Charter Schools' Impact on Segregation in New York City

Abstract

Despite the Brown v. Board of Education (1954) court ruling and decades of policy efforts, New York City remains one of the most racially and economically segregated school systems in the United States of America. The city's public and charter schools continue to reflect the geography of housing segregation shaped by redlining, exclusionary zoning, and school district boundary policies. However, it is unclear whether the inclusion of charter schools 30 years ago has improved the segregation in New York City schools. To determine whether charter schools can be a viable solution to desegrating schools, this paper asks: Do charter schools disrupt or deepen patterns of racial segregation and inequality in New York City? I argue that while some charter networks expanded access to rigorous coursework and produced strong academic outcomes with a dezoned model, the sector as a whole operates within, and often reinforces, New York City's racial geography of schooling. However, I also argue that any analysis of segregation that isolates charters from the wider public/private system risks overstating their impact, and it is the dual education system itself that must be addressed to truly desegregate New York City schools.

Historical Context of School Segregation in New York City

After the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education ruling, New York City still retained a neighborhood-based assignment policy. This meant that school enrollment was tied to racially segregated housing patterns that were shaped by redlining and exclusionary zoning ordinances. The 1970s had busing initiatives to assist with desegregation efforts, but these had a marginal impact. At the same time, demographic shifts, particularly white and middle-class flight into suburbs or private institutions, further entrenched racial and socioeconomic segregation into the New York City schooling ecosystem (Clotfelter, 2011). Two decades later, there was mounting concern over stagnant test scores and bureaucratic inefficiencies, which led federal and state policymakers to embrace charter schools as a market-based intervention strategy. New York State passed the Charter Schools Act of 1998, which authorized up to 100 charter schools statewide and granted charter operators administrative flexibility outside of district bureaucracies while retaining public funding streams. Since its passing, charter growth has been framed as a pillar of education reform.

Under Mayor Michael Bloomberg (2002–2013) and Chancellor Joel Klein, New York City became a national case study in market-based reform. The administration closed over 150 district schools deemed 'failing' and aggressively pursued charter co-locations, which provided charter school operators space within public school buildings. During this period, charter school enrollment tripled, but their expansion generated tensions around accountability, equity, and spatial control of schools. This was because the school closures were concentrated in historically

Black and Latino neighborhoods (Ravitch, 2013). Mayor Bill de Blasio (2014–2021) took a different approach to education policy as he limited charter school co-locations and invested in community school models that were focused on wraparound services rather than competition. Under Mayor Eric Adams (2022–present), charter expansion has re-emerged in public discourse due to parent demand and post-pandemic academic recovery narratives, but the evidence so far points to limited material growth in the sector under his administration. While Adams has voiced support for lifting the NYC charter cap and taken steps to address funding inequities affecting charter schools, there have been no high-profile new charter authorizations. Instead, his administration's most visible education agenda has centered on system-wide curriculum mandates in literacy and math, class size compliance, large-scale teacher hiring, early childhood expansion, and after-school programming. Despite multiple administrations not making active strides to expand charter schools, as of 2025, over 145,000 students, about 15 percent of the public school population, attend charter schools in New York City (New York City Charter Center, 2024).

Twenty-three years after the Charter Schools Act in New York, Civil Rights Project data show that charter schools are not mitigating segregation; they are intensifying it relative to district schools. While some community districts saw marginal diversification, the share of intensely segregated charter schools rose from 59% to 82% between 2010 and 2018, even as that figure declined slightly in traditional public schools. By 2018, 95% of Black and 91% of Latino charter students attended schools that were more than 90% nonwhite, compared to 80% and 70% in district schools. At the same time, White students, already a small share of NYC's public enrollment, experienced high isolation in, particularly in Staten Island, where charters averaged ~71% White + Asian, and in Brooklyn public schools, where White students attended schools

that were ~63% White + Asian. When placed against the fact that only ~23% of NYC students are White, this represents a level of racial sorting that exceeds demographic expectations.

Segregation in the Charter Sector: Causes and Consequences

The intensifying segregation within New York City's charter schools must be understood through the lens of larger structural patterns in New York City as much as charter-specific causes. The causes of segregation in charter schools: location and selection, are leading to measurable consequences for students, whether or not they attend charter schools.

