (2018). *Discrimination in elite public schools: Investigating Buffalo*. Teachers College Press.
- Orfield, G., & Ee, J. (2017). Our segregated capital: An increasingly diverse city with racially polarized schools. Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles.
- Orfield, M., & Stancil, W. (2022). Magnet schools and metropolitan civil rights planning: A strategy to revitalize and stabilize distressed communities. *Learning Policy Institute*.
- Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, 551 U.S. 701 (2007).
- Preston, C., Goldring, E., Berends, M., & Cannata, M. (2012). School innovation in district context: Comparing traditional public schools and charter schools. *Economics of Education Review*, 31(2), 318–330.
- reardon, s. f., Fahle, E., Jang, H., & Weathers, E. (2022). Why School Desegregation Still Matters (a Lot). *Educational Leadership*, 80(4), 38-44. <https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/why-school-desegregation-still-matters-a-lot>

- Richards, M. P., & Stroub, K. J. (2020). Measuring segregation in a multiracial era: The impact of federal racial reporting changes on estimates of public school segregation. *Teachers College Record*, 122(5), 1–42.
- Riel, V., Parcel, T. L., Mickelson, R. A., & Smith, S. S. (2018). Do magnet and charter schools exacerbate or ameliorate inequality? *Sociology Compass*, 12(9), e12617.
- Saporito, S. (2003). Private choices, public consequences: Magnet school choice and segregation by race and poverty. *Social Problems*, 50(2), 181–203.
- Siegel-Hawley, G., & Frankenberg, E. (2013). Designing choice: Magnet school structures and racial diversity. In *Educational delusions?: Why choice can deepen inequality and how to make schools fair* (pp. 107–125). University of California Press.
- Sollenberger, R. (2020). Charter schools may have double-dipped as much as \$1 billion in PPP small business loans. *Salon*. <https://www.salon.com/2020/07/10/charter-schools-may-have-double-dipped-as-much-as-1-billion-in-ppp-small-business-loans/>
- Steele, L., & Eaton, M. (1996). Reducing, eliminating, and preventing minority isolation in American schools: The impact of the Magnet Schools Assistance Program. American Institutes for Research, U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Under Secretary, Washington, DC.
- Strauss, V. (2021). Obama’s Real Education Legacy: Common Core, Testing, Charter Schools. In *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2016/10/21/obamas-real-education-legacy-common-core-testing-charter-schools/>
- Thiessen, M. A. (Ed.). (2009). *A Charge Kept: The Record of the Bush Presidency 2001–2009*. Morgan James Publishing. U.S. Department of Education. (2019). *The U.S. Department of education’s charter schools program overview*. <https://oese.ed.gov/files/2019/12/CSP-Data-Overview-WestEd-7.22.2019.pdf>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2022). *Application for New Awards Under the Expanding Opportunity Through Quality Charter Schools Program (CSP) – Grants to Charter School Developers for the Replication and Expansion of High-Quality Charter Schools*. <https://oese.ed.gov/files/2022/07/FY22-84.282BE-CSP-Developer-Application-Package-Instructions.pdf>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2023). *Magnet Schools Assistance Program - Funding*. <https://oese.ed.gov/offices/office-of-discretionary-grants-support-services/school-choice-improvement-programs/magnet-school-assistance-program-msap/funding-and-legislation/>
- U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). *History of Magnets*. <https://magnet.edu/about/what-are-magnet-schools#1499668004783-31842681-3d5d>
- US Government Accountability Office. (2016). Better use of information could help agencies identify disparities and address racial discrimination.



- U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2016). K-12 education: Better use of information could help agencies identify disparities and address racial discrimination (GAO-16-345). <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-16-345>
- Wang, J., & Herman, J. (2017). Magnet schools: History, description, and effects. *The Wiley Handbook of School Choice*, 158–179.
- Wedge, D. (2022, August 30). The future of Boston Latin. *Boston Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.bostonmagazine.com/education/2022/08/30/boston-latin-culture-war/>
- Wessmann v. Gittens*, 98-1657 (1st Cir. 1998).
- Whitehurst, G. J., Reeves, R. V., & Rodrigue, E. (2016). Segregation, race, and charter schools: What do we know? *Center on Children and Families at Brookings*.
- Zimmer, R., Gill, B., Booker, K., Lavertu, S., & Sass, T. R. (2009). *Charter schools in eight states: Effects on achievement, attainment, integration, and competition*. Rand Corporation.

