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An Analysis of the Impact of Charter Schools on Desegregation Efforts in Little Rock, Arkansas

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**AN ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF CHARTER SCHOOLS ON
DESEGREGATION EFFORTS IN LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS**

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AN ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF CHARTER SCHOOLS ON DESEGREGATION EFFORTS IN LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS

The aim of this report is to address the challenge by the Little Rock School District (LRSD) that open-enrollment charter schools in Pulaski County (PC) are impeding the efforts of the three PC school districts (Little Rock, North Little Rock (NLRSD), and Pulaski County Special (PCSSD)) to become racially integrated. A key motivation for this analysis is the ongoing debate about how expanded school choice, in this case charter schools, impacts racial segregation. Critics of charter schools argue that these schools lead to greater racial segregation, whereas proponents of charter schools suggest that there is no necessary link between racial segregation and the existence of charter schools. Indeed, some charter advocates contend that charters and parental choice can actually lead to more racial integration for students.

As such, it seems worthwhile to examine the types of students who transfer out of PC traditional public schools into PC charter schools, to see if the cumulative impact of such transfers is having a detrimental effect on the integration efforts of the LRSD. To do this, we have gathered student-level ACTAAP testing data from the Arkansas Department of Education for all PC students from 2005 to 2009, which provides information about where a student attended school in a given year, as well as the demographics of the student¹. With these data, we can look at the demographics of the students that are leaving LRSD traditional public schools for charter schools, and actually begin to determine the extent to which charter schools impact racial integration, be it positively or negatively.

However, one of the key points in this argument is coming to an agreement about what is the true definition of “segregation” or “integration” in PC. For these purposes, we have chosen to look at integration in two general ways and then apply it to our data. First, we can look at how schools in PC compare to the average demographics for all schools in the county, which as a whole in 2008-09 were 66.3% minority, to determine the extent to which schools in PC are more or less segregated. We can also look specifically at how charter schools compare to the LRSD racial balance, which in 2008-09 was 78.3% minority. In both cases, we can determine how far away a given school is from these demographic benchmarks, and identify when students leave schools in ways that either positively or negatively impact the integration efforts of PC.

Throughout this report, we begin each section by asking a question relevant to the ongoing conversation about racial segregation and charter schools. For example, in the first section, we address the question of whether charter schools are more or less segregated than traditional public schools in PC. Each question is followed by a brief analysis of relevant data, with several conclusions in bullet points highlighted at the end of each section. With each question, we attempt to carefully and thoroughly examine the relationship between the authorization of charter schools and the integration efforts of the public school districts. The value that this report adds, however, is that we do not simply look at district and school-level data; rather, we focus primarily on student-level data, which allows us to generate factual conclusions about student transfers from LRSD traditional public schools to charter schools in the region.

¹ Because of the nature of the ACTAAP testing data, we only had access to data for students in grades 1-9. However, with these data, it is difficult to understand where a student attended school prior to 1st grade, since a student would not appear in our data when he or she was in kindergarten. Thus, we have chosen to only use the data for students in grades 2-9 (or those students for whom we can determine the schools in which they were previously enrolled). With that said, there is no reason to think that the results obtained from these data are not representative of the PC student population as a whole.

1) ARE CHARTER SCHOOLS IN PULASKI COUNTY MORE SEGREGATED THAN TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN THE LITTLE ROCK SCHOOL DISTRICT?

One of the first points to address in the discussion about segregation in PC is whether or not charter schools are any more segregated than traditional public schools in PC. In a report submitted on September 11, 2009, by the LRSD to the United States District Court, Eastern District of Arkansas, Western Division, the following claim was made about charter schools:

“First, open-enrollment charter schools may be negatively affecting the racial balance of PCSSD schools. The Arkansas State Board of Education (“State Board”) has failed to impose racial balance requirements for open-enrollment charter schools necessary to ensure compliance with the 1989 Settlement Agreement. As a result, open-enrollment charter schools are some of the most racially segregated schools in Pulaski County. In 2008-09, Academics Plus located in Maumelle was 15 percent black;² Dreamland Academy in southwest Little Rock was 91 percent black.”

