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Integration in the Little Rock Area, Part 1: Demographic Trends in Enrollment

Sarah C. McKenzie
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

Gary W. Ritter
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

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Integration in the Little Rock Area: Part 1 Demographic Trends in Enrollment

- Enrollment in traditional public schools (TPSs) in the Little Rock Metro Area has declined steadily over 30 years for an overall decrease of **18%**
- Charter school enrollment has increased continuously since beginning in 2001, and currently enroll about **10%** of students in LR Metro area public schools.
- TPSs in the LR Metro Area enroll a **higher percentage** of black and FRL students than charters.
- The share of black students enrolled in charters has increased, while the share of black students enrolled in TPSs has decreased.
- The share of FRL students has increased over time in both TPSs and charters; up **7%** in LR Metro, **10%** in LRSD, and **14%** in charters.
- In LR Metro TPSs and charters, Hispanic students have increased to **10%** of enrollment.

School integration has been a contentious policy issue in Little Rock since the 1950s. Recent charter expansions have raised questions about the current level of integration in public schools (charter and traditional) in the Little Rock Area. As an introduction to this work, we begin by examining broad changes in enrollment before we drill down in later briefs and study the impacts of individual moves.

Introduction

In this brief, we look descriptively at enrollment patterns in the Little Rock area school systems. These systems include traditional public schools and public charter school systems. As policymakers build a vision for an effective school system in Little Rock, in which multiple traditional public districts and charters work synergistically to meet the needs of all students, it is important to understand how the sectors compare, and the demographic composition of the schools.

The data used in this series are drawn from the Arkansas Department of Education, and racial indicators come from paperwork submitted by parents when students first enroll at a school. LRSD represents students enrolled in the Little Rock School District, while LR Metro includes LRSD students as well as students enrolled in Pulaski County Special School District (PCSSD) and North Little Rock School District (NLRSD). Charter includes students enrolled in public charter schools in the Little Rock area: Academics Plus, College Prep Academy, Covenant Keepers, eStem, Exalt

This Brief

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Academy, Flightline Upper Academy, Jacksonville Lighthouse, Lisa Academy, Lisa Academy North, Little Rock Prep, Premier High, Quest High, and SIAtch High.

Enrollment Patterns, 1989-2015

Before focusing on the time period covered in depth in this series, it is helpful to consider a long-term, big-picture view of enrollment in the Little Rock area. Figure 1 presents trends in enrollment by sector between the 1987-88 and 2015-16 school years. Private school enrollments are reported biannually through the Private School Universe Survey, and are not yet available for more recent years.

As shown in Figure 1, enrollment in the Little Rock Metro Area as a whole (LRSD, North LRSD, Pulaski County Special School District) has steadily decreased by 18% from over 58,000 in 1989-90 to about 48,000 in 2015-16. Enrollment in Little Rock School District (LRSD) declined about 9% over this time, from about 27,000 in to about 23,000 in 2015-16. At the same time, enrollment in districts surrounding the Little Rock area (Bryant, Conway, and Cabot) has increased significantly, from 15,000 to nearly 29,000 in 2015-16. Enrollment in Little Rock area private schools increased slightly from 1988-89 to 2011-12 (the most recent data available), growing from under 9,000 students to over 10,000 students in slightly over a decade. The charter sector has also grown since the first open enrollment charter school in the Little Rock area opened in 2001. Since that time, charter enrollment has increased to just over 6,000 students in 2015-16. With this

broad enrollment overview in mind, we focus on enrollment in on the Little Rock Metro Area between 2008-09 and 2014-15.

Little Rock Area Enrollment, 2008-2015

Overall public school enrollment (including public charters and traditional public schools) has been generally increasing in the Little Rock area between the 2008-09 and 2014-15 school years. However, differences emerge when looking at enrollment trends in charters and TPSs.

Enrollment in Little Rock School District declined by 4% from 25,760 to 24,725 in the 2014-15 school year, and enrollment in the Little Rock Metro Area traditional public schools (Little Rock School District, North Little Rock School District, and Pulaski County Special School District) declined nearly 8% from 55,380 students to 51,055 students in 2014-15. Little Rock area charter school enrollment more than doubled from 2,119 students in the 2008-09 school year to 5,709 in the 2014-15 school year.

