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Charter schools: a debate over integration and education

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At Jumoke Academy, a nearly all-black charter school in one of Hartford's poorest neighborhoods, Monique Griffin, the mother of four students, scoffs at the idea the school would be considered a failure.

"Jumoke has been great," says Griffin, citing its family-like atmosphere, after-school programs and encouraging academic record.

Nevertheless, a controversial new report takes direct aim at schools such as Jumoke, saying that charters are among America's most racially segregated schools and "a civil rights failure."



Charter schools "are more racially isolated than traditional public schools in virtually every state and large metropolitan area in the nation," says a report by the Civil Rights Project at the University of California - Los Angeles.

Many of Connecticut's 18 public charter schools have high concentrations of

Principal Lynn Toper helps third graders Imani Dinnald, left, and Kiarra Washington with a lesson at Jumoke Academy

minority students, especially black children. At Jumoke,

416 of the 432 students are black. Only two are white.

"It doesn't bother me," Griffin said. "The larger picture for me is the quality of education."

That is the heart of the argument made by critics of the UCLA report. Charter supporters contend that the best charters, regardless of their racial makeup, have begun to find solutions to one of the nation's most pressing educational problems: the achievement gap that finds many minority and low-income students lagging behind white and more well-to-do children.

Underlying a heated debate over the new report are differing views over the relative merits of two crucial goals for public education: Reducing racial isolation on one hand and closing the academic achievement gap on the other.

In Connecticut, both goals have been high priorities. The achievement gap separating low-income students from others is the largest in the nation and remains a major concern. And racial integration gained widespread attention statewide following a 1996 court ruling in the Sheff vs. O'Neill case ordering the state to reduce racial isolation in Hartford's mostly black and Hispanic schools.

After the Sheff order, dozens of open enrollment magnet schools with themes such as science or the arts opened across the state with the aim of promoting voluntary integration. However, unlike magnet schools, charters did not have specific racial targets and were designed to test innovative approaches to curriculum and teaching. Several of the schools opened in the state's poorest cities, aimed specifically at disadvantaged students, most of whom are members of minority groups.

In 11 of the state's 18 charters, minority children account for more than 94 percent of the students.

"The charter school movement has been a major political success, but it has been a civil rights failure," UCLA Professor Gary Orfield wrote in a foreword to the Civil Rights Project report. Orfield, one of the nation's leading authorities on school desegregation, was a witness for the plaintiffs in the original Sheff trial.

His criticism ignited a sharp response from advocates of charters, the publicly supported independent schools that are free of the usual administrative and union rules governing most public schools.

The report "is really pretty stunning, actually," said Dacia Toll, president of Achievement First, an organization operating charter schools in Hartford, New Haven, Bridgeport and New York City. Toll was one of the founders of Amistad Academy, a charter school in New Haven that has gained

national attention for its impressive academic record with a student body consisting almost entirely of black and Hispanic children.

"The biggest problem with the report is it ignores student achievement," Toll said. "It prioritizes integration above everything else." In too many of the nation's schools, "many of our minority kids are not getting a quality education," she said. "That's the real civil rights issue."

Minority Enrollment At Connecticut Charter Schools

School	Enrollment	% Minority
Achievement First Hartford Academy Inc., <i>Hartford</i>	440	99.5%
Jumoke Academy, <i>Hartford</i>	432	99.5%
Highville Charter School, <i>Hamden</i>	303	99.3%
The Bridge Academy, <i>Bridgeport</i>	263	99.2%
Elm City College Preparatory School, <i>New Haven</i>	547	98.9%
Park City Prep Charter School, <i>Bridgeport</i>	242	98.8%
Bridgeport Achievement First, <i>Bridgeport</i>	238	98.7%
Amistad Academy, <i>New Haven</i>	744	98.1%
New Beginnings Inc., Family Academy, <i>Bridgeport</i>	360	98.1%
Trailblazers Academy, <i>Stamford</i>	165	97.0%
Stamford Academy, <i>Stamford</i>	131	94.7%
Common Ground High School, <i>New Haven</i>	160	81.9%
Side By Side Community School, <i>Norwalk</i>	232	75.9%
Charter School for Young Children on Asylum Hill, <i>Hartford</i>	185	74.1%
Interdistrict School for Arts and Communication, <i>New London</i>	182	65.9%
Odyssey Community School, <i>Manchester</i>	180	50.6%
Integrated Day Charter School, <i>Norwich</i>	330	30.9%
Explorations, <i>Winsted</i>	80	6.3%

Source: State Department of Education

At schools such as Jumoke, closing the achievement gap is the overriding goal.