The report does correctly identify that charter schools are some of the most racially segregated schools in PC. However, what the report does not show is that while there are segregated charter schools in PC, there are also a number of traditional public schools in PC that are equally, if not more, segregated. In fact, 17 of the 20 most segregated schools in PC (as measured by the difference from the PC minority average, 66.3%) are traditional public schools³. Further, Dreamland Academy, which was singled out for being one of the most segregated charter schools, does not even appear in the top 20 (it is actually number 29 on the list) – there are 24 PC traditional public schools that appear ahead of Dreamland Academy on this list. The list of the 20 most segregated schools in PC can be found in Table 1.

² As noted in the report, only PCSSD’s Bayou Meto Elementary had a lower percentage of black students; Bayou Meto, however, is exempt from PCSSD’s racial balance requirements because of its remote location.

³ For these purposes, we have chosen not to include the Arkansas Virtual Academy (ARVA) and the Arthur Bo Felder Learning Academy (ABFLA). The reason for not including the ARVA is that while the offices of the school are located in Little Rock, the ARVA does draw a student body from across the state and primarily from Northwest Arkansas. Thus, the student body of the ARVA would not be representative of the Little Rock area. The ABFLA is a conversion charter school located in Little Rock, but because the school can only draw students from within the LRSD boundaries, we have chosen not to include it because it is unclear whether the school is best classified as a charter school or a traditional public school.

Table 1: Pulaski County’s Twenty Most Segregated Schools

School	School District	% Minority	Difference from Pulaski County Average
Bayou Meto Elementary	Pulaski County	8.6%	-57.7%
Academics Plus (Grades K-8)	Charter	19.9%	-46.4%
Forest Park Elementary	Little Rock	21.0%	-45.3%
Academics Plus (Grades 10-12)	Charter	22.4%	-43.9%
Jefferson Elementary	Little Rock	23.3%	-43.0%
Scott Elementary	Pulaski County	28.0%	-38.3%
Crestwood Elementary	North Little Rock	28.1%	-38.2%
Indian Hills Elementary	North Little Rock	28.4%	-37.9%
Lakewood Elementary	North Little Rock	28.6%	-37.7%
Fulbright Elementary	Little Rock	29.1%	-37.2%
Lawson Elementary	Pulaski County	29.4%	-36.9%
Joe T. Robinson Elementary	Pulaski County	32.9%	-33.4%
Stephens Elementary	Little Rock	98.7%	+32.4%
Seventh Street Elementary	North Little Rock	98.7%	+32.0%
Covenant Keepers College Preparatory	Charter	98.3%	+32.0%
Franklin Incentive Elementary	Little Rock	98.3%	+31.7%
Cato Elementary	Pulaski County	34.6%	-31.7%
Geyer Springs Elementary	Little Rock	97.8%	+31.5%
Oak Grove Elementary	Pulaski County	35.0%	-31.3%
Chanel Elementary	Pulaski County	35.1%	-31.2%
Wakefield Elementary	Little Rock	97.0%	+30.7%

What this report also fails to note is that several of the open-enrollment charter schools in PC are also some of the most integrated schools in PC. In total, 4 of the 20 most integrated schools in PC are charter schools – LISA Academy, eSTEM Elementary, eSTEM Middle, and eSTEM High – all of which fall within 6% of the PC district minority average. The list of the 20 most integrated schools can be found in Table 2.

Table 2: Pulaski County’s Twenty Most Integrated Schools

School	School District	% Minority	Difference from Pulaski County Average
Park Hill Elementary	North Little Rock	65.3%	-1.0%
Williams Magnet Elementary	Little Rock	65.1%	-1.2%
Carver Magnet Elementary	Little Rock	64.5%	-1.8%
LISA Academy	Charter	64.4%	-1.9%
eSTEM High	Charter	68.3%	+2.0%
Booker Arts Magnet Elementary	Little Rock	63.9%	-2.4%
Poplar Street Middle	North Little Rock	68.8%	+2.5%
Wilbur D. Mills High	Pulaski County	68.9%	+2.6%
Gibbs Magnet Elementary	Little Rock	62.5%	-3.8%
Murrell Taylor Elementary	Pulaski County	62.2%	-4.1%
eSTEM Elementary	Charter	62.0%	-4.3%
North Little Rock High (East)	North Little Rock	62.0%	-4.3%
North Little Rock High (West)	North Little Rock	61.8%	-4.5%
Clinton Elementary	Pulaski County	61.8%	-4.5%
Central High	Little Rock	61.0%	-5.3%
eSTEM Middle	Charter	60.8%	-5.5%
Parkview Magnet High	Little Rock	60.6%	-5.7%
Mann Magnet Middle	Little Rock	59.7%	-6.6%
Fuller Middle	Pulaski County	59.7%	-6.6%
Bates Elementary	Pulaski County	59.6%	-6.7%

