

Charters as a Driver of Resegregation

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Executive Summary

Expanding school choice through charter schools is among the top education priorities of the current federal administration as well as many state legislatures. Amid this push to expand the charter sector, it is essential to understand how charter schools affect students who attend them, as well as the ways charter schools impact traditional public schools in their communities. Building upon existing research that finds charter schools tend to be more segregated than traditional public schools, this report describes how charter schools also contribute to resegregation in traditional public schools. We explore the direct and indirect ways in which this occurs through a case study of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) in North Carolina. In 2016, CMS was the most racially segregated large school system in North Carolina. Consistent with national trends, charter schools are more segregated than traditional public schools in CMS. Moreover, while national discourse presents charter schools as an alternative to underperforming schools of poverty, in the Charlotte region, the majority of charter schools are located in suburban areas and serve primarily academically proficient, middle-class students who are largely white or Asian.

In an effort to reinstate diversity as one of its priorities, CMS adopted a new student assignment plan that expanded magnet school options and in May of 2017 redrew boundaries to break up high concentrations of poverty in many of the district's schools. The new plan will affect few of the district's students and only modestly shifts concentrations of poverty. Most of the schools with intense concentrations of educational and economic privilege or disadvantage will remain as they were under the former assignment plan—as will the racial isolation that accompanies socioeconomic segregation.

This report illustrates how charter schools undermined the capacities of CMS leaders to effectively redesign student assignment boundaries to achieve the district's goal of breaking up high concentrations of poverty. Two central findings emerge:

- The departure of some middle-class, academically proficient students who are white or Asian from traditional public schools for charters directly made the task of socioeconomic and racial desegregation mechanically more difficult because their departure to the charters leaves fewer middle class white and Asian students in the traditional school, thereby contributing to more segregated schools in both sectors.
- The proliferation of charters in Mecklenburg County was grist for the political activism of suburban parents who threatened a middle-class exodus from CMS to the charter sector if new assignment boundaries did not honor their current neighborhood school assignments. These threats indirectly undermined policy actors' initial willingness to act boldly and decisively in revamping pupil assignments to curb socioeconomic segregation.

Charlotte's recent struggles with pupil reassignments illustrate how charter schools directly and indirectly drive resegregation among the traditional public schools.

Charters as a Driver of Resegregation

Expanding school choice through charter schools is among the top education priorities of the current federal administration as well as many state legislatures. In his full budget proposal for fiscal year 2018, the President proposed to provide charter schools with an additional \$158 million, nearly a 50% increase, while cutting the funds for the U.S. Department of Education by 13.5% or \$9.2 billion. Amid this push to expand the charter sector, it is essential to understand how charter schools affect students who attend them, as well as the ways charter schools impact traditional public schools in their communities. In this report we focus on charter schools' contributions to racial and socioeconomic segregation of public schools, given that, as the nation's public school enrollment becomes increasingly diverse and multiracial, segregation is intensifying.²

Building upon existing research that finds charter schools tend to be more segregated than traditional public schools, this report describes how charter schools also contribute to resegregation in traditional public schools. We explore the direct and indirect ways in which this occurs through a case study of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) in North Carolina.

School Choice Theories and Their Impact on Segregation

School choice policies are often intended to provide students with access to better educational opportunities than those that are provided by their neighborhood public schools. However, depending on the theoretical premises underlying their creation, advocates design

² Orfield, G., & Frankenberg, E. (2014). *Brown at 60: Great progress, a long retreat, and an uncertain future*. Los Angeles, CA: The Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles.

school choice policies that accomplish the anticipated benefits through quite different operating structures, and accordingly, foster vastly different consequences for school segregation.

With roots in the civil rights era, the integration theory of choice uses the voluntary approach to choice to achieve desegregation rather than viewing choice as an end in itself.³ Magnet schools and other choice practices based on the integration theory of choice tend to be structured around civil rights standards, such as open enrollment, diversity goals, outreach to diverse communities, and free transportation, which are associated with higher levels of desegregation.⁴ Magnets' designs and operating structures often result in schools with more diverse groups of peers⁵ by disrupting the link between residential segregation and school segregation,⁶ and the magnet themes attract students from all demographic backgrounds across school catchment zones. Civil rights protections further support the enrollment of a diverse student body.

