



SCHOOL CHOICE IS THE NEW CIVIL RIGHT

Our public school system is based on the democratic ideal that every child is entitled to an education that will help them realize their full potential and contribute to society. This notion was enshrined by *Brown v. Board of Education*, the landmark 1954 Supreme Court decision that struck down “separate but equal” schools for blacks and whites. Among other things, the court sent a message that day: education is a civil right.

Yet today, it's easy to see that not all schools are created equal. “We have a dilemma in our country, because children's education is determined by where they live,” says Richard Wertheimer, CEO of City Charter High School. Children in low-income neighborhoods or towns are more likely to attend poorly performing schools. If their family can't afford to move or pay for private school, they are often stuck in a sub-standard educational setting.

Charter schools offer the hope of a better option. As autonomous public schools run by their own non-profit boards, charters are open to all students, giving a critical choice to thousands of families in the region.

A family in McKeesport, for instance, can send their child to the local district's elementary school or to Propel Charter School-McKeesport. The Propel school, even though 85 percent of its students are economically disadvantaged, ranked in the top 5 percent of the region's schools; its fifth-grade test scores were 14th out of 287 schools according to a 2010 *Pittsburgh Business Times* survey. In contrast, the same survey ranked the local district's fifth-graders 96th of 106 school districts. Same kids, same population, different results.

When parents have access to choices, they take full advantage. Of the 3,500 students who attend charter schools in Allegheny County, the majority are African-American and from low-income communities. Around the country, more than 60 percent of the nation's 1.4 million charter school students are non-white. Almost half are economically disadvantaged.

“These populations have lacked options and are desperate for a good education; they naturally gravitate toward charter schools,” says Wertheimer, principal of a charter school where 64 percent of the students are economically disadvantaged. The school was recently named one of U.S. News & World Report's “Best High Schools.” At least 10 members of this year's graduating class were the first in their family to receive a high-school diploma.

How is City Charter able to achieve such superior results with an inner-city student population? “We have a caring environment, enormous supports for our students, extra high standards, and high-quality faculty,” says Wertheimer. “These are innovations that aren't being done at other schools and that lend themselves to the population we have.”

Quality charter schools offer hope for a future where prospects for a good education aren't based on where you live—where good schools and good school choices are for everyone, not just those who can afford to pay for them.

This series is brought to you by a consortium of Allegheny County charter schools.



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