Conclusion:

- Charter schools in PC are no more segregated than traditional public schools in PC.
- Four of the charter schools in PC are well integrated when compared to the PC minority average (66.3%).
- The suggestion that open-enrollment charter schools may be negatively affecting the racial balance of schools in PC because they “are some of the most racially segregated schools” in PC appears unfounded, and is inconsistent with the aforementioned data.

2) WHERE DO STUDENTS ENROLLING IN CHARTER SCHOOLS COME FROM?

In total, 1,468 students enrolled in charter schools during the 2008-09 school year, which coincided with the opening of five charter schools – Covenant Keepers College Preparatory, Lisa Academy North Little Rock, and eSTEM Elementary, Middle, and High School. Of those 1,468 students, 493 came from the LRSD, and 364 students transferred from the NLRSD and PCSSD. There is no previous Arkansas data for the remaining 611 students, which implies that these students came from other states, were previously in private schools, or were being home-schooled. All data, including the overall number of transfers since the 2005-06 school year, can be found in Table 3.

Table 3: Number of First-Year Student Enrollments in Charter Schools

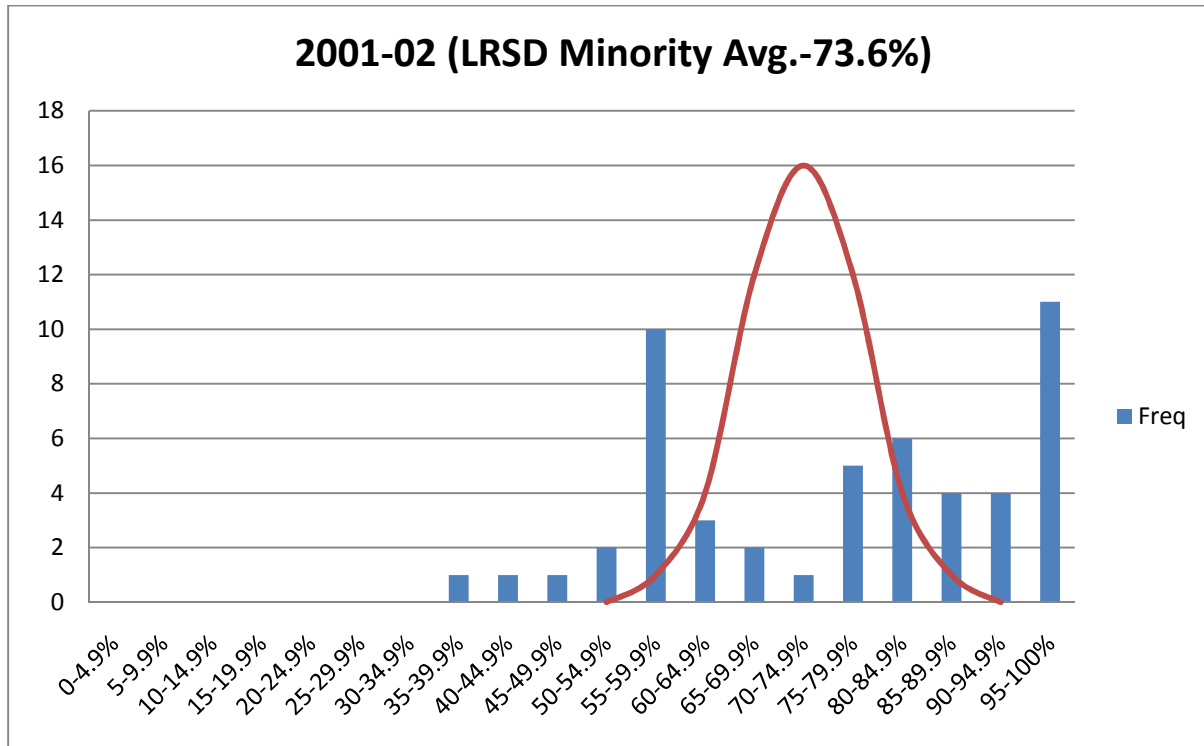
	2008-09 Acad. Yr.	Overall (2005 to 2009)
Total Charter Enrollments	1,468	2,796
Enrollments from the LRSD	493	800
<i>% of Enrollments</i>	<i>33.6%</i>	<i>28.6%</i>
Enrollments from NLRSD & PCSSD	364	575
<i>% of Enrollments</i>	<i>24.8%</i>	<i>20.6%</i>
Unknown	611	1,421
<i>% of Enrollments</i>	<i>41.6%</i>	<i>50.8%</i>