Racial/ Ethnic Composition

Black Students

Figure 2 highlights the changing composition of each public school sector in the Little Rock area over time. Roughly 66% to 68% of students enrolled in LRSD are black in the years 2008-09 to 2014-15, while roughly 40% to 46% of students enrolled in Little Rock area charters are black over the same time period. However, when viewed as a trend, we see that the percent of black students in Little Rock area charters has generally increased over time, going from about 40% of charter students in 2008-09 to a peak of 47% of students in the 2012-13 school year. Conversely, black students comprised the

largest percentage of the LRSD student body in the 2008-09 school year, when 68% of enrolled students were black. The share of black students enrolled at LRSD has generally decreased each year since, declining to 66% in the 2014-15 school year. The share of black students enrolled in the Little Rock Metro Area has also slightly decreased over time, falling from 58% of the student population in 2008-09 to 57% in the 2014-15 school year.

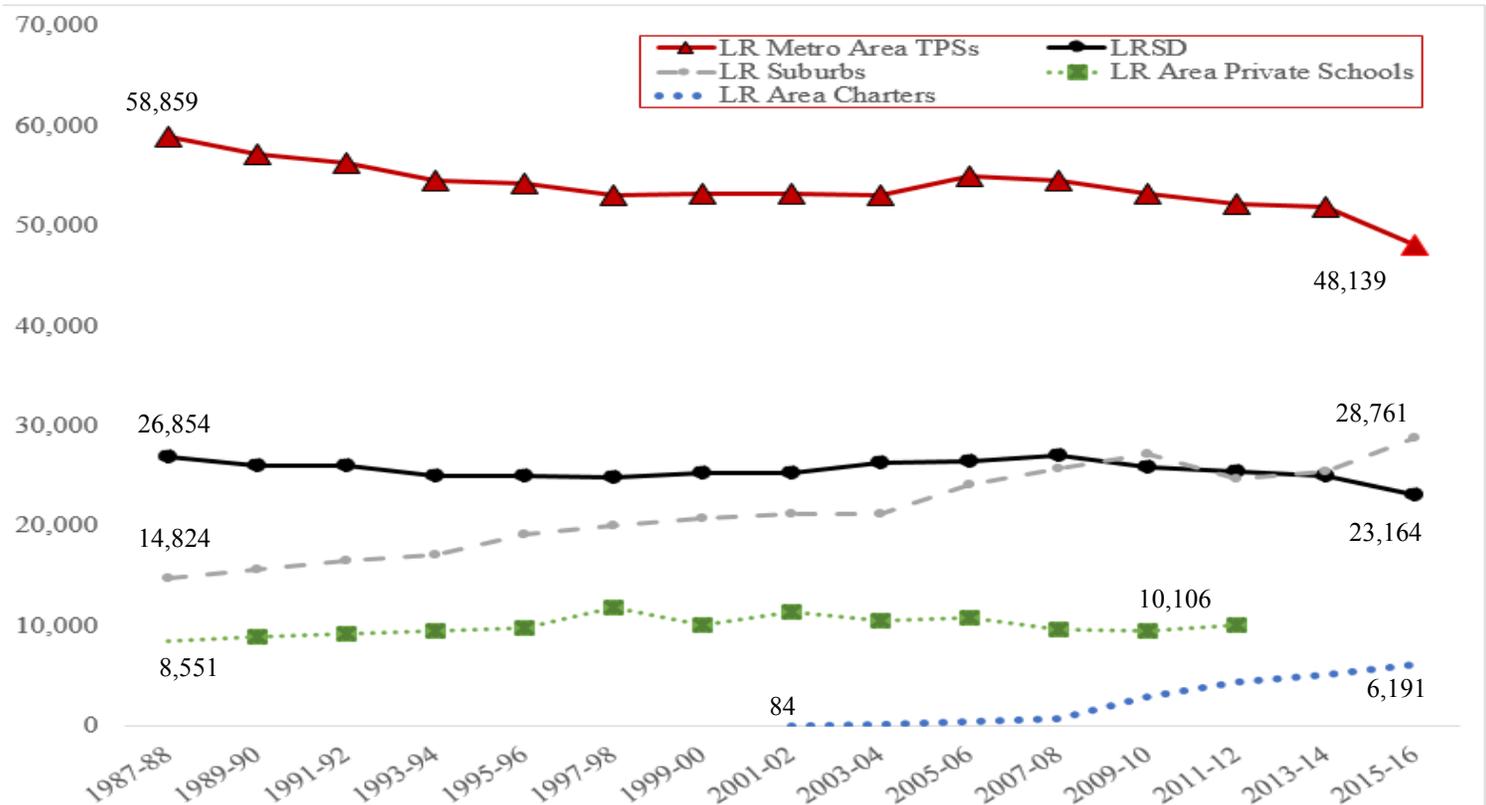
White Students

When we examine the percentage of white students in each public school sector in the Little Rock area from 2008-09 to 2014-15, we see that white students comprised 22% of the LRSD student body in the 2008-09 school year, and the percentage has decreased each year to 18% of the student body in the 2014-15 school year. Similarly, in the Little Rock Metro Area, white students have decreased from comprising 34% of the student body in 2008-09 to representing 29% of the student population in 2014-15. White students have gone from comprising 47% of the Little Rock area charter sector student body in 2008-09 to 37% in the 