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### The Detriment of Choice; Charter Schools in the Twin Cities

If an average white American is asked about segregation, they would most likely say that it is a thing of the past. After all, that's what most believe the abolition of the Jim Crow Laws and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 achieved. However, sociologists in 2018 would tell them that those legislations did nothing to reduce the impacts of segregation; in fact, in many ways we are regressing. In the cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, civil rights attorneys have taken notice of the continued and blatant segregation of schools and filed a lawsuit against the state of Minnesota in 2015, attempting to implement a city-wide integration plan which would include redrawing of school district lines. While school integration seems like a concept that most people would get behind, there are many obstacles standing in the way of true school integration, including a high number of charter schools in the the metro-area. The rise of charter schools was given validity in large part from the appeal of the option of choice, as well as the promotion of neoliberalist ideals. Through the lens of urban theorists Massey and Denton, Low, and Brenner and Theodore, I will explicate the detrimental effects of educational exclusion through charter schools in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

It is essential to specify what is considered to be a charter school, and how a charter school differs from a traditional public school. In the state of Minnesota, charter schools are technically public; they are tuition-free, do not require entrance exams, and are theoretically held

to the same financial and academic standards as public district schools. However, there are some key differences that affect parents, students, and the community. “Charter schools claim to be public schools because they receive tax-payer money, and, in theory, are overseen by state-approved authorities. But private-sector entities - boards of directors and charter management organisations - manage the schools and control finances. And private management - which can be for-profit or non-profit - allows charter schools to avoid the transparency and accountability required of district public schools” (Barkan 105). Whether charters are definitionally public or private, the amount of racial segregation between them demonstrates that there is an element of exclusionism in who attends which charter school. In this way, the education system is becoming increasingly privatized and divided.

In their article “Segregation and the Making of the Underclass,” Massey and Denton lay out the complex and multifaceted causes of segregation in the United States, especially in urban areas. They point out that even in 1993, the rates of geographic concentration of the black community indicated not only segregation, but a form of hypersegregation. They define hypersegregation as “when the extent of racial segregation is so intense and occurred on so many dimensions simultaneously” (Massey and Denton 195). The process of ghettoization has persisted not because blacks choose to live in certain areas, but because of some very deliberate choices made by people in socioeconomic power. “This extreme racial isolation did not just happen; it was manufactured by whites through a series of self-conscious actions and purposeful institutional arrangements that continue today” (Massey and Denton 194). These institutional arrangements include discriminatory housing markets, a lack of political representation of black residents, and poorly funded educational institutions. All of these intersecting factors come

together to enforce the existence of the underclass; a demographic of people who are so systematically disadvantaged that upward mobility is nearly impossible. “In a segregated world, the deck is stacked against black socioeconomic progress, political empowerment, and full participation in the mainstream of American life” (Massey and Denton 197). Massey and Denton make the claim that until all of these barriers are attacked simultaneously, hypersegregation will persevere. Hypersegregation isn’t the only cause for the rise of charter schools; rather, the implementation of charter schools exacerbated hypersegregation.

Setha Low’s article “The Erosion of Public Space and the Public Realm” focuses primarily on the struggle between public and private space in New York City post-9/11. Its overarching message, however, can be perceived as the promotion of maintaining public space which can serve everyone equally. In Low’s view, privatization of space plays an active role in the separation of people. “In this century, we are facing a different kind of threat to public space - not one of disuse, but of patterns of design, management, and systems of ownership that reduce diversity” (Low 402). In the situation of New York, city officials believed that a memorial would be the best use of Ground Zero, or the piece of land the World Trade Center occupied. However, Low observed that citizens of that area didn’t believe the memorial would serve them any good; the memorial space would not feel safe or secure for immigrants or ethnic groups. While Low is referring primarily to public parks and open spaces, her philosophy about the degradation of diversity can be logically transferred to the shift from public schools to charter schools.

Neoliberalism is another essential concept to examine when speaking about privatization of education. Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore go through the basics of neoliberalism as an urban ideology and what it means in different contexts. Their overarching definition of neoliberalism is

as follows: “The linchpin of neoliberal ideology is the belief that open, competitive, and unregulated markets, liberated from all forms of state interference, represent the optimal mechanism for economic development” (Brenner and Theodore 139). The scholars go through the history of this theory from the 1970s and 1980s, and pose important questions about its success in practice. One element of concern is the inevitable presence of state interference, despite neoliberalism’s goal to be unregulated by the state. “Whereas neoliberal ideology implies that self-regulating markets will generate an optimal allocation of investments and resources, neoliberal political practice has generated pervasive market failures, new forms of social polarization, and a dramatic intensification of uneven development at all spatial scales” (Brenner and Theodore 140). The scholars also include a table on pages 143-145 to describe the neoliberal shift from the “Moment of Destruction” to the “Moment of Creation” of various localizations, such as the welfare state, urban housing markets, the labor market, and territorial development. While education is not mentioned within their list, their conclusions about shifting from the public to the private domain can be logically extended to the issue of public schools versus charter schools in the way that publicly funded projects are transitioned into privately managed entities.

