

The Influence of Charter Schools on Education Equity in America

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Abstract: The historical issues that caused a long-lasting education equity issue in America have been relieved by the emergence of charter schools as a popular alternative to traditional public schools. This study aims to analyze the influence of charter schools on educational equity in the United States. The research involved a literary review, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative analysis from reports done by experts in educational equity. This paper will first define the systemic issues of education inequality. Next, the paper will compare the situation of education equity before and after the emergence of charter schools. Then, the paper will identify the reason why charter schools can enhance educational equity in the United States. Finally, this paper will offer constructive suggestions targeting some existing drawbacks of charter schools for improving educational equity in the United States. Overall, this paper finds that charter schools have a positive influence on enhancing educational equity in America.

Keywords: educational equity, charter school, racial discrimination, minority group, inclusive learning environment

1. Introduction

Achieving educational equity is one of the most critical goals in the American education system. Like many other systemic issues, educational inequality is a long-lasting problem caused by many factors, such as racial discrimination, students' socioeconomic status, and school funding allocation. Till the 1960s, most African American, Latino, and Native-American students were educated in thoroughly segregated schools with much lower funding than the school with a majority of white students [1]. Although apartheid is no longer legal, deep-rooted historical issues remain in the issue of educational equity. One of the most common reasons for educational inequality in the US is the disparity in funding allocation policy. A large amount of public school funds is from property tax which causes the school in poor communities would receive much less funding than the school in affluent districts. The unfair funding allocation would lead the minority group of students to receive lower quality education and fewer educational resources. The emergence of charter schools is to relieve this long-lasting issue and provide a relatively equitable educational environment for minority groups of students. Extensive research studies evaluate how charter schools improve students' academic performance; for example, in the research done by Han & Keefe, they examined whether the competitive pressure that charter schools put on traditional public schools could help improve student

achievement in school [2]. In addition, Gulosino & Liebert examined students' academic performance within the charter schools in urban, suburban, and rural [3]. However, in the paper, The author will focus more on how charter schools enhance educational equity in the United States. This paper will first define the systemic issues of education inequality. Next, the paper will compare the situation of education equity before and after the emergence of charter schools. Then, the paper will identify the reason why charter schools can enhance educational equity in the United States. Finally, this paper will offer constructive suggestions targeting some existing drawbacks of charter schools for improving educational equity in the United States.

2. Introduction Factors Caused Education Inequality in America

2.1. Racial Discrimination

Education inequality in America, stemming from racial discrimination, refers to the disparities in educational resources, opportunities, and achievement that disproportionately affect marginalized groups of people. Various aspects, such as lower academic performance, lower graduation rates, unequal access to quality schools, and limited representation in higher education demonstrate it. Although federal education policy tries to focus on reducing the racial gap in education, the reality is that this agenda is a much lower priority in the federal education policy agenda. The Office of Civil Rights in the U.S. Department of Education reported a widespread disparity in access to preschool, college counselors, and college prep and advanced courses [4]. The latest results from the Program for International Student Assessment, an international academic assessment used to compare educational progress in many countries, indicate that American education still has serious racial inequalities in academic achievement, educational resources, and opportunity [5]. Education is a tool that can bring relative equality to society, but deep-rotted racial discrimination has gradually spread in education, making education powerless to cope with the current social situation.

2.2. Students' Socioeconomic Status

The educational inequality caused by socioeconomic status is mainly reflected in the difference in academic achievement. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds easily face challenges that hinder their access to high-quality education and academic achievement. Factors causing inequality include limited resources, less academic support, lower quality of education, and fewer educational opportunities. According to the study done by Cascella, students' socioeconomic status (SES) has a strong correlation with students' test scores, which indicates that low SES can negatively affect students' academic achievement [6]. The inadequate educational resources can directly influence students from low SES to have higher dropout rates, lower test sources, and lower graduation rates. In education systems with high overall inequality (such as income inequality), the achievement gap between students from different backgrounds is more pronounced [7]. Thus, students from lower SES families are easy to be excluded from quality education in the United States.