2014-15 school year, with the percent of white students in the charters decreasing in every year. The share of white students in the Little Rock area, whether in charters or TPSs, has decreased over the past seven school years; however, white students still represent a larger share of the charter school population than the TPS population.

Hispanic Students

The share of Hispanic students enrolled charters and traditional public schools has increased over time. In 2008-09, Hispanic students represented 5.0% of charter students, while in 2014-15, 10.2% of charter students were Hispanic. Similarly, Hispanic students grew from 7.8% of the LRSD student population in 2008-09 to 12.6% of

Figure 1: Enrollment in Little Rock Area Schools, 1989 to 2016, by School Group



the student body in 2014-15. In the LR Metro Area as a whole, Hispanic students gone from 6.2% of the student body to 10.0% of the students enrolled in traditional public schools.

Other Students of Color

We group together Asian, Native American, multiracial, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students for the sake of brevity in this analysis. This group of students represented less than 5% of all students in TPSs over the time examined, and about 7-8% of all charter students. In charter schools, the share of other students of color has fallen from 8.1% of the student population in 2008-09 to 6.9% of the student population in 2014-15. In LRSD and in the LR Metro Area as a whole, the percent of other students of color enrolled in TPSs grew from about 2% of the student body to about 4% of the student body.

Special Program Composition

Figure 3 presents the percentage of students participating in special programs in Little Rock area public schools by school sector.

