

NC Public Charter Schools: Stymied by Funding
Op-Ed from Rhonda Dillingham, Executive Director, NC Association for Public Charter Schools

A recent [report](#) from policy analyst Kris Nordstrom at the North Carolina Justice Center claims that charter schools are contributing to increasing racial segregation. Public charter schools are free public schools that are open to **all** students, and only make up six percent of all public schools nationwide.

Charter schools should not be labeled as a major contributor to an ongoing problem of segregation. Nordstrom himself states, “It is unclear how much of the increase in racially isolated schools is due to education policy decisions (i.e. school choice, school assignment plans, school district borders, etc.)”

Decades’ old mechanisms leading to segregation, including discriminatory zoning policies, disproportionate school funding models, and wealthier school districts breaking away from larger urban districts are the root of the problem.

Historically, a family’s zip code has determined where children attend school. The ability to purchase a home in a school district with more resources can also mean access to a high-quality education for children. Unfortunately, families who cannot afford to move into a better school district do not have that same choice. Limiting a low wealth minority family’s right to choose a high quality charter school over a poor performing assigned neighborhood school contributes to social inequality.

Fortunately, public charter schools are empowering families and meeting the needs of children. They allow families to break free from the limitations of a school that has been chosen for them. Instead, families are able to *choose* the educational model they feel is best for their children, and they are thankful to have this choice. In 2016, [two national surveys](#) found that, on average, charter school parents are more satisfied with their children’s schools than are district school parents.

Not only are charter schools giving parents more choice, but they are also becoming more racially diverse. A recent [report](#) from the state [Office of Charter Schools](#) found that the enrollment of Hispanic and low-income students has increased.

Unfortunately, unequal funding models mean that students continue to experience a disproportionate lack of investment in terms of resources available to their schools. In North Carolina, the 10 highest-spending counties spend [four times more](#) per child than the 10 lowest-spending counties. Furthermore, if a child living in a county with low-wealth funding attends a charter school in a different county, the low-wealth funding [does not follow](#) the child to the charter school.

Nordstrom asserts that requiring charter schools to provide transportation would decrease segregation. Such a requirement would be unfair, however, since the state currently does not provide funding to charter schools for buses, a burden that could be ameliorated by the

Transportation Grant Pilot Program, a provision of the state budget. Charter schools are eligible to apply for reimbursements of up to 65% of transportation costs, but the school must prove that at least 50% of its enrollment consists of students residing in households with an income level not in excess of the amount required for a student to qualify for the federal free or reduced price lunch program. Further, reimbursable costs include only transportation fuel, vehicle maintenance, and contracted transportation services, not bus drivers' salaries, which come at a significant cost to the school. According to the [Office of Charter Schools Report](#), 41 schools have applied for the grant, representing well over \$3 million, yet the two-year grant pilot is only funded at \$2.5 million. Expanding the criteria of the Transportation Grant Pilot Program is [a priority item](#) for the NC Association for Public Charter Schools.

North Carolina's public charter schools understand the importance of diversity. That is why many of them provide transportation and food to students even though the schools are not fairly compensated. Rather than closing successful public charter schools, as Nordstrom suggests, legislators need to equalize funding so that all students have access to the education option that best suits their needs.

Charter schools' number one goal is to provide a high-quality education to children who need it now. The North Carolina Association for Public Charter Schools will continue to make sure every student has a bright future. It is time to shift our focus from blaming charter schools to finding solutions that create real change.

About the North Carolina Association for Public Charter Schools

The North Carolina Association for Public Charter Schools (NCAPCS) is the leading charter school membership organization in the state. Created from the merger of the NC Alliance for Public Charter Schools and the NC Public Charter Schools Association, the NC Association for Public Charter Schools is dedicated to advancing quality educational opportunities for all North Carolina children by supporting and expanding successful charter schools. NCAPCS exists to serve as an advocate on behalf of all North Carolina public charter schools in addition to providing a broad spectrum of technical support, mentoring, training, networking, and purchasing services to its membership.

Rhonda Dillingham is the executive director of the NC Association for Public Charter Schools.