When charter schools developed in the early 1990s, they were not based on the integration theory of choice. Rather, charters grew out of market theory. Based on economic

³ Cobb, C. D., & Glass, G. V. (2009). School choice in a post-desegregation world. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 84(2), 262-278; Goldring, E., & Smrekar, C. (2000). Magnet schools and the pursuit of racial balance. *Education and Urban Society*, 33(1), 17-35; Orfield, G. (2013). Choice theories and the schools. In G. Orfield & E. Frankenberg (Eds.), *Educational delusions? Why choice can deepen inequality and how to make schools fair* (pp. 37-68). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

⁴ Goldring & Smrekar, 2000; Siegel-Hawley, G., & Frankenberg, E. (2013). Designing choice: Magnet school structures and racial diversity. In G. Orfield & E. Frankenberg (Eds.), *Educational delusions? Why choice can deepen inequality and how to make schools fair* (pp. 107-128). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

⁵ Betts, J., Kitmitto, S., Levin, J., Bos, J., & Eaton, M. (2015). *What happens when schools become magnet schools? A longitudinal study of diversity and achievement*. Washington, D.C.: American Institutes for Research; Bifulco, R., Cobb, C. D., & Bell, C. (2009). Can interdistrict choice boost student achievement? The case of Connecticut's interdistrict magnet school program. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 31(4), 323-345; Davis, T. M. (2014). School choice and segregation "tracking" racial equity in magnet schools. *Education and Urban Society*, 46(4), 399-433.

⁶ Frankenberg, E. (2013). The role of residential segregation in contemporary school segregation. *Education and Urban Society*, 45(5), 548-570.

principles of a competitive market where individuals ostensibly act as consumers, parents select a school for their children that best meets their needs and interests. Market theory presumes that government's involvement in education is problematic because it interferes with the anticipated beneficial market forces unleashed by maximization of individual self-interest and competition.⁷ Unlike the integration theory of choice, which prioritizes group and community goals, the market theory of choice emphasizes individual goals, competition, deregulation, and privatization. Based on how market-based choice regimes operate, charter schools have few civil rights protections and without such protections they can foster increased segregation.⁸ In this report, the market theory of choice provides the framework for analyzing how the existence of charter schools impacts resegregation in traditional public school systems.

Why Segregation Matters

While research has consistently demonstrated that charters are more segregated than traditional public schools, the ways in which charter schools affect segregation in traditional public schools have been less thoroughly analyzed. Understanding these effects is important because of the ways in which segregation is systematically linked to unequal education opportunities and outcomes. In contrast, desegregation is associated with numerous desirable academic, intergroup, and long-term outcomes for students from every racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic background.⁹

⁷ Chubb, J. E., & Moe, T. M. (1990). *Politics, markets and America's schools*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

⁸ Frankenberg, E., Siegel-Hawley, G., & Wang, J. (2011). Choice without equity: Charter school segregation. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 19(1), 1-96.

⁹ Ayscue, J. B., Frankenberg, E., & Siegel-Hawley, G. (2017). *The complementary benefits of racial and socioeconomic diversity in schools*. Washington, DC: The National Coalition on School Diversity; Mickelson, R. A.

Segregated schools tend to have less experienced and less qualified teachers,¹⁰ higher rates of teacher turnover,¹¹ higher rates of student mobility,¹² lower quality facilities, inadequate resources, and less advanced curricular options.¹³ In turn, students who attend segregated schools have lower academic achievement, higher dropout rates,¹⁴ and lower graduation rates.¹⁵ Conversely, desegregated schools are associated with myriad benefits including improved academic outcomes,¹⁶ reduction in prejudice and stereotypes alongside increased friendships across groups,¹⁷ and in some circumstances, higher levels of civic engagement,¹⁸ greater likelihood of living and working in diverse environments later in life,¹⁹ as well as increased

(2016). *School integration and K-12 outcomes: An updated quick synthesis of social science evidence*. Washington, DC: The National Coalition on School Diversity.

