

## EDUCATION WEEK

# Charter Schools Aren't Good for Blacks, Civil Rights Groups Say

By **Arianna Prothero**

August 30, 2016

African-American students make up a major share of enrollment in the nation's charter schools—and in some cities, they dominate.

But since two black civil rights organizations born from different generations **called for a halt** to opening new charters, debate has been raging over how the groups' demands will affect black support for the publicly funded, but independently run schools.

In recent weeks, the **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People**, the venerable civil rights organization, took its firmest stance to date on charter schools in calling for a moratorium. Soon after, **the Movement for Black Lives**, a coalition of over 50 organizations that includes activists from Black Lives Matter—a powerful new advocacy force—also called for a ban on charter school growth.

The rationale at the core of both groups' stances: **Black families and communities are losing control of their public schools.**

It's a critique that some charter school supporters empathize with.

"Education reformers basically disposed communities—brought in reform ideas, [such as] charter schools, but didn't hire local teachers—almost engaging in this work in a missionary manner," said Shavar Jeffries, the president of Democrats for Education Reform, a national, pro-charter advocacy group. "And that will absolutely undermine the ability of education reform to sustain itself."

But, he said, support for charters is strong among low-income black and Latino families.

### Core of Community

Although charter schools are more popular with Republicans, they garner strong support from Democrats—58 percent—**according to a 2016 poll from Education Next**, a journal published by Stanford University's Hoover Institution.

But that support among Democrats starts to break down somewhat among survey respondents who are black. Forty-five percent of African-American respondents said they either "completely support" or "somewhat support" charter schools, compared with 29 percent that either "completely oppose" or

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### U.S. Total Student Enrollment

"somewhat oppose" charters. Twenty-six percent said they neither support nor oppose charters.

Those divides in black public opinion are nothing new, said Howard Fuller, a former superintendent of the Milwaukee schools and the founder of the pro-charter school advocacy organization, **Black Alliance for Educational Options**.

"No matter what the public policy is, the downside of this has been that the push to improve academic achievement has led to black schools being closed, black teachers losing their jobs and being devalued," said Fuller. "It's not possible for this type of change to occur and for there not to be a division."

Although schools are important in any community, that is especially so for black communities, said Jeffrey Henig, a professor of political science and education at Teachers College, Columbia University. Not only was educational opportunity an important goal of the civil rights movement, schools hired black employees before much of the public sector did, he said.

"The African-American community was shut out of power and authority for so many years, even if African-Americans see the warts on the local district, it's their district," Henig said.

The NAACP's proposed moratorium, which still has to be approved by the group's national board in October, cites increased segregation, high rates of suspensions and expulsions for black students, fiscal mismanagement, and poor oversight in charter schools as reasons to hit pause on the sector's growth.

Joan Duvall Flynn, the president of the NAACP's Pennsylvania state conference and local branches, was struck by how many of those issues echoed concerns she had identified in her own state. The language calling for the moratorium was proposed by the California chapter.

"The fact that way across the country they're having the same observations and experiences, I think makes it clear that this is a nationwide issue," Duvall Flynn said. "We are very concerned about the loss of local control of public education. The closest democratic institution to every kitchen table is the school board."

Charter schools, though funded with taxpayer dollars, are directly run by appointed boards, not elected ones.

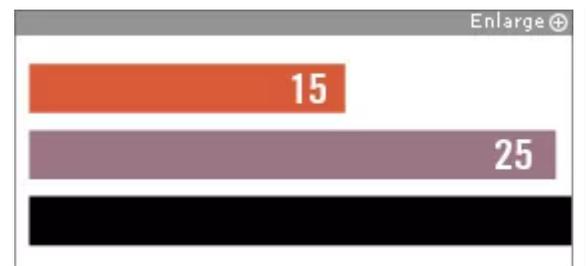
The NAACP's resolution further states that charter schools are rapidly expanding and are "increasingly targeting low-income areas and communities of color."

The most visible segment of the charter sector—**propelled in part by deep-pocketed foundations**—is focused on setting up shop in low-income, urban neighborhoods with the aim of serving the black and Latino students who live in those communities. That's the goal of many of the nation's highest-profile charter school networks, such as KIPP, YES Prep, and Aspire Public Schools.

### Charter Demographics

Nationally, black students make up 28 percent of charter school enrollment, compared with 15 percent of noncharter enrollment, **according to an Education Week Research Center analysis** of federal data from the 2012-13 school year. White students make up 35 percent of total charter school enrollment and 50 percent of the public, noncharter sector.

But the racial makeup of charter schools varies greatly from state to state. Black students make up large majorities of charter school enrollment in Louisiana, New Jersey, and Tennessee—in areas where states have taken over low-performing districts or schools. Many of the themes in the NAACP's



Source: Education Week Research Center, 2016. Analysis of data from U.S. Department of Education's Common Core of Data (2012-13).

resolution, such as concerns over strict discipline policies and school closures, are echoed in the education agenda outlined by the Movement for Black Lives.

Its agenda also targets some of the most powerful philanthropic backers of the charter school sector. It calls out the Walton Family Foundation, the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for bankrolling what it calls "an international education privatization agenda" that includes the expansion of charter schools. (All three foundations help support coverage of different issues in *Education Week*. The newspaper retains sole editorial control over its content.)

### **Bigger Debates**

The Movement for Black Lives agenda also demands an end to converting regular public schools to charters, closing schools, and taking over schools by states and mayors, among other initiatives.

The agenda was shaped by young activists whose outlooks have been molded by drastic changes in urban education in cities such as Philadelphia, New Orleans, and Chicago, said Jonathan Stith, the national coordinator for the Alliance for Educational Justice, a group that works with student activists in urban communities. Stith, whose organization is part of the Movement for Black Lives, helped write the platform.

Critics of the proposed charter moratoriums have said the groups are taking direction from the teachers' unions, which generally oppose the expansion of charters. But Stith rebuffs those accusations, saying the movement is charting its own path. He points to a crucial part of his group's agenda that he says the unions have kept quiet on—how police in schools negatively impact students.

"What's been interesting is seeing the two teachers' unions being very 'yay, anti-privatization,' but very silent around school police," said Stith. "The education of black children in this country is caught between a policeman and a privatizer."

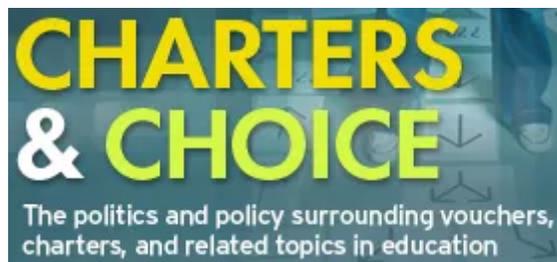
Although it's still too early to know whether the stances taken by the NAACP and the Movement for Black Lives will ultimately affect policy or support for the charter sector, they may be symptoms of other challenges facing charter school supporters.

"More and more, education politics and policy is being infiltrated by these bigger wars over the proper role of government, the proper role of philanthropy, and the proper role of markets," said Henig of Teachers College.

Charter schools rode in on a wave of reform that included teacher accountability, high-stakes testing, and private providers, he said.

"Those bigger debates seem to be sticking to the charter issue in ways that helped it initially and are now slowing it down."

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