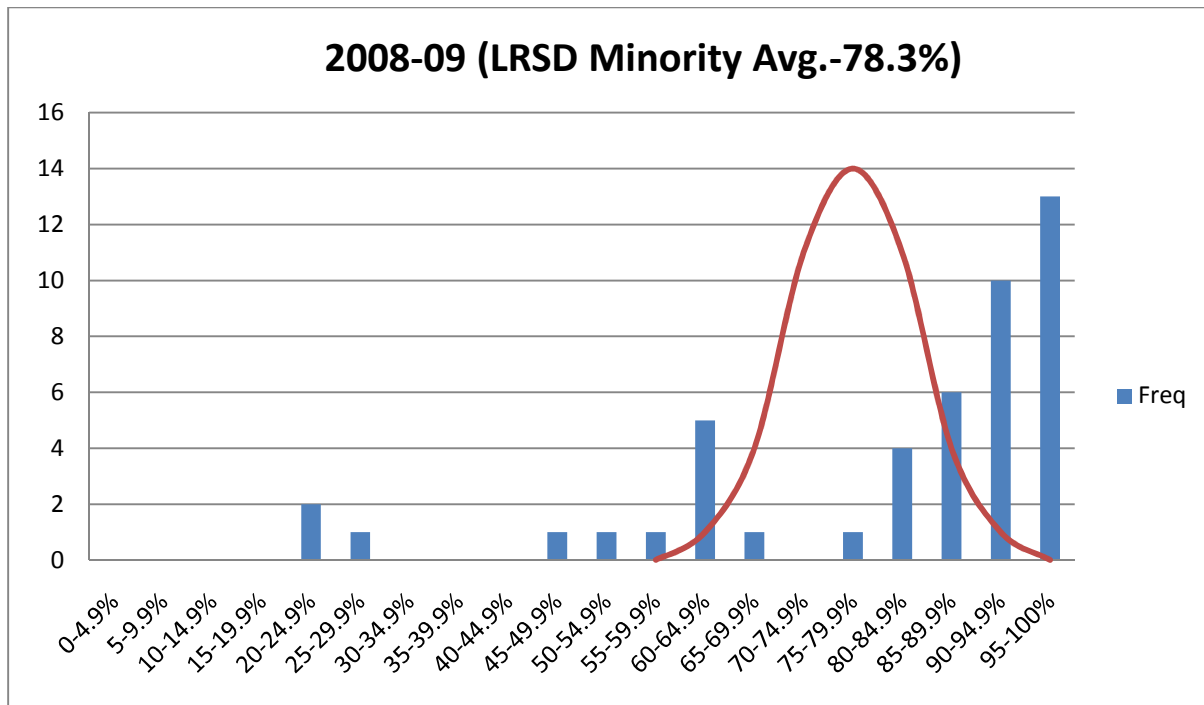
Conclusions:

- The number of students transferring to charter schools from schools in PC is insignificant when compared to the total number of students in PC. For example, in 2008-09 there were 2,959 total students in open-enrollment charter schools in PC (including students in grades K-1 and 10-12), and 51,040 total students in PC; it seems unlikely that this small number (less than 6%) would significantly impact racial integration (something we will explore in the next section).
- Charter schools are actually drawing a significant number of students back into public education, with these new students comprising the majority of the new enrollments in charter schools each year. As displayed in Table 3, there were 611 students transferring into public charter schools in 2008-09, and 1,421 since 2005.

3) WHAT IMPACT DO STUDENTS LEAVING THE LRSD FOR CHARTER SCHOOLS HAVE ON THE INTEGRATION EFFORTS OF THE LRSD?