Cause: Housing Segregation

Charter schools are heavily concentrated in Harlem, the South Bronx, and Central Brooklyn, neighborhoods that have been shaped by legacies of racialized disinvestment and redlining. Because charter schools frequently occupy former district buildings, often in low-income, predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods shaped by legacies of redlining and exclusionary zoning, they operate within, rather than outside of, the geography of residential segregation. As a result, even when admissions procedures are formally race-neutral, the racialized distribution of housing continues to determine which students live near, apply to, and remain enrolled in particular schools (Rothstein, 2017). According to the New York City Independent Budget Office (2022), 78 percent of charter schools are located in community districts where the median household income falls below the city average. Charter schools are located in segregated areas because early charter operators intentionally sought to serve students labeled 'at-risk', but were also being constrained by available real estate and political resistance in whiter, higher-income zones. But these charter co-locations, where charters share facilities with district schools, have been particularly contentious in areas undergoing demographic

change. Families and educators in district schools often perceive co-located charters as extracting resources, attention, and space from neighborhood institutions (Fabricant & Fine, 2012). As seen in the Bloomberg administration, school closures followed by charter openings disrupted community continuity, especially in Black and Latino neighborhoods where schools operate as social hubs.

Cause: Student Exclusion

Interestingly, while charter schools have higher rates of intense segregation than district schools, they have lower rates of English Language Learners and students with disabilities. Although charters are required to conduct admissions through randomized lotteries, the design of these systems can produce stratified access through their online platforms and English-dominant application materials. In 2019–20, English Language Learners made up 13 percent of students in district schools but only 8 percent in charter schools, and students with disabilities accounted for 20 percent of district enrollment but only 16 percent of charter enrollment (NYC DOE Data Book, 2021). These differences translate to thousands of students who are effectively excluded from the charter school system. Retention is also inequitable compared to the district as the NYC Independent Budget Office (2015) found that students with disabilities, lower test scores, or behavioral challenges were more likely to exit charter schools before eighth grade, with many of these students returning to district schools mid-year. Additionally, these removals or withdrawals have been shown to disproportionately affect Black boys and students with disabilities. If not all students are able to access charter schools, even after the lottery, then charter schools cannot be the innovators of equity and access in the educational ecosystem.

Consequences of Segregation on Students

While high test-score performing networks like Success Academy and Uncommon Schools produce standardized test scores exceeding those of nearby district schools, these outcomes are dimmed in light of their segregation due to selective enrollment and retention patterns. Segregation, therefore, shapes who gains access to these high-performing environments but also determines whose educational experiences are structured by concentrated disadvantage in the schools they leave behind. CREDO (2017) found that students in New York City charters gained the equivalent of 23 additional days of learning in reading and 63 in math annually, compared to similar district students. Additionally, students who transfer mid-year, English Learners, and students with disabilities see reduced or negative gains relative to their peers in district schools. Because academic performance is mediated by who enters, remains, or exits the charter system, it becomes challenging to isolate instructional quality from selection effects.

Segregated schooling affects more than academic outcomes, as Mickelson (2015) found racially integrated school environments to have increased cross-racial understanding, broader civic engagement, and higher long-term socioeconomic attainment. Comparatively, racially homogeneous schools limit students' exposure to diverse networks of social capital. This finding us compounded by Bifulco and Reback (2014), as they found that NYC charters narrowed test-score gaps and widened disparities in interracial contact. This means that charter school students are achieving separately, which echoes the dual education system that Brown v. Board sought to dismantle.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the evidence on segregation within New York City's charter sector, the racial and socioeconomic isolation stems from structural factors in enrollment design, housing geography, and multi-sector sorting. While the charter movement was built on the promise of

innovation and access, realizing those goals now requires four policy levers to move the educational ecosystem toward integration.

1. Strengthen Oversight for Equitable Enrollment and Retention

The New York State Education Department should expand its audits of charter schools to include enrollment, attrition, and discipline data. This data would then be disaggregated by race, disability status, and English Learner classification. These audits would then inform charter renewal and expansion decisions, as well as inform parent choice. At present, the accountability systems emphasize performance metrics without scrutiny of access and inclusion. By using the data to access charters and making this data publicly available through demographic dashboards, parents and policymakers would have real-time transparency about who charter schools serve and who they retain.

2. Integrate Charter and District Enrollment Systems

New York City's fragmented admissions landscape is perpetuating stratification among public school students. As Charter lotteries are managed independently, parents are forced to navigate multiple application processes. Implementing a unified enrollment system would consolidate applications across district and charter sectors while preserving parental choice. New York City already has a similar system that allows parents to choose high schools, but it can be expanded to include all schools. This shift would fully dezone all schools, expand access for all students, and allow charter schools to still innovate with their academic standards. If this system included data from the aforementioned public dashboard, enrollment, retention, academic

outcomes, and student demographics would be available to any parents, so they can choose the best school for their children.