¹⁰ Clotfelter, C. T., Ladd, H. F., & Vigdor, J. L. (2005). Classroom-level segregation and resegregation in North Carolina. In J. C. Boger & G. Orfield (Eds.), *School resegregation: Must the South turn back?* (pp. 70-86). Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press; Jackson, K. (2009). Student demographics, teacher sorting, and teacher quality: Evidence from the end of school desegregation. *Journal of Labor Economics*, 27(2), 213-256.

¹¹ Clotfelter, C. T., Ladd, H. F., & Vigdor, J. L. (2010). Teacher mobility, school segregation, and pay-based policies to level the playing field. *Education, Finance, and Policy*, 6(3), 399-438.

¹² Rumberger, R. (2003). The causes and consequences of student mobility. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 72(1), 6-21.

¹³ Yun, J. T., & Moreno, J. F. (2006). College access, K-12 concentrated disadvantage, and the next 25 years of education research. *Educational Researcher*, 35(1), 12-19.

¹⁴ Balfanz, R., & Legters, N. E. (2004). Locating the dropout crisis: Which high schools produce the nation's dropouts? In G. Orfield (Ed.), *Dropouts in America: Confronting the graduation crisis* (pp. 57-84). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

¹⁵ Swanson, C. B. (2004). Sketching a portrait of public high school graduation: Who graduates? Who doesn't? In G. Orfield (Ed.), *Dropouts in America: Confronting the graduation rate crisis* (pp. 13-40). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

¹⁶ Mickelson, R. A., Bottia, M. C., & Lambert, R. (2013). Effects of school racial composition on K-12 mathematics outcomes: A metaregression analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 83(1), 121-158; Mickelson, R. A., & Nkomo, M. (2012). Integrated schooling, life course outcomes, and social cohesion in multiethnic democratic societies. *Review of Research in Education*, 36, 197-238.

¹⁷ Allport, G. W. (1954). *The nature of prejudice*. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley; Pettigrew, T., & Tropp, L. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90(5), 751-783; Tropp, L. R., & Prenovost, M. A. (2008). The role of intergroup contact in predicting children's interethnic attitudes: Evidence from meta-analytic and field studies. In S. R. Levy & M. Killen (Eds.), *Intergroup attitudes and relations in childhood through adulthood* (pp. 236-248). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

¹⁸ Kurlaender, M., & Yun, J. (2005). Fifty years after *Brown*: New evidence of the impact of school racial composition on student outcomes. *International Journal of Educational Policy, Research and Practice*, 6(1), 51-78.

¹⁹ Braddock, J. H., & McPartland, J. M. (1989). Social-psychological processes that perpetuate racial segregation: The relationship between school and employment desegregation. *Journal of Black Studies*, 19(3), 267-289; Wells,

educational and occupational attainment, more prestigious jobs with greater economic returns, health benefits, and reduction in adult poverty and incarceration.²⁰

Market theory of choice predicts competition from charters will affect traditional public schools; specifically, triggering them to improve in order to keep and attract students to them. As the following case study demonstrates, the presence of charter schools in a community may have other impacts. In Charlotte, North Carolina, the proliferation of charters directly contributes to the districts' resegregation by race and socioeconomic status (SES) in two ways. First, the departure of some middle-class, white, Asian, or academically proficient students from traditional public schools for charters makes it more difficult to create integrated schools. Second, charters indirectly undermine desegregation when district policy makers implement a politically palatable plan that does little to address segregation because they are fearful that a more vigorous pursuit of diversity in pupil assignment plans will trigger flight to charters. This is what is happening in Charlotte.

Charter Schools and Segregation Trends in North Carolina

Since charter school legislation was adopted in North Carolina in 1996, important developments have shaped the ways in which charter schools are related to segregation. Initially, North Carolina's charters served a disproportionately large share of black students. Since the initial period, charter enrollment patterns have shifted such that charters currently enroll a

A. S., & Crain, R. L. (1994). Perpetuation theory and the long-term effects of school desegregation. *Review of Educational Research*, 64(4), 531-555.

