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Segregated Charter Schools Evoke Separate But Equal Era in U.S.

By John Hechinger - Dec 22, 2011

At [Dugsi Academy](#), a public school in St. Paul, [Minnesota](#), girls wearing traditional Muslim headscarves and flowing ankle-length skirts study Arabic and Somali. The charter school educates “East African children in the Twin Cities,” its website says. Every student is black.

At [Twin Cities German Immersion School](#), another St. Paul charter, children gather under a map of “Deutschland,” study with interns from Germany, Austria and [Switzerland](#) and learn to dance the waltz. Ninety percent of its students are white.

Six decades after the U.S. Supreme Court struck down “separate but equal” schools for blacks and whites, segregation is growing because of charter schools, privately run public schools that educate 1.8 million U.S. children. While charter-school leaders say programs targeting ethnic groups enrich education, they are isolating low-achievers and damaging diversity, said Myron Orfield, a lawyer and demographer.

“It feels like the Deep South in the days of Jim Crow segregation,” said Orfield, who directs the University of Minnesota Law School’s Institute on Race & Poverty. “When you see an all-white school and an all-black school in the same neighborhood in this day and age, it’s shocking.”

Charter schools are more segregated than traditional public schools, according to a 2010 report by the Civil Rights Project at the [University of California, Los Angeles](#). Researchers studied 40 states, the [District of Columbia](#), and 39 metropolitan areas. In particular, higher percentages of charter-school students attend what the report called “racially isolated” schools, where 90 percent or more students are from disadvantaged minority groups.

Charter-School Birthplace

In Minnesota, the birthplace of the U.S. charter-school movement, the divide is more than black and white.

St. Paul’s Hmong College Prep Academy, 99 percent Asian- American in the past school year, immerses

students “in the rich heritage that defines Hmong culture.” Its [Academia Cesar Chavez School](#) -- 93 percent Hispanic -- promises bilingual education “by advocating Latino cultural values in an environment of familia and community.” [Minneapolis’s Four Directions Charter School](#), 94 percent Native American, black and Hispanic, promotes “lifelong learning for American Indian students.”

[Charter schools](#), which select children through lotteries, are open to all who apply, said Abdulkadir Osman, Dugsi’s executive director.

“Some people call it segregation,” Osman said. “This is the parent’s choice. They can go anywhere they want. We are offering families something unique.”

Nobody ‘Forced’

That’s a “significant difference” between Minnesota charters and segregated schools in the 1950s South, said Joe Nathan, director of the Center for School Change at Macalester College in St. Paul.

“Nobody is being forced to go to these schools,” said Nathan, who helped write Minnesota’s 1991 charter-school law.

Ever since [Horace Mann](#) crusaded for free universal education in the 19th century, public schools have been hailed as the U.S. institutions that bring together people of disparate backgrounds.

The atomization of charter schools coincides with growing U.S. diversity. Americans of other races will outnumber whites by 2042, the Census Bureau projects.

Even after a divided [Supreme Court](#) in 2007 ruled that schools couldn’t consider race in making pupil assignments to integrate schools, Justice Anthony M. Kennedy urged districts to find other ways to fight “de facto resegregation” and “racial isolation.”

“The nation’s schools strive to teach that our strength comes from people of different races, creeds, and cultures uniting in commitment to the freedom of all,” Kennedy wrote.

Diverse Workplaces

Citing Kennedy’s words, U.S. Secretary of Education [Arne Duncan](#) and Attorney General Eric Holder this month called for schools -- including charters -- to combat growing segregation.

Along with breeding “educational inequity,” racially- divided schools deny children the experiences they need to succeed in an increasingly diverse workplace, Duncan said in announcing voluntary guidelines for

schools.

Charter schools may specialize in serving a single culture as long as they have open admissions, and there's no evidence of discrimination, said Russlynn Ali, assistant education secretary for civil rights.

The education department is encouraging charter schools to promote diversity. Charters could expand recruiting and consider lotteries that give extra weight to disadvantaged groups, such as families living in low-income neighborhoods or children who speak English as a second language, Ali said in a phone interview.

Immigrant Magnet

Minnesota, 85 percent white, is a case study of the nation's growing diversity. Since the 1970s, Minneapolis and [St. Paul](#) have become a magnet for Hmong refugees, who fought alongside Americans in the [Vietnam War](#). In the 1990s, Somalis sought refuge from civil war.

St. Paul, where the nation's first charter school opened in 1992, is 16 percent black, 10 percent Hispanic and 15 percent Asian-American, according to the U.S Census Bureau.

Charter schools should be similarly diverse, recommended a 1988 report that provided the groundwork for Minnesota's charter-school law.

"We envision the creation of schools which, by design, would invite a dynamic mix of students by race and ability levels," the Citizens League, a St. Paul-based nonprofit public-policy group, wrote in the report.

'Great Failure'

Instead, in the 2009-2010 school year, three quarters of the Minneapolis and St. Paul region's 127 charter schools were "highly segregated," according to the University of Minnesota Law School's race institute. Forty-four percent of schools were 80 percent or more non-white, and 32 percent, mostly white.

"It's been a great failure that the most segregated schools in Minnesota are charter schools," said Mindy Greiling, a state representative who lobbied for the charter-school law when she was a member of a suburban school board in the 1980s. "It breaks my heart."

Segregation is typical nationwide. Seventy percent of black charter-school students across the country attended "racially isolated" schools, twice as many as the share in traditional public schools, according to the report from the Civil Rights Project at UCLA.

Half of all Latino charter-school students went to these intensely segregated schools, the study found. In the West and the South, the two most racially diverse regions of the country, “charters serve as havens for white flight from public schools,” the report said.