To begin to answer this question, it seems appropriate to first look at the overall distribution of schools in the LRSD with respect to their percentage of minority students, and see how the district profile has changed over the past eight years (for which data are available). The following two graphs show all of the schools in the LRSD grouped into “bins” according to their percentage of minority students, with the blue bars indicating the number of schools that fall within a given bin. For example, in 2001-02, there were 10 schools in the LRSD with a percentage of minority students ranging from 55-59.9%. The red curve included in each graph represents a normal distribution centered on the actual percentage of minority students in the district. This red curve is placed on the graph as an approximate representation of a well-integrated district. In other words, if the LRSD was well integrated, we would expect that the shape of the actual Little Rock school data to be similar to that of the red curve. However, the racial composition within the actual Little Rock schools did not resemble that of a well-integrated district in the least, neither in 2001-02 or in 2008-09.





While these overall school-level figures are useful, it would be even more useful to delve into the characteristics of the actual students who have transferred into the charter schools in PC. By doing this, we can determine what impact – if any – students transferring to charter schools are having on the level of integration in the LRSD. For these purposes, we have chosen to analyze the characteristics of the traditional public schools that students have left prior to enrolling in charter schools. In this way, we can determine if these transfers are having a detrimental impact on integration, such as if a high number of white students are leaving schools with high percentages of minority students (thus making the school more segregated), or if these student transfers are actually beneficial to the integration efforts of the LRSD.

Presented in Table 4 and Table 5 are the types of transfers that occurred when students left LRSD to move into charter schools in 2008-09 and 2005 to 2009 respectively. In both Tables, we have grouped each student transfer into one of six different categories based on a student’s race, and the demographics of the traditional LR public school from which he or she transferred⁴. The types of transfers that would be beneficial to the integration efforts of the LRSD are white students leaving above-average white schools and minority students leaving above-average minority schools, thus making the school from which a student transfers more integrated. Overall, these types of transfers were far more prevalent than detrimental transfers, such as when a white student leaves a school with a high percentage of minority students. In 2008-09, there

⁴ For these purposes, we have defined a school as being “integrated” if the racial composition of the student body (in terms of the percentage of minority students) of a school was within 10% of the LRSD. For instance, 78.6% of the LRSD was minority in 2008-09. Thus, a school would be defined as integrated if its percentage of minority students ranged from 68.6%-88.6%. If a school had a percentage of minority students greater than 88.6%, we labeled that school as an above-average “minority school”; conversely, a school with a percentage of minority students less than 68.6% (or a percentage of white students greater than 31.4%) was labeled as an above-average “white school.”

were 95 instances of white students leaving above-average white schools and 132 minority students leaving above-average minority schools, compared to 11 white students leaving above-average minority schools (which is often referred to as “white-flight”) and 83 minority students leaving above-average white schools. These same patterns are consistent with the overall trends presented in Table 3.

Table 4: Student Transfers to Charter Schools from the LRSD, 2008-09

Type of Transfer	Number of Students	% of Transferring Students
<u>White Students Leaving:</u>		
-Above-Average White Schools	95	19.3%
-Integrated Schools	72	14.6%
-Above-Average Minority Schools	11	2.2%
<u>Minority Students Leaving:</u>		
-Above-Average Minority Schools	132	26.8%
-Integrated Schools	100	20.3%
-Above-Average White Schools	83	16.8%

Table 5: Overall Student Transfers to Charter Schools from the LRSD, 2005 to 2009

Type of Transfer	Number of Students	% of Transferring Students
<u>White Students Leaving:</u>		
-Above-Average White Schools	156	19.5%
-Integrated Schools	129	16.1%
-Above-Average Minority Schools	16	2.0%
<u>Minority Students Leaving:</u>		
-Above-Average Minority Schools	202	25.3%
-Integrated Schools	173	21.6%
-Above-Average White Schools	124	15.5%

Conclusions:

- The number of LRSD to charter school transfers that result in schools that are more integrated in the LRSD are far more prevalent than transfers that would hinder the district’s integration efforts (227 transfers that resulted in increased integration in LRSD traditional public schools compared to 94 transfers that reduced the level of integration).