²⁰ Johnson, R. C. (2011). *Long-run impacts of school desegregation and school quality on adult attainments*. Retrieved from Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.

disproportionately large share of white students.²¹ Overall, the state’s charters have become bimodally racially imbalanced. In 2014, more than 70% of the state’s charters were either predominantly white (enrolling more than 80% white students) or predominantly students of color (enrolling more than 80% students of color).²²

In 1998, a lawsuit challenged the diversity provisions of the state’s original legislation that stipulated charter schools must comply with existing desegregation orders and must “reasonably reflect” the racial and ethnic composition of the surrounding area within one year of inception. Because of this suit, the North Carolina Board of Education agreed not to enforce the diversity requirements.²³ In 2011, in anticipation of receiving Race to the Top funding, which put pressure on states to lift “artificial caps on the growth of charter schools” in order to remain eligible for funding,²⁴ North Carolina lifted its initial cap of 100 charter schools. Since then, the number of charters has proliferated, particularly in the state’s two largest county-wide districts in Raleigh and Charlotte. In 2015, HB334 permitted the use of a weighted lottery for charter schools to support socioeconomic diversity, yet as of 2017-18, out of 174 charter schools, only four schools statewide have received a waiver to do so, two in Mecklenburg County, and one each in New Hanover and Durham Counties.²⁵

Charters Schools in Charlotte:

²¹ Ladd, H. F., Clotfelter, C. T., & Holbein, J. B. (2015). *The growing segmentation of the charter school sector in North Carolina*. Retrieved September 4, 2015 from http://www.caldercenter.org/sites/default/files/WP%20133_0.pdf.

²² Ibid.

²³ Siegel-Hawley, G., & Frankenberg, E. (2010-2011). Does law influence charter school diversity? An analysis of federal and state legislation. *Michigan Journal of Race and Law*, 16, 321-376.

²⁴ U.S. Department of Education (2009). *States open to charters start fast in “Race to Top”* [press release]. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2009/06/06082009a.html>

²⁵ NC § 334 3a (2015); NCDPI Office of Charter Schools, personal communication with Hawn Nelson, 23 June 2017.

A Case Study of Charters' Direct and Indirect Effects on Segregation

Patterns in the Charlotte metropolitan area are similar to the state's in that many Charlotte charter schools enroll a disproportionately large share of white students. Compared to students in traditional CMS schools, white and black charter students in Charlotte are more socioeconomically and racially isolated with larger proportions of same-race peers. In comparison to traditional public schools (including magnets), Charlotte's charter schools are the more racially imbalanced; that is, compared to CMS's traditional schools, charters' enrollment is more dissimilar to the metro area's overall racial composition.²⁶

Charter schools' racial imbalance has developed within the context of intensifying school segregation in North Carolina, and in Charlotte in particular.²⁷ Currently, most charter schools in Mecklenburg County serve a bifurcated market. Of the 36 charter schools in the Charlotte region, 6 schools (17%) are hyper segregated and serve student bodies that are less than 2% white; while 16 schools (44%) are racially isolated white and enroll more than 60% white students.²⁸ National discourse presents charter schools as an alternative to underperforming schools of poverty. Yet in the Mecklenburg County region, the majority of charter schools are located in suburban areas and serve primarily academically-proficient white or Asian middle-class students.

Resegregation in Charlotte

²⁶ Ayscue, J., Siegel-Hawley, G., Kucsera, J., & Woodward, B. (2016). School segregation and resegregation in Charlotte and Raleigh, 1989-2010. *Educational Policy*, 1-52.

²⁷ Ibid; Ayscue, J. B., & Woodward, B. with Kucsera, J., & Siegel-Hawley, G. (2014 May). *Segregation again: North Carolina's transition from leading desegregation then to accepting segregation now*. Los Angeles: The Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles.

²⁸ Hawn Nelson, A. (2017). As charters and choice expand, so does segregation. *UNC Charlotte Urban Institute*. Retrieved February 15, 2017 from <https://ui.uncc.edu/story/cms-and-charters-school-choice-outcomes-segregation>.

Four decades ago, CMS was one of the nation's most successfully desegregated public school systems, and operated under *Swann's* mandatory desegregation order for over 30 years.²⁹ After becoming unitary in 2002, CMS implemented a neighborhood-based assignment plan that led to rapid school resegregation by race and SES given that neighborhoods were racially and socioeconomically segregated.³⁰ Today, Charlotte exemplifies the nation's school resegregation trend.