2.3. School Funding Allocation

Educational inequality resulting from the allocation of school funding refers to the disparities in school funding between different schools, which can directly influence the resources and opportunities among schools. The most impactful reason why school funding can cause educational inequality in America is that school funding heavily relies on local property taxes. According to the report done by Kenyon et al., 36% of school funding comes from local property tax [8]. This funding allocation causes the schools in affluent districts to have more funding support, while the schools in poor districts can not receive adequate funds. For example, in New York, per-pupil current spending

is \$25,519; however, in Nevada, there is only \$9,814 per student [9]. This disparity can easily cause those schools in poor districts to lack modern instructional materials, the latest technology, experienced teachers, and adequate facilities. Over time, the disparity caused by the unequal distribution of school funding will contribute to education inequality, perpetuating disadvantages for students from low-income families and hindering their educational opportunities and outcomes.

3. Compare the Education Situation Before and after the Emergence of Charter Schools

In order to understand the function of charter schools in education equity in America, it is crucial to compare the education situation before and after the emergence of charter schools. Before the emergence of charter schools, traditional public schools were the dominant school type which was operated and funded by local school districts. Most students only can go to the school in the community they live, which causes the students in low-income families only can go to those low-quality schools. Also, the curriculum in traditional public schools is fixed with standardized criteria, so the curriculum in all schools is very similar without any innovation, and also, teachers have to follow the standardized formula to teach their students, which is hard to satisfy and include all the students. However, after the emergence of charter schools, the educational system in America was injected with fresh blood. Some supporters consider that charter schools can bring competition to traditional public schools to force them to improve their education quality [10]. The special characteristics of charter schools bring hope to achieve educational equity in America. Charter schools are a type of public school funded by the government but operated by private. They can have their own types of curricula and teaching methods without standardized criteria, and the only thing they have to do is to achieve the goal they set before they started the charter school, or they will lose the fund from the government and even will be shut down by the government. The biggest gains are for African Americans and for students of low socioeconomic status attending charter schools [11]. It is because charter schools cannot charge any tuition fee, which can bring a chance for low-income families to access high-quality education, and also charter schools cannot select students or reject students for any reason. Therefore, charter schools maximize the quality and opportunity of education for all children, especially those from minority groups. After charter schools appeared in the American education system, they not only provided more quality education choices for students and parents but also brought hope to enhance education equity in America.

4. The Reason Why Charter School is Effective in Enhancing Equity in America

4.1. Increase Education Options

Charter schools provide more school choices for parents who are unsatisfied with the assigned traditional public schools, which allows parents to seek out the schools that better fit their kids' situation, such as specific interests, requirements, or learning styles. In 2020, charter schools provided educational opportunities for more than 3.3 million students, including 70% of colored people [12]. By providing diverse educational approaches and specialized programs, charter schools make the education environment more inclusive to every student. Some charter schools have their own specific focus, such as arts, science, etc. Students can base their own interests on choosing the school they want. Also, charter schools often emerge in response to underperforming traditional public schools in disadvantaged communities. For charter schools, their funds are directly provided by the government, so they would not face school funding disparities. In charter schools, students do not need to pay any tuition, so this chance can not only provide a better quality education for students but also do not need any extra money to increase their family financial burden. This special characteristic of charter schools provides a gate for those students who live in poor communities an opportunity to receive a better education and also opens the gate of achieving educational equity in America.

4.2. Accountability and Competition

Accountability and competition in the charter school sector can contribute to improving education equity in America. Charter schools operate under performance-based contracts, which outline specific academic, financial, and operational goals they must meet. If a charter school does not achieve the goal it set, it can face consequences such as penalty, non-renewal, or closure. This accountability can force schools to pay more attention to student's academic achievement, which can avoid unequal situations, such as some teachers giving up some students because of their bad academic performance, race, SES, or any other factors. According to a report from CREDO, reading achievement at charters flipped from negative to positive territory. math scores also improved a lot, though they were still slightly lower than at traditional public schools [13]. Through the chart below, the study can clearly see a large improvement in students' reading and math scores at charter schools.