Free and Reduced Lunch Students

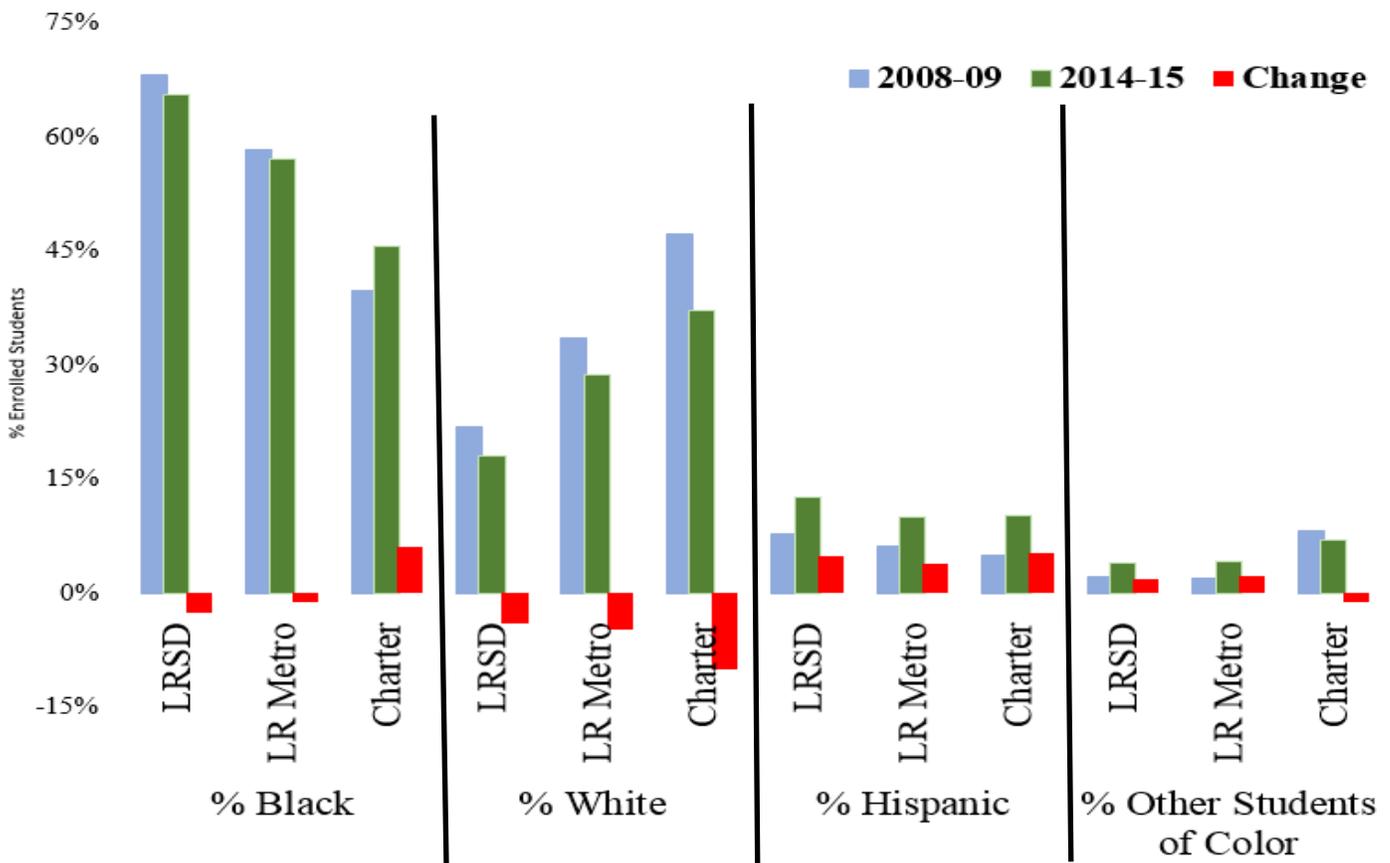
The Free and Reduced Lunch Program (FRL) provides school meals to students who are economically disadvantaged. Schools with greater than 40% of students participating in FRL also receive additional federal funding to support student learning. Although an imperfect measure, participation in this program is frequently used an indicator of a student’s socio-economic status.

The percentage of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch increased in each sector from 2008-09 through 2012-13, when 46% of charter students were eligible for free or reduced price lunch (FRL), as were 72% of students enrolled at LRSD, and 67% of students in the LR Metro Area. In 2013-14, the percent of FRL students in charters increased slightly, while in LRSD FRL rates fell from 72% to 61% of the student body, and in the LR Metro Area the percent of students eligible for FRL fell by six percentage points. In 2014-15, 47% of charter students were FRL-eligible, while the percent of FRL-eligible students in the LRSD increased to almost 75% of the student body. About 69% of students in the Little Rock Metro Area qualified for free or reduced price lunch in the 2014-15 school year.

English Language Learners

As can be seen in figure 3, a small but increasing percentage of students in the Little Rock Metro area are identified as English Language Learners (ELL). The percentage of students has increased over the years in Little Rock area charter schools, the Little Rock School District, and in the Little Rock Metro Area. In the 2008-09 school year, less than 1% of students enrolled in Little Rock area charter schools were identified as ELL, while about 6% of students enrolled in LRSD were identified ELL, as were 4% of students in the LR Metro Area. In 2014-15, ELL student enrollment grew to almost 3% of the charter student population, 7% of the LR Metro Area student population, and almost 11% of the LRSD student population. Due to the relatively small number of students identified as ELL throughout the Little Rock area public school system, and the small number switching between public school sectors, we do not focus on changes in ELL student enrollment changes between sectors our analyses.