To begin examining this issue, it was essential to become familiar with the current stance of the civil rights lawyers filing the lawsuit against the state of Minnesota. I searched for more information on the lawsuit in the Star Tribune, the largest newspaper source in Minnesota. I located a handful of articles from 2015, when the lawsuit was originally filed, and one from January of 2018, when the lawsuit went to the Minnesota Supreme Court.

In the process of researching school segregation in the Twin Cities, it became obvious that the growth of the charter school system played a significant role in citizens' dissatisfaction of the public schools. Not only are charter schools allowed, but Minnesota is known as the nation's first charter school state, as the very first charter school opened in St. Paul in 1992. I felt that the link between heightened school segregation and the prominence of charter schools specifically in the state of Minnesota could not be ignored. In order to become better versed in the history of charter schools, I selected the article "Death by a thousand cuts: the story of privatising public education in the USA" by Joanne Barkan to include in my research. This was the most recent scholarly article I could find on the privatization of schools, and I felt that this would offer me the most useful perspective, as the issues laid out in the lawsuit are also occurring in the present day.

As a former student of a very well-funded public school in a suburb of Chicago, I came into this project with more knowledge about public school culture and policies. I attended Niles North High School in Skokie, IL from 2012-2016, and I was very privileged in the fact that Niles North collected high property taxes from a high-end shopping mall located across the street, as well as from a handful of wealthier neighborhoods within district lines. The overall student population is by no means rich; 31% of current students are on free or reduced lunch, and the school offers free breakfast every morning with lower income students in mind (Illinois Report Card). Niles North is a unique public high school that can meet the high needs of its students with high funding and program offerings. This contrasts greatly with the surrounding public high schools in wealthier suburbs such as Deerfield, Highland Park, and Wilmette, which also have high funding but fewer low-income students to support. Therefore, public high schools in those

areas can spend less money on supporting students experiencing poverty, and more of their resources on lifting the upper-class students even higher in their achievement levels and opportunities for extra-curriculars.

Niles North High School is unique in its demographics as well: in the 2017-2018 year, white students made up 38.5% of the population, while Asian students stood at 36.8%, black students at 9.2%, and Hispanic/Latinx students at 12.8% (Illinois Report Card). The racial makeup of the school has remained similar for many consecutive years, and this caused a type of culture shock when I arrived at St. Olaf and learned about my friends' high schools. I learned from the Minnesota Report Card that almost all of my friends' suburban high schools were 80-90% white. This trend of course does not differ far from other Chicago suburbs; According to the Illinois Report Card, New Trier Township High School in Winnetka is 83.8% white, Deerfield High School is 88% white, and Lake Forest High School is 86.6% white. I am consistently surprised and discouraged by these numbers, and this is what inspired my research on school segregation.

I also acknowledge that school segregation is highly linked with residential segregation and housing policies. As we read in Matthew Desmond's ethnography *Evicted*, areas with low housing market values tend to also have lower achieving schools (Desmond 172). For the sake of this study, I will limit my examination to the effects of charter schools rather than housing policies, since charters allow parents to send their children to educational institutions outside their assigned school district. Redrawing district lines, as the lawsuit demands, will only assist school integration if charter schools are also held to standards of integration.

It is worth mentioning the compositions of Minneapolis versus St. Paul, as they are fairly different cities demographically. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2017 Minneapolis was populated with 63.9% white residents, and St. Paul was 57.4% white. There were 3% more African-Americans living in St. Paul than Minneapolis (18.9% versus 15.9%, respectively). The largest divergence between minority populations in 2017 was in the number of Asians/Asian Americans. While 6% of the Minneapolis population was Asian alone, St. Paul's percentage of Asians was 18%. This is likely due to the concentrated amount of Hmong people in the St. Paul area. Despite these demographic differences, for the sake of this paper I will be grouping issues of education policies in Minneapolis and St. Paul together, as the lawsuit does. However, further research of the educational policies in each city individually should be done.