Located in a former Catholic school, an aging brick building in Hartford's North End, Jumoke's elementary school zeroes in on academics, scheduling lengthy blocks of time each day for reading, writing and mathematics.

The school provides daily enrichment classes for students who meet academic benchmarks and extra help for those who don't. Children wear uniforms, and the school posts signs such as "Respect Others" and "No Bully Zone" along the walls, part of its effort to emphasize character development.

"We're bringing in quality teachers . . . and setting expectations high," says the school's principal, Lynn Toper, a former State Department of Education consultant. "Our parents are thrilled to be here. How often do you hear that?"

Jumoke has an extended school day, using the extra time for a homework club and other activities. It also offers Saturday classes and a summer program. It boasts an academic record that meets statewide averages in many cases and is well above that of most other public schools in Hartford.

Michael Sharpe, Jumoke's chief executive officer, said he was surprised by the UCLA report. He said that while the Sheff case has provided racially integrated schools for some, it has left many

others on waiting lists or in city schools that remain racially isolated. "You still have to have quality education for those kids left behind," he said.

State Rep. Gary Holder-Winfield, D- New Haven, also questioned the report's conclusions.

"We focus so much on segregation, we forget the mission of schools is to educate people," said Holder-Winfield. Although racial diversity has obvious merits, "if [children] can't get an education in a diverse school but they can in this segregated [charter] school, I don't know that I have an issue," he said.

In the Civil Rights Project report, Orfield said that the charter movement has largely ignored the issue of segregation and that research does not support the claims of superior academic performance. "Though there are some remarkable and diverse charter schools, most are neither," he wrote.

The Obama administration has supported expanding charters, but it "has not seriously focused so far on insuring that they embrace civil rights policies or on the better educational experience of magnet schools in combining choice and integration," Orfield said.

Charters enroll a disproportionate number of black children, with nearly one-third of black charter students ending up "in apartheid schools with zero to one percent white classmates, the very kind of schools that decades of civil rights struggles fought to abolish in the South," Orfield said.

The critics pounced. "It's ridiculous to equate African-Americans choosing schools freely with the horrors that occurred under forced segregation," said Michael Petrilli of the Fordham Institute, a national organization promoting school choice and high standards.

Sandy Kress, a former education advisor to President George W. Bush, said, "It seems kind of offensive to call schools a civil rights failure when indeed they are giving students a path to opportunity they had not been getting."

Petrilli and Kress also weighed in on the UCLA report in an online blog of the National Journal Magazine.

Others defended the report. It "hits the nail on the head," said John Brittain, a former member of the legal team that filed the Sheff case. He said federal and state education policy governing charter schools "can create the opportunity for voluntary school integration through financial incentives and other measures."

The opening of new, nearly all-black charters such as Achievement First-Hartford is in direct conflict with the goals of the Sheff order, said Mark Waxenberg, director of government relations for the Connecticut Education Association, the state's largest teachers' union.

"How do they allow that?" he said. "It's a contradiction and doesn't make sense to me."

Charter schools ought to be part of the effort to promote integration, said Martha Stone, a lawyer for the Sheff plaintiffs. "That has to be the state's first priority," she said.

Some charters have been able to attract racially mixed student bodies. At Hartford's School for Young Children on Asylum Hill, for example, 26 percent of the preschoolers are white, 27 percent Hispanic and 45 percent black.

That school, Stone said, "is a shining example of how charters can be part of the Sheff solution."

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