3. Expand Incentives for Diverse-by-Design Charter Models

Few New York City charters have pursued integration as an intentional design principle. A state-level competitive grant program, modeled after North Carolina's "Break the Link" initiative, could encourage new and existing charters to develop diverse-by-design campuses. This charter model would be able to prevent further clustering in racially homogenous areas and encourage the establishment of schools in emerging, demographically mixed neighborhoods. For example, Brooklyn Prospect Charter School (BPCS), centers racial and socioeconomic integration as part of its mission. This charter network has multiple campuses and each uses weighted lotteries to balance enrollment across income levels, languages, and neighborhoods. As a result, BPCS maintains a more diverse student body: approximately 35 percent Black, 25 percent Latino, 20 percent white, and 15 percent Asian. The student demographics BPCS recruits across district lines and markets itself to families in mixed-income neighborhoods. Due to this effort, its demographic profile contrasts with both district schools in segregated zones and charter networks that reflect single-neighborhood compositions (Brooklyn Prospect Network Report, 2023). If this type of integration were implemented across charter networks, policymakers would have clarity on whether charter expansion genuinely broadens opportunity or merely redistributes students among similarly segregated institutions.

4. Promote Inclusive Access to Rigorous Coursework

The charter school sector's most cited contribution to educational policy has been the expansion of advanced coursework opportunities for students of color. For example, Success Academy requires all students to take Algebra I by eighth grade and offer broad access to Advanced Placement (AP) courses. However, these opportunities solely depend on enrollment in selective or highly structured charter networks. The network's academic outcomes have been widely cited by policymakers and charter advocates as evidence that high expectations and structured learning environments can produce measurable achievement gains for students of color. Success Academy produces test scores above city averages, as 82 percent of their students scored proficient in math in 2022, compared to 46 percent citywide (NYSED, 2023). However, these outcomes result from strict behavioral codes, extended instructional time, and intensive test preparation. These practices contribute to high performance, but also contribute to higher suspension rates and mid-year withdrawals (Hernandez, 2018). As mentioned earlier in this analysis, students who leave charters like Success Academy frequently re-enter under-resourced district schools, which concentrate higher-need students outside the charter network. If the Department of Education scaled citywide initiatives such as AP for All, universal Algebra 1 in eighth-grade, and ensures equitable distribution of rigorous courses across district schools, this would mitigate the incentive for families to seek charters as the sole route to academic rigor. It would also reinforce the principle that excellence and equity need not be achieved through parallel systems.

Discussion and Conclusion

The evidence presented in this analysis suggests that racial segregation within New York City's charter sector does not occur in isolation. Instead, segregation is intensifying due to the interactions amoung enrollment design, retention, residential geography, and multi-sector sorting across public, charter, and private schools. While some charter networks have expanded access to advanced coursework and generated notable academic outcomes for specific groups of students of color, these gains occur while access and retention are uneven. However, limiting the analysis to the charter versus district divide obscures a deeper stratification pattern. New York City currently operates a dual education system, where a disproportionate share of white and affluent families exit the public system entirely through private school enrollment. As Di Carlo (2021) shows, private schools enroll nearly 40 percent of the city's white students despite serving only about 14 percent of the city's total enrollment, which removes a substantial portion of potential racial diversity from the public integration equation. If every charter and district school were perfectly integrated, a significant portion of citywide segregation would persist due to separation between the public and private sectors. Therefore, it is more apt to state that different sectors of the educational system are absorbing students along racial and class lines, thus reproducing a layered hierarchy of access rather than a unified public system.

To answer the initial question of this analysis, it is not important whether charter schools disrupt or reinforce segregation, but whether any within-sector reform can meaningfully intervene in a landscape organized by inter-sector stratification. Charter expansion without cross-sector integration risks redistributing students within the public system while leaving the structural sorting mechanisms between public and private schooling untouched. In this way, the charter sector's academic gains reflect patterns of selective access shaped by who enters, who remains, and who opts out of the public system entirely.

Desegregation policy in New York City must address the architecture of choice across all educational sectors. Without the policy levers of integrated admissions systems, oversight of retention practices, incentives for diverse-by-design models, and parallel investment in district schools, charter reform alone will not dismantle segregation. As learned from Brown v. Board of Education, equitable education cannot be achieved through parallel systems that sort students by race, class, or perceived potential. Today, New York City's education landscape risks reproducing that dual system, just under a new policy vocabulary.

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