

Diverse Charter Schools: an Emerging Model

Charter schools present a new opportunity to create diverse student bodies because they are free from some limits traditional public schools face. Many charters, however, remain segregated by race and class. This panel explored opportunities to create more diverse charter schools and highlighted examples of these diverse schools from across the country.

- **Julie Mead**, *Professor and Chair*, Department of Educational Leadership & Policy Analysis, University of Wisconsin-Madison
- **Allison Kell**, *Co-Director*, Community Roots Charter School
- **Halley Potter**, *Policy Associate*, Century Foundation
- **Rachel Godsil**, *Eleanor Bontecou Professor of Law*, Seton Hall University School of Law (moderator)

Julie Mead opened the presentation with a theoretical explanation of charter schools and their relationship with diversity. Using her own research, she gave recommendations for how to best create diverse charter schools. Schools, she said, should focus on specific recruitment tactics to increase diversity. For charter authorizers, she suggested they condition the charter grant on higher standards of diversity than the requirements for public schools. For Congress, she suggested that charter funds be conditioned on diversity, among other things.

Halley Potter gave seven successful examples of diverse charter schools in the United States. Schools were selected based on diversity and performance. Diversity was defined in terms of students eligible for a free or reduced price lunch coupled with racial and ethnic diversity. Performance was based on high academic achievements (like EPIC awards and college admittance rates) and whether economically disadvantaged students had a higher performance rate on state assessments than in public schools. She then suggested some best practices these schools employed. One was intentional location, which both gives families from different backgrounds access the school and also allows the school to draw attendees from a diverse population. Some schools also practice targeted student recruitment or weighted admission to keep their diversity levels strong. Finally, most schools embrace diversity within the school's programs and community, not simply in terms of numbers.

Allison Kell, who is the co-director of one of the seven successful schools profiled by Ms. Potter, focused on her school's recruitment practices. Community Roots is in Brooklyn, purposefully located near a diverse, traditionally black community. The school recruits a large population of low income and special needs students. While gentrification is causing a higher population of middle and upper class students, they are working to regain the high levels of economic diversity that were present at the beginning. Her largest focus was making sure that the school is diverse in practice, not only in numbers. Community Roots uses programming for students and families to encourage diverse interactions, and thus make a stronger, diverse community.

After the presentations, Rachel Godsil opened the floor for questions. The group focused largely on three areas. First, are charter schools, even diverse ones, the best way of integrating schools? One participant expressed concern that if charter schools, even diverse charter schools, are pulling students from the public school population, it will decrease diversity even more in public

schools. Similarly, others expressed concerns about balancing charter schools and public schools. If we focus integration goals and education reform on charter schools, what happens to the public schools and students in them? Also, given the past problems of choice and segregation, participants wanted to make sure we learn from that past and keep it in the conversation. Second, should we and how can we encourage all charter schools to be diverse? Some members of the group had very positive feelings on charter schools in general and felt like forcing them to be diverse could limit the value of charter schools. However, the larger group still seemed skeptical of charter schools' commitment to diversity, and wanted these diversity requirements to be part of the law.

Finally, the group asked how do we embrace diverse practices, both with in-classroom teaching and out-of-classroom programming within diverse charter schools? As Julie Mead said, "Access is step one. It's not the goal in and of itself." Community Roots illustrates that these diverse school practices are possible. The concern participants and panelists had moving forward is how do we quantify these practices? How can we show that a school is taking advantage of their diversity to benefit the community, both for accountability, and to give data for other schools trying to emulate their practices? Coming away, the group seemed reassured that these diverse charter schools could have a positive impact, emerging as a new model not only for charter schools, but as a gateway to the conversation of how to improve diversity in all schools.