- These trends are consistent with transfer patterns exhibited since 2005.
- There were also a large number of students that left schools that were integrated. Of those students that left these integrated schools, more were minority than white. In 2008-09, 72 white students left integrated schools compared to 100 minority students. Since 2005-06, 129 white students have left integrated schools compared to 173 minority students who have left for charter schools. When more minority students leave schools that are already 69%-89% minority, it improves racial balance.
- Thus, it seems plausible to conclude that charter schools are not inhibiting the district from becoming more integrated, and in fact may be contributing to the integration efforts of the district.

4) WHAT TYPES OF STUDENTS ARE TRANSFERRING OUT OF THE LRSD INTO CHARTER SCHOOLS?

Our purpose for answering this question was to determine if certain groups of students were more likely to leave the LRSD to enroll in charter schools. Specifically, we wanted to see if the oft-cited concern that white students were more likely to “flee” the LRSD was actually occurring. Presented in Table 6 are the demographics of students leaving LRSD for charter schools in 2008-09 and since 2005.

Table 6: Demographics of Students Transferring from the LRSD to Charter Schools

	2008-09	Overall (2005 to 2009)
Number of Student Transfers	493	800
% Minority	64%	63%
% Black	54%	51%
% White	36%	38%
% Free/Reduced Lunch	44%	38%

Conclusions:

- There were a significantly greater percentage of minority students that transferred from the LRSD to a charter school than white students in 2008-09.
- This pattern has been consistent since 2005.
- The low percentage of white students transferring from the LRSD (36%, or 177 students) does not seem likely to inhibit the ability of the district to become more integrated.
- The fact that more minority students transfer from the LRSD means that the LRSD as a whole is actually achieving a more favorable racial balance instead of becoming more segregated.

5) ARE STUDENTS THAT TRANSFER INTO CHARTER SCHOOLS FROM THE LRSD ENTERING INTO SCHOOLS THAT ARE MORE OR LESS INTEGRATED?

To answer this question, we chose to look at the enrollment data in two ways. First, we wanted to see what the demographics were for the schools that white and minority students enrolled in after leaving the LRSD. We also wanted to know if a student’s transfer was one that led to improved or reduced integration in his or her new school.

For the first point, we looked at both white and minority students according to the types of transfers outlined in Tables 4 and 5⁵, with the results of our analysis presented in Table 7. The results of this analysis show that the schools that white students attend after leaving the LRSD are, on average, comprised of a fairly even ratio of minority and white students. However, the types of schools to which minority students transfer are much more likely to be comprised of mostly minority students.

Table 7: Demographics of Charter Schools to which Students Transferred, 2008-09

Type of Transfer	Number of Students	% of Transferring Students	2009 School % Minority	2009 School % White
<u>White Students Leaving:</u>				
-Above-Average White Schools	95	19.3%	57.1%	42.9%
-Integrated Schools	72	14.6%	57.7%	42.3%
-Above-Average Minority Schools	11	2.2%	50.5%	49.5%
<u>Minority Students Leaving:</u>				
-Above-Average Minority Schools	132	26.8%	73.9%	26.1%
-Integrated Schools	100	20.3%	65.5%	34.5%
-Above-Average White Schools	83	16.8%	60.2%	39.8%

Thus, it seemed relevant to look at each student transfer (again, grouped according to the six categories used in Table 7) to see whether or not a student transferring out of the LRSD into a PC charter school was moving into a school that became more integrated as a result of his or her transfer (a “favorable” transfer) or if the student was transferring to a more segregated school environment (an “unfavorable” transfer). We also wanted to know how many students were leaving integrated school environments in the LRSD and entering a charter school that was also well integrated (an “integrated” transfer). The results of this analysis are presented in Table 8.

From this analysis, we begin to see that overall, the types of charter environments that a student transfers to from the LRSD are much more favorable, or integrated, on the whole. For instance,

⁵ Again, we have defined a school as being “integrated” if the racial composition of the student body (in terms of the percentage of minority students) of a school was within 10% of the LRSD. For instance, 78.6% of the LRSD was minority in 2008-09. Thus, a school would be defined as integrated if its percentage of minority students ranged from 68.6%-88.6%. If a school had a percentage of minority students greater than 88.6%, we labeled that school as an above-average “minority school”; conversely, a school with a percentage of minority students less than 68.6% (or a percentage of white students greater than 31.4%) was labeled as an above-average “white school.”

when white students leave schools that have an above-average population of white students, in over half of those transfers the student moves to a charter school that has a more favorable racial balance. This is also true for minority students that leave schools that have an above-average percentage of minority students – the student’s new school has a more favorable racial balance. We also see that students, both white and minority, that were in integrated schools in the LRSD move into charter schools that are also well integrated.