Neighborhood school assignments and residential segregation are far from the only reasons that in 2016 CMS was the state's most racially segregated large school system.³¹ In the past 25 years, the Charlotte region has experienced dramatic demographic shifts and explosive growth. The Hispanic community grew from less than 2% of the county's population in 1990 to roughly 13% in 2016. In 2015, 48% of Mecklenburg County residents were non-Hispanic whites.³² Over three-quarters of Mecklenburg County's school aged population—roughly 150,000 youths—attend one of CMS' 161 schools, only a few of which have demographically representative enrollments. The remaining 23% attend private, home, or charter schools.³³

²⁹ *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, 402 U.S. 1 (1971)

³⁰ Ayscue, J. B., Woodward, B., Kucsera, J., & Siegel-Hawley, G. (2014); Mickelson, R.A., Smith, S.S., & Hawn Nelson, A. (2015). *Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow. School Desegregation and Resegregation in Charlotte*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press; Siegel-Hawley, G. (2016). *When the fences come down: Twenty-first-century lessons from Metropolitan School Desegregation*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

³¹ North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. (2016). Grade, Race, Sex Report, 2015-2016. Retrieved from <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/fbs/accounting/data/>

³² United States Census Bureau. (2016). Quick Facts Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/37119>

³³ Notably, the percent of Mecklenburg County youth attending private schools has declined slightly during the last decade, see Lane, J. & Hawn Nelson, A. (2015). Charter, private, home school or CMS? Is enrollment shifting? Retrieved January 2016 from <http://ui.uncc.edu/story/private-school-public-charter-homeschool-enrollment-charlotte-mecklenburg>. This decline is consistent with national private school enrollment trends, with the decline in private school enrollments among whites linked to growth of charters, see Ewert, A. (2013). The Decline in Private School Enrollment. SEHSD Working Paper FY12-117. U.S. Census Bureau. Social, Economic, and Housing Division. Washington, DC, January.

District enrollment is 40% black, 29% white, 23% Hispanic, and 6% Asian. And because of the close correlation between race and SES in Mecklenburg County, in the 76 schools where all students qualify for free lunch, almost 87% of students are black and/or Latino.³⁴

Enrollment growth, building utilization, changes in intra-urban ethnic spatial settlement patterns, and shifting demographics of school-aged children required the school board to recalibrate CMS's pupil assignment plan every six years. The persistent academic failures in the district's hypersegregated high poverty schools prompted the board to include reducing concentrations of poverty as a goal of student assignment.³⁵ In late 2016 CMS began a multi-phase redesign of its pupil assignment plan to address growth and SES segregation.³⁶ Phase I increases magnet seats and Phase II redraws school assignment boundaries.

This recalibration of CMS' pupil assignment plans, coupled with federal and state policies that support market inspired choice reforms, particularly charters, created a significant opportunity for us to study if charters play a *direct* role in fostering racial segregation in traditional CMS schools through the mechanical relationship between charter growth and their enrollment of middle-class, white and Asian, and/or high performing students who leave CMS. By examining the public discourse about the SES equity component connected with redesigning the pupil assignment plan and the unfolding policy process in CMS, we also explore the *indirect* effects of charter schools on segregation in CMS.³⁷ Specifically, we examine if policy actors

³⁴ Helms, A.D. (2016, December 2). CMS Tally: More Hispanic and Asian students, fewer black and white. *The Charlotte Observer*.

³⁵ Helms, A. D. (2015, August 13). CMS Board: It's time to break up concentrations of school poverty. *The Charlotte Observer*.

³⁶ CMS stopped considering race in pupil assignment after it became unitary in 2002.

³⁷ This case study is based on a chapter by Roslyn Arlin Mickelson, Jason Giersch, Amy Hawn Nelson, and Martha Bottia, "Do Charter Schools Undermine Efforts to Create Racially and Socioeconomically Diverse Public Schools?"

were influenced by the looming threat of white, Asian, and/or middle class exits to charters in response to the redrawing of school catchment areas to reduce SES hypersegregation.