Attorneys Daniel Shulman and John Shulman filed the civil rights lawsuit against the state of Minnesota on behalf of seven families and one community group, stating that Minnesota school districts and educational policies perpetuate school segregation - or as Massey and Denton would call it, hypersegregation. In particular, they cited charter schools as a major roadblock for integration. The Star Tribune article written in 2015 explains, "Charter schools also have 'promoted and exacerbated segregation,' the lawsuit said, by marketing themselves to parents as providers of a 'racially-oriented education, appropriate only to a particular racial group' or by attracting white students in districts with shifting demographics" (Lonetree and Matos). Writer Joanne Barkan mirrors this sentiment by saying, "Vouchers and charter schools create still another problem: they increase racial and socioeconomic segregation... 68.4 per cent of voucher-participating private schools had enrolments that were either 90 per cent white or 90 per cent black. Overall, 90 per cent of voucher transfers 'increased segregation in private

schools, public schools, or both sectors” (Barkan 110). Schools that serve either 90% white students or 90% black students would be considered hypersegregated, and this is allowed to continue under the guise of safety, achievement, and choice.

Educational privatization has played a significant role in thwarting integration. “Public funding, private management - these four words sum up American-style privatisation, whether applied to airports, prisons or elementary and secondary schools” (Barkan 97). While charter schools claim to be a better fit for certain races and special interest students, the ability of private entities to be in charge of public money is too often an opportunity for discrimination and intolerance to occur. Another 2015 Star Tribune article points to charter and private schools as a problematic loophole. “The rise of independent charter schools, the advent of choice programs, which allow students to attend schools outside their home districts, and the lure of private or religious schools have also contributed to the situation [of school segregation]” (Matos, Webster, and Lonetree). When public money is allowed to be spent in an enclosed and exclusive environment, democracy is effectively undermined, and poorer families’ taxes may not be benefiting their own children in the public school districts. Low’s theory of privatizing public space carries out here, especially because charter schools are not currently held to the same policies pushing integration as public district schools. “Privatization, surveillance, and restrictive management have created an increasingly inhospitable environment for immigrants, local ethnic groups, and culturally diverse behaviors. If this trend continues, it will eradicate the last remaining spaces for democratic practices, places where a wide variety of people of different gender, class, culture, nationality, and ethnicity intermingle peacefully” (Low 403). Whether the charter schools in Minneapolis/St. Paul are populated by all white or all black students, the fact



remains that charter schools limit school-aged children from interacting with peers from different racial and socioeconomic groups.

Neoliberalism has drastically shaped the direction of education reform, and subsequently has facilitated the current segregation that stands now. As Brenner and Theodore explain, "... the overarching goal of such neoliberal urban policy experiments is to mobilize city space as an arena both for market-oriented economic growth and for elite consumption practices" (Brenner and Theodore 142). In the case of education reform, the shift towards neoliberalism prompted policy makers to convince the American people that the public school system was failing, and needed to be helped by privately run charter schools. As the number of charters increased, the public school district lines lost their value, as parents had the new ability to take their children's education into their own hands. This in turn gave white school parents the right to avoid public school integration initiatives and place their children into primarily white charter schools. Lower-income families of color, on the other hand, either had to remain in the public school system or enroll in charter schools that strictly advertised to minority students. Barkan explains this dilemma by saying, "Politicians might profess a commitment to reducing racial inequality, but most acted within neoliberal boundaries and with no interest in pushing integration further" (Barkan 101). Neoliberalism ultimately allowed politicians and white families to use the desire of choice to disguise their aversion to educational integration policies.

As formerly mentioned, further research should be conducted regarding the different cities and school districts in Minneapolis as opposed to St. Paul. The lawsuit against the state accuses both cities of perpetuating educational inequality, however it would be useful to know which of them has more racial segregation on average. The outcome of the lawsuit is not

determined yet, as the Minnesota Supreme Court has approved the case to return to Hennepin County Court, which will decide whether the allegations against the state require state integration policies. If this turns out to be the verdict, integration efforts would need to extend to charter schools as well as traditional public district schools. This is a contentious issue; charter school advocates supporting primarily minority students worry that integration policies would uproot their tightly knit community and worsen achievement levels. It would be beneficial to study previous integration ventures in charter schools, and whether or not it caused any achievement variations. Lastly, public and charter schools' reliance on funding from property taxes invites housing disparities to reflect in school disparities - in resources and demographics alike. A larger, macro-level path to change would be to restructure the way educational institutions are funded and equalize funding for all public and private schools. This is not an exhaustive list of educational reforms, and the results of the lawsuit at hand shall continue to be observed once a court-date is set.

Ideological privatization and neoliberalism have greatly impacted urban educational policies and increased racial hypersegregation, and these effects are seen in the case of Minneapolis and St. Paul. In a country like the United States, the advocacy of choice is too tempting for some to pass up, and thus families are able to choose schools outside of their assigned districts. Education reform proponents may convince themselves and others that choice is always best, but 'choice' can also be coded as 'avoidance,' and many white politicians and families have too much to gain from avoiding integration efforts and maintaining the status quo of racial segregation. Choice is not inherently evil, however if perceptions of certain races and

classes persist in the eyes of those able to choose, then perhaps educational choice needs to be replaced with educational equity.

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