Table 8: Types of Transfers from the LRSD to Charter Schools, 2008-09

Type of Transfer	Number of Students	% of Transferring Students	# of Favorable Transfers	# of Integrated Transfers	# of Unfavorable Transfers
White Students Leaving:					
-Above-Average White Schools	95	19.3%	50	0	45
-Integrated Schools	72	14.6%	1	66	5
-Above-Average Minority Schools	11	2.2%	0	0	11
Minority Students Leaving:					
-Above-Average Minority Schools	132	26.8%	87	0	45
-Integrated Schools	100	20.3%	3	83	14
-Above-Average White Schools	83	16.8%	53	0	30

These data suggest that the majority of student transfers from LRSD traditional public schools to charter schools are actually resulting in students entering into more racially integrated learning environments. Over half of the white students that left above-average white schools enrolled in a charter school that was more integrated (with almost all white students that left integrated schools enrolling in similarly integrated schools). Further, minority students that leave above-average minority schools or well-integrated schools are enrolling in charter schools that are equally or more integrated than their previous school.

In short, the majority of students that are leaving the LRSD for charter schools are leaving learning environments that are relatively racially segregated in favor of learning environments that are relatively racially integrated.

Conclusions:

- While minority students leaving high-minority LRSD schools do tend to enroll in charter schools that have high percentages of minority students, overall, both white and minority students transfer to charter schools that are relatively well integrated.
- The majority of students that transfer to charter schools make “favorable” transfers – that is, they move into charter schools that have a more favorable racial balance than their previous traditional public school.

- The data presented in Table 8 show that in over half of the instances where white students leave above-average white schools, these students are actually entering into charter schools that are more integrated than the traditional public schools they attended in the LRSD. As a result, because these students are leaving schools with high percentages of white students, they are actually transferring to a more diverse learning environment.
- This trend is also present with minority students leaving schools with a high percentage of minority students – in two-thirds of these transfers, minority students enroll in charter schools that are more diverse than the LRSD traditional public school in which they were previously enrolled.

6) WHAT ARE THE OVERALL CONCLUSIONS THAT CAN BE TAKEN FROM THESE ANALYSES?

The bottom line that can be taken from these analyses is simple – neither groups of schools, be it charter or traditional public – is doing a particularly “better” job of drawing a student population that is racially balanced. Rather, there are charters that are segregated and there are charters that are integrated, and the same can be said for traditional public schools in PC.

However, simply having charter schools that are segregated does not imply that the authorization of charter schools is in any way related to the inability of PC to become more racially balanced. Rather, what we see when we look at student-level transfers is that the types of transfers that are occurring may actually be helping PC become more racially balanced. This is because the types of students that are leaving traditional public schools for charter schools are not simply white students leaving schools that have high percentages of minority students – in fact, the opposite appears to be true. We saw more instances of white students leaving above-average white schools and minority students leaving above-average minority schools. When this occurs, these transfers actually make the traditional public school more racially balanced, not less. What we also see is that the majority of traditional public school to charter school transfers involve students leaving schools that were more segregated for schools that are less segregated. Both of these points lend support to the notion that charter schools are actually benefitting the traditional public schools with regard to racial balance.

In the end, an analysis of student transfers across all grade levels since the first charter school opened in PC is certainly warranted. However, based on the data used in these analyses, it seems that claims suggesting that charter schools impede the ability of PC to become more integrated are simply unfounded. Without charter schools, minority students (who are more likely to enroll in charter schools in PC) may be at an inherent disadvantage than their white peers. This is because many minority students are more likely to be in an economic range where they could not make a choice to leave the school in their home district for other educational settings, such as private schools or schools in more affluent neighborhoods. As such, placing further restrictions on charter school enrollment based solely on this argument does not seem warranted, and will simply take away educational options that some students – white or minority – might otherwise not have.