## Appendix

### **Analytic Sample: Findings Robust to Alternative Inclusion Thresholds**

The decision to focus on a subset of geographic districts with five each of charter and magnet schools was made because districts that have at least a modicum of each choice type can be considered districts that have reasonably tried each. Districts with fewer schools may not have had the opportunity to substantially implement both types of school choice. However, increasing this threshold to say, 10, excludes a number of districts that are reasonable to compare, but do not have that many of each type of school. Because five is largely arbitrary, we re-ran the analysis with both 2 and 10 as the minimums, which meant we expanded the number of districts to 325 and then restricted the number of districts down to 69. The basic findings held in these alternative scenarios: Black to white exposure was higher in magnets, Latino to White exposure was higher in magnets by around 2010, and the share of magnets that were intensely segregated was lower and holding steady compared to charters, which rose for most of the last 20 years.

### **Data and Measures**

Primary data for this report come from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Common Core of Data (CCD), Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey Data. Most data were accessed through the Education Data Portal (Version 0.15.0) provided by the Urban Institute, which harmonizes the data across years. However, the most recent data, for 2021-22, were retrieved directly from NCES.

The CCD is a comprehensive listing of public elementary and secondary schools in the United States. The data cover school years 1986-87 through 2021-22, but magnets and charters are not reliably reported until the turn of the millennium. In this report, when a single year is reported it references the beginning of the school year (e.g., *2021* means school year *2021-22*). The analysis includes “regular” schools that were not marked as closed, inactive, or future. Schools in U.S.

territories and that were missing basic location data were excluded. After these exclusions, 89,893 schools remained in the data set for the 2021-22 school year. The analytic data set that is the focus of this report is a subset of these schools in the focal geographic districts.

Data for race were missing for a large number of records in the early years of the CCD, so interpreting early trends should be done with caution. The small subset of students whose race was reported as “unknown” or “not reported” were recoded as multiracial (otherwise known as two or more races). Importantly, the categories for reporting race changed over time. Given these changes, Asian, after approx. 2008 (depending on the state), as used in this report, is a sum of Asian and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. The introduction of the multiracial category makes interpreting longitudinal analyses more difficult. The introduction of Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander can be made mostly comparable with earlier data because both before and after the introduction of the new category the group would likely be included in the Asian category (see Richards & Stroub, 2020).

There were significant data quality problems with magnet designations. Spikes in magnet designations and significant anomalies were identified. For example, California reported nearly 500 magnet schools in each year for more than five years leading up to 2019, but then 0 magnet schools for 2020 and 2021. The District of Columbia had an anomalous spike in the number of magnet schools in the year 2012. Florida reported no magnet schools before 2005, but then reported more than 250 in 2005 and in all subsequent years. Texas reported no magnet schools before 2010, but then more 200 for each subsequent year. Georgia reported no magnet schools in 2013, but more than 80 in the year before and after. If racial composition differences exist across these states and the data is indeed inaccurate, then national segregation trends by magnet status could be biased.

We contacted the U.S. Department of Education regarding inaccuracies in the magnet school designations reported in the CCD (March 2024). They acknowledged reporting error for

magnet status from certain states. To assess the impact of these discrepancies on our research, we conducted a partial reanalysis using magnet status data from the 2020-21 Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC). Note that the CRDC does not gather information annually, precluding a complete replication. This re-evaluated analysis yielded some differences; however, our core findings remained intact. Notably, the CRDC identified approximately 1,000 additional schools as magnets for the year examined. If we had access to a full data series extending to 2022-23, it is likely that the CRDC would indicate a more pronounced growth in magnet school numbers and enrollment than reported via the CCD data, yet still falling short of the expansion observed in charter schools. The analyses of segregation and racial composition for the year 2020-21 revealed consistent outcomes across both datasets: charter schools exhibited higher levels of segregation across all measures examined.

The geocoded data for schools, latitude and longitude, were occasionally missing and sometimes inconsistent. That is, a small subset of schools at the same physical address could have different latitudes and longitudes across different years. This introduced a small amount of noise but is unlikely to influence the basic findings.