Redesigning Pupil Assignment to Mitigate Resegregation

CMS' assignment plan is premised on parental choice among expanded magnet offerings or home schools with redrawn boundaries. The magnet portion of the plan is consistent with integration theories of choice wherein attractive magnet schools contribute to voluntary desegregation of the district's schools. In November 2016, the board unanimously approved Phase I of the new pupil assignment plan that expanded magnet options and seats, and established a weighted lottery based on students' SES for the 2017-18 school year.³⁸ In Phase II, the school board tackled the redrawing of catchment areas for non-magnet schools. New boundaries were proposed with four metrics in mind: proximity, intact feeder patterns, socioeconomic diversity, and utilization of capacity.³⁹

Phase II was approved in May 2017 after months of heated public hearings. The details of the initial recommendations for redrawn school catchment zones were the center of an intense public debate in which charter schools directly and indirectly played a prominent role. Both citizens and school board members were keenly aware that the extent to which prosperous white, Asian, and black suburban families actually leave CMS and enroll their children in charters

in Iris C. Rotberg and Joshua L. Glazer (eds.) *Parallel Education Systems: Charter Schools and Diversity*. New York: Teachers College Press, forthcoming 2018.

³⁸ Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. (2017b). *Phase I – Access to Options and Magnets*. Retrieved May 10, 2017 from <http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/cmsdepartments/StudentPlacement/PlanningServices/20172018StuAsgnReview/Pages/JJ-Access-to-Options-and-Magnets.aspx>

³⁹ Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. (2017c). *Phase II – Home School Boundaries and Feeder Patterns*. Retrieved May 10, 2017 from <http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/cmsdepartments/StudentPlacement/PlanningServices/20172018StuAsgnReview/Pages/JJ-Home-School-Boundaries.aspx>

would have a *direct* effect on CMS's ability to create more diverse schools district-wide. Mere expressions of heightened interest in charter schools by middle-class parents also could *indirectly* contribute to maintaining segregation in CMS. If policy makers believe too ambitious a plan will trigger flight to charters, they are likely to scale back their efforts to expand equity through creating more diverse schools.

What Actually Happened

The ongoing proliferation of charter schools in Mecklenburg County has weakened fiscal and political support for CMS. Projected growth in CMS is one-fifth as large as projected growth in the charter sector.⁴⁰ Because 2016 growth in charter enrollment surpassed traditional public school growth, Mecklenburg County Commissioners expressed their reluctance to fund new schools, improve existing facilities, or generally invest in public education if CMS student populations are not growing or even declining.⁴¹

Other fiscal consequences also potentially undermine the quality of traditional public schools. When a student enters a charter school, money follows her from the district of her residence to the charter she attends. CMS educators note that the funding pass-through occurs while district operating costs remain unchanged,⁴² complicating enrollment projections, budgeting, and instructional programming.⁴³ Fewer resources, such as fewer staff, can lead to

⁴⁰ Helms, A. D. (2016, February 24a). Charter growth in Mecklenburg expected to outstrip CMS 5 to 1. *The Charlotte Observer*.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. (2016c). Board of Education 2016-2017 Operating Budget Request. Retrieved from [http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/mediaroom/20162017 BudgetCapitalPlanInformation/ Documents/BOE%20FY2016-17%20Budget%20 Request%20FINAL%205-24-16.pdf](http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/mediaroom/20162017%20BudgetCapitalPlanInformation/Documents/BOE%20FY2016-17%20Budget%20Request%20FINAL%205-24-16.pdf)

⁴³ Helms, A. D. (2016, May 4). As students choose CMS or charters, does money follow them? *The Charlotte Observer*.

concerns about instructional programs, and any perceived weaknesses in these undermine confidence in CMS among families who may respond by sending their child to nearby charters.