Figure 2: Student Demographics in the Little Rock Area, by Public School Sector, 2008-09, 2014-15 and Percent Change





For more information about this Policy Brief and other education issues in Arkansas contact us:

Office for Education Policy
 211 Grad Ed Building
 Fayetteville, AR 72701
 Phone: (479) 575-3773
 Fax: (479) 575-3196
 oep@uark.edu

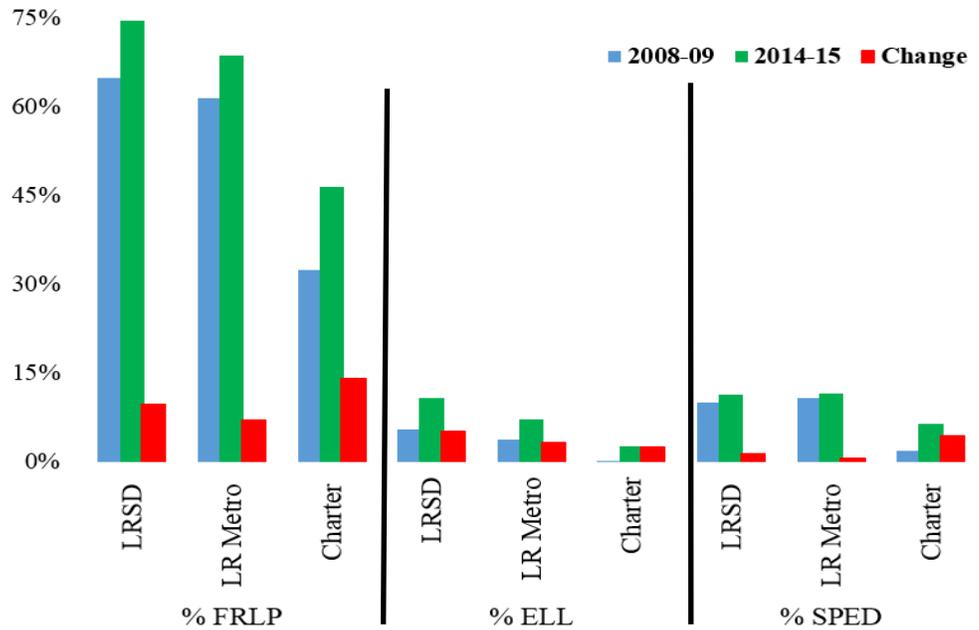
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Special Education Students

As can be seen in figure 3, the percentage of students who are identified as special education students has increased slightly to 11% in the TPSs. Only 6.5% of the students enrolled in area charters is identified as special education, although the percentage has increased since 2008-09. Due to the relatively small number of students identified as SPED throughout the Little Rock area public school system, and the small number switching between public school sectors, we do not focus on changes in SPED student enrollment changes between sectors in our analyses.

Figure 3: Student Special Program Participation in the Little Rock Area, by Public School Sector, 2008-09, 2014-15 and Percent Change



FACULTY DIRECTOR :

Gary W. Ritter, Ph.D.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR:

Sarah McKenzie, Ph.D.

RESEARCH STAFF:

Leesa Foreman

Charlene A. Reid

Evan Rhinesmith

Elise Swanson

Elaine Wootten, Ed.D.

Conclusion

Little Rock School District and other traditional public schools in the Little Rock Metro Area enroll greater shares of black students and students qualifying for free or reduced price lunch than do area charter schools. Over time, however, the share of black students in charters has increased, while the share of black students in TPSs has decreased. Although the percentage of FRL students has increased across all public school sectors in the Little Rock area, the percentage of FRL students has increased more rapidly in charters. This trend is encouraging for those of us hoping to see increased integration in all schools in the Little Rock education system. While it is clear that significant differences in racial composition exist between sectors in the Little Rock area, this level of aggregation does not allow us to determine whether levels of integration within schools have increased or decreased over time, or how student transfers between sectors impact the level of integration of either the schools they leave or the schools they enter. To do this, we must dig deeper into the data and look at student-level data of the students who are choosing to transfer between public school sectors in the Little Rock area. The issues related to integration and segregation will be studied in forthcoming policy briefs and Arkansas Education Reports.

For more information about integration in the Little Rock school system, please read our upcoming policy briefs in the series:

- Who switches sectors? Demographic and academic characteristics of students voluntarily moving between charters and traditional public schools
- What about the schools? School –level changes in demographics and academics in schools affected by student movement.
- Integration or segregation? The impact of individual student-level moves on school-level integration.