Hmong Roots

They also serve as havens for minority students who need extra help, said leaders of Minnesota charter schools.

Christianna Hang, founder of [Hmong College Prep Academy](#), said she designed the school so children, mostly first-generation Americans, didn’t feel adrift in public schools as she did when she arrived in the U.S. in 1980.

In the Hmong academy’s central hallway, a tapestry depicts families living in [Laos](#), fleeing the Vietnam War and arriving in America. The school’s roughly 700 students, in grades kindergarten through 12th grade, learn Hmong.

“I came here for my parents as much as for me,” said Mai Chee Xiong, a 17-year-old senior. “I was very Americanized. I wanted to be able to speak with them in our language, and I wanted to understand my roots.”

In the 2009-2010 school year, 26 percent of Hmong Academy students met or exceeded standards on state math exams, while 30 percent did so in reading. About half passed those tests in the St. Paul Public School District.

Harvard Banners

To raise expectations, classrooms adopt colleges, hanging banners from [Harvard University](#), [Yale University](#) and [Dartmouth College](#) over their doors.

“If we don’t do something to help these kids, they will get lost,” Hang said. “If they drop out of school, they will never become productive citizens, and there’s no way they will achieve the American dream.”

Dugsi Academy, the school for East Africans, and Twin Cities German Immersion School make for some of St. Paul’s sharpest contrasts.

Until this school year, the two schools were neighbors, across a busy commercial thoroughfare in a racially diverse neighborhood. At different times of the day, the kids used a city playground in front of the German school for recess. Dugsi has since moved three miles away, across a highway from the Hmong academy.

The German Immersion School is a bright, airy former factory with exposed brick and high ceilings.

Fluent German

“Eva, was ist das?” kindergarten teacher Elena Heindl asked one morning earlier this month as she pointed a red flashlight to letters, eliciting the name of each one in German.

To succeed at the school, students must be fluent in German to enroll, unless they enter before second or third grade, Julie Elias, a parent, told prospective families on a tour this month.

“You can’t just move into the neighborhood if you want to go to our school,” Elias said. The school is legally required to take anyone picked in its lottery, though it counsels parents against enrolling in older grades without German knowledge, said Annika Fjelstad, its director.

The school, which includes many families with one parent who speaks German or that have German relatives, holds special events at the [Germanic-American Institute](#) in a \$1.3 million St. Paul house with a ballroom. Children like to call the institute “our school’s mansion,” said Chris Weimholt, another parent giving the tour.

No Buses

In the 2009-2010 school year, 87 percent of children at the German school passed state math tests and 84 percent did so in reading, according to the [Minnesota Department of Education](#). Fifteen percent qualify for the federal free or reduced lunch program, compared with 71 percent in St. Paul. The school doesn’t offer bus transportation, so most parents drive, often carpooling, Elias said.

The language requirement and lack of transportation prevents poor families from attending, said Greiling, the state legislator, who has toured the school.

“A regular public school could never have that kind of bar,” she said. “It seems an odd thing that this would be legal.”

The German program doesn’t have buses because they would cost \$100,000 a year, too heavy a burden for an expanding school of 274 that wants to maintain classes of 20 students, Fjelstad said. An immersion school can’t take kids who aren’t fluent after early grades, she said.

In February, the school formed an “inclusivity” task force to find ways to make the school more reflective of the community, Fjelstad said. The school will try to improve recruiting through its relationship with community organizations, such as a neighboring YMCA, she said.

International View

The school offers a different kind of diversity, said Weimholt, a nurse whose grandfather emigrated from [Germany](#) after World War I. “It doesn’t look diverse by skin color. But families straddle two different continents. The school truly has an international perspective.”

So does Dugsi Academy. Children learn Arabic and Somali along with English and traditional academic subjects. A caller last month heard no English on a school voice mail.

One morning in late November, a sixth-grade social-studies class discussed immigration with 28-year-old Khaleefah Abdallah, who himself fled [Somalia](#) 12 years ago. The boys wore jeans and sweatshirts. The girls sported hijabs, or traditional Muslim head coverings with skirts or long pants.

‘Melting Pot’

Abdallah asked his class about the idea of the American “melting pot:” immigrants assimilating into U.S. culture. He suggested another metaphor, a “salad bowl,” where people from different backgrounds mix while retaining their own identity.

“I agree with the salad bowl,” Fadumo Ahmed, 12, dressed in a black hijab and sneakers with pink laces, told the class. “We all come from different places, but we still want to keep our culture.”

Students shared stories of the challenge of co-existing in mainstream America.

Ahmed Hassan, 12, complained about a boy on a city playground who made fun of the long traditional robe he wore one Friday.

“He told me it looked like a skirt,” Hassan said. Abdallah told the class that, under the U.S. constitution, Americans have the freedom to express themselves through their clothing.

Test Scores

Dugsi, a low-slung red-brick building in an office park, has about 300 students in kindergarten through eighth grade. Almost all qualify for federal free or reduced lunches, according to the [state](#). Only 19 percent passed state math exams in the 2009-2010 school year, while 40 percent did so in reading.

The school’s test scores reflect families’ backgrounds, said Osman, the Dugsi director and a former employee of the U.S. Embassy in Somalia, who emigrated to the U.S. in 1993. Parents work as cab drivers, nurses and grocers, Osman said. Many had no formal schooling.

It would be better if one day Somali students could go to school with children from other backgrounds, Osman said.

“That’s the beauty of America -- Latinos, Caucasians, African-Americans and Native Americans, all together in the same building, eating lunch and in the same classrooms,” Osman said. “It would be something wonderful. That’s what I’m thinking of for my own kids and grandchildren.”

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