This threat of flight to charters hovered over Mecklenburg County policy actors as they crafted Phase II of the 2017 assignment plan. CMS board members knew that aggressively pursuing SES desegregation policies that middle-class parents perceive as threatening access to and the quality of their neighborhood school may trigger exits from CMS. This possibility became central to the policy context in which CMS policy actors redesigned Phase II. At roughly the same time the school board was redrawing assignment boundaries in April 2017, the mayor of Matthews, a southern Mecklenburg suburb, proposed that his entire city become a "'business park' for charter schools."⁴⁴ This proposal effectively put CMS on notice that if it tampered with Matthews-area school boundaries, the town would do what it could to facilitate its students' exit to charters. During an earlier discussion of assignment plans, CMS School Board Member Rhonda Lennon, who represents the largely white and affluent northern suburban Lake Norman area, warned her colleagues:

If we do not have a guaranteed [neighborhood] school for every student, we don't need to go the County Commission and ask for more money because [middle-class suburbanites] will not stay at CMS. As a matter of fact, Rhonda Lennon will probably be putting in an application to open a charter school in the northern part of the county.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Helms, A. D. (2017, February 6). A 'business park' for charter schools is the latest proposal in choice scene for CMS. *The Charlotte Observer*.

⁴⁵ Helms, A. D. (2016, February 24a). Charter growth in Mecklenburg expected to outstrip CMS 5 to 1. *The Charlotte Observer*.

Lennon’s remark linking future funding from Mecklenburg County, a guaranteed seat in neighborhood schools, and the threat of middle-class white flight to charters, captures the conundrum faced by school board members seeking to break up concentrated poverty through redrawing school assignment boundaries.

The final assignment plan adopted in May 2017 included the limited use of elementary pairings, the reopening of several closed schools, alterations of some feeder patterns, and minor boundary changes for other schools.⁴⁶ The vast majority of CMS schools and the students who attend them will not be affected by the redrawn attendance boundaries. The new assignment plan will affect approximately 7,000 students, or less than 5% of the district’s 147,000 students. The changes only modestly shift concentrations of poverty.⁴⁷ Changes in catchment area boundaries will lower concentrations of poverty for only 21 of the district’s 75 schools with over 70% students on free or reduced lunch. Of the 21 schools projected to see improvements in SES balance, many changes are inconsequential.⁴⁸ For example, one middle school is projected to drop to from 94% to 92% of students on free or reduced lunch.⁴⁹

Most of the schools with intense concentrations of educational and economic privilege or disadvantage will remain as they were under the former assignment plan—as will the racial

⁴⁶ Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. (2017d). *Phase II – Student Assignment Superintendent Recommendations*. Retrieved May 10, 2017 from <http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/cmsdepartments/StudentPlacement/PlanningServices/20172018StuAsgnReview/Documents/SAR%20Ph%20II%20Recommendations%20%20Apr%2025%202017%20BOE%20Mtg.pdf>

⁴⁷ Helms, A. D. (2017, April 28). CMS plan’s impact on high-poverty schools becomes clearer, and it’s not much. *The Charlotte Observer*.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ It is important to note that this is not based on FRL, but a metric designed specifically for CMS student assignment, based on an index for SES mainly relying on US Census data. All schools by SES in 2016 can be found here: <http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/cmsdepartments/StudentPlacement/PlanningServices/20172018StuAsgnReview/Documents/All%20School%20SES%20Level%202016.pdf>

isolation that accompanies socioeconomic segregation. According to board member Rhonda Lennon, the plan will be well received in the northern suburbs because it does not uproot the vast majority of students.⁵⁰

Conclusion

While market theories of choice anticipate that charters will positively influence public education, thwarting efforts to increase diversity surely is not amongst these expectations. Our case study of Charlotte illustrates how charter schools directly and indirectly undermine the capacities of CMS leaders to desegregate the public schools. When charters siphon off middle-class Asian, black, Hispanic, and white students and their funding, they directly make the task of SES and racial desegregation mechanically more difficult. The proliferation of charters in Mecklenburg County was grist for the political activism of suburban parents who threatened a middle-class exodus from CMS to the charter sector. These threats indirectly undermined policy actors' initial willingness to boldly and decisively revamp pupil assignments to curb segregation. Threats of a suburban exodus to charter schools likely thwarted public school actors' willingness to redraw assignment boundaries in ways that would limit or reverse segregation in CMS. Charlotte's recent struggles with pupil reassignments illustrate how charter schools directly and indirectly drive resegregation among the traditional public schools.

⁵⁰ Helms, A. D. (2017, April 20). Here's why neighborhood school advocates may like new CMS boundary plan. *The Charlotte Observer*.