The 2021-22 data is from a provisional dataset provided by NCES. It is “as of” July 17, 2022 (v.1a), which was released in December 2022. After the as-of date, a handful of states updated data for 2021-22. Caution should be exercised when interpreting data into 2021.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics, by Analytic Sample Inclusion, 2000 and 2021**

Analytic Sample	Year	Number of Schools	Percent Black	Percent Latino	Percent White
Excluded from Sample	2000	54,056	13.3%	15.4%	65.9%
Excluded from Sample	2021	82,216	12.1%	26.4%	49.7%
Included in Sample	2000	9,976	33.2%	32.2%	27.7%
Included in Sample	2021	14,010	25.1%	43.2%	20.7%

Table 1 includes descriptive statistics of all schools in the geographic districts included and excluded from the analytic sample. As expected, schools in the analytic sample had a higher proportion of Black and Latinx students.

### **Districts in the Analytic Sample**

The list below contains the names of the school districts whose geographic boundaries defined the 2021 sample.

Alachua County, FL; Albany City, NY; Albuquerque Public Schools, NM; Aldine Independent, TX; Anchorage, AK; Antelope Valley Union Joint High, CA; Atlanta City, GA; Benton Harbor Area Schools, MI; Brevard County, FL; Bridgeport, CT; Broward County, FL; Buffalo City, NY; Caddo Parish, LA; Chaffey Joint Union High, CA; Charleston County, SC; Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, NC; Chicago Public 299, IL; Chula Vista Elementary, CA; Clark County, NV; Cobb County, GA; Dade County, FL; Dallas Independent, TX; DeKalb County, GA; Detroit Public Schools Community District, MI; District of Columbia Public Schools, DC; Durham Public Schools, NC; Duval County, FL; East Baton Rouge Parish, LA; East Side Union High, CA; Ector County Independent, TX; Escambia County, FL; Flint City, MI; Forsyth County Schools, NC; Fresno Unified, CA; Garland Independent, TX; Grand Rapids Public Schools, MI; Granite, UT; Greenville County, SC; Guilford County Schools, NC; Hamilton County, TN; Hillsborough County, FL; Houston Independent, TX; Indianapolis Public Schools, IN; Jefferson Parish, LA; Kansas City 33, MO; Kern High, CA; Lansing Public, MI; Las Cruces Public Schools, NM; Lee County, FL; Leon County, FL; Little Rock, AR; Long Beach Unified, CA; Los Angeles Unified, CA; Lubbock Independent, TX; Manatee County, FL; Meridian Joint 2, ID; Mesa Unified District, AZ; Metropolitan Nashville Public, TN; Minneapolis Public, MN; New Haven, CT; New York City Department Of Education, NY; North East Independent, TX; Oakland Unified, CA; Orange County, FL; Orleans Parish, LA; Osseo Public, MN; Palm Beach County, FL; Pasadena Unified, CA;

Pasco County, FL; Philadelphia City, PA; Phoenix Union High, AZ; Pinellas County, FL; Pittsburgh, PA; Plymouth-Canton Community Schools, MI; Polk County, FL; Prince George's County Public Schools, MD; Rochester City, NY; Sacramento City Unified, CA; San Antonio Independent, TX; San Bernardino City Unified, CA; San Diego City Unified, CA; San Francisco Unified, CA; San Jose Unified, CA; Sarasota County, FL; Sequoia Union High, CA; Shelby County, TN; Southfield Public, MI; St. Louis City, MO; St. Lucie County, FL; St. Paul Public, MN; Stockton Unified, CA; Sweetwater Union High, CA; Tolleson Union High, AZ; Tucson Unified District, AZ; Wake County Schools, NC; Washoe County, NV.

### Calculating Exposure

The following formula was used to calculate exposure:

$$P_{AB} = \sum_{i=1}^n \left( \frac{a_i}{A} \right) \left( \frac{b_i}{t_i} \right)$$

where

- $P_{AB}$  represents the exposure index of racial group  $A$  to  $B$ ;
- $n$  is the number of small units (e.g., schools) in a larger unit (e.g., a district or state);
- $a_i$  is the number of students in racial group  $A$  in the small unit  $i$  (school  $i$ );
- $b_i$  is the number of students in racial group  $B$  in the small unit  $i$  (school  $i$ );
- $A$  is the total number of students in racial group  $A$  in the larger unit (district or state);
- $t_i$  is the total number of students in all racial groups, including multiracial students, in the small unit  $i$  (school  $i$ ).

Values lie between 0 and 1, with smaller values indicating less exposure of group  $A$  to  $B$ .