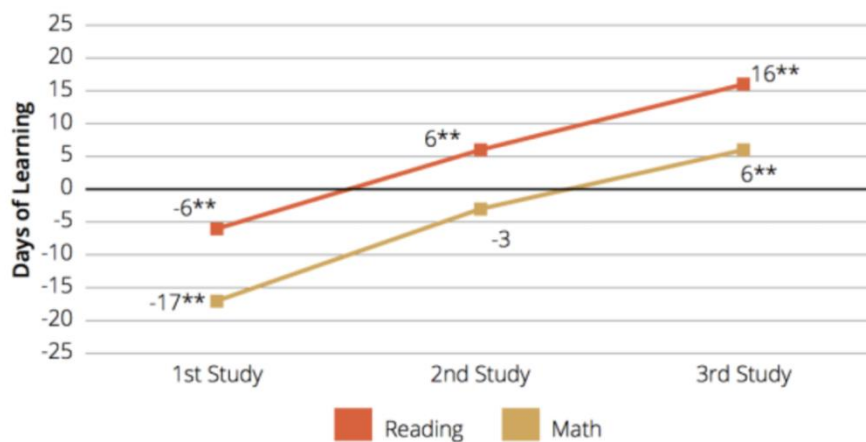


Figure 1: Annual academic growth of charter school students across three national studies [14].

There are nearly 70% of students at charter schools are colored people who are easy to be underserved in the education system, so this improvement can indicate a vast progression in achieving education equity in America. In addition, the competition of charter schools can prompt traditional public schools to improve their practices and outcomes. From 1970, the number of students in traditional public schools decreased by nearly 45% [15]. Considering from competition aspect, the loss of students can be a motivation for traditional public schools to improve their education quality and try to benefit more students. Although, on the surface, the emergence of charter schools has destroyed the education market of traditional public schools, it is not only a challenge but also an opportunity for traditional public schools that have not innovated and broken through for a long time.

4.3. Addressing Specific Community Needs

The flexibility of charter schools allows them to tailor curricula, programs, disciplines, policies, etc., to the specific circumstances of different communities. Finding the root cause of education inequality in specific communities and providing effective strategies would be more important than just providing support. The characteristics of charter schools make the process of identifying causes of education inequality and designing plans easier and more effective. "No excuse" charter schools can be the best example to illustrate how charter schools use their special nature to enhance education equity in America. "No excuse" charter schools have gained attention for their potential to enhance education equity in America. These "no excuse" charter schools mainly focus on bridging the achievement gap between students from minority groups and privileged students by providing

rigorous academic programs, high expectations, and additional support to students in disadvantaged communities. In the study done by Cheng et al., they found that “no excuses” charter schools can increase students' math and language achievement by 25% and 17% [16]. This data can demonstrate that these charter schools can directly target students from underserved communities and provide specific services for them to reduce the achievement gap. These schools usually target low-income families and implement innovative strategies to help students succeed academically.

5. Providing Some Constructive Suggestions to Improve Charter Schools

In order to maintain while improving charter schools' function of enhancing educational equity, some feasible suggestions can help charter schools to have a better outcome in creating an equitable learning environment.

5.1. Equitable Access to Charter Schools

Ensuring equitable access to charter schools is crucial for enhancing educational equity. The particularity of the independent operation of charter schools makes this goal become difficult to achieve. It is because most charter schools have their own application website and approach; thus, some parents who do not have access to those charter schools will lose the chance to send their children to a quality school. An analysis archive written by Marshall mentions that without policies that ensure widespread adoption, public choice options could perpetuate social and socioeconomic stratification, which could run counter to the goal of school choice policies, which is to ensure that choice is available to all, not just those who can afford it [17]. Thus, creating a centralized application process would make the information more accessible for all parents and students. As information becomes more accessible, the window for student admission will become genuinely open to all students.

5.2. Inclusive and Culturally Responsive Teaching Practice

Adopting inclusive and culturally responsive teaching practices can create an inclusive learning environment where all students feel valued and represented. One of the critical factors in achieving educational equity is for students to feel equal and a sense of belongingness, so creating an inclusive learning environment is crucial. According to Chen et al., culturally responsive environments are essential for both dominant group and minority groups of students because, for the dominant group, students can learn how to feel secure about who they are without the need to feel superior to others, and for a minority group, students can shift the understanding of diversity as something that exists in others to seeing diversity as a critical element of the relationship between themselves and those they encounter [18]. This change of attitude can make both groups of students know how to respect others and respect themselves, which is important for creating an inclusive and equitable learning environment.

5.3. Collaboration with Community

Establishing good communication and collaboration between charter schools and communities can bring a more comprehensive understanding of students' situations and also can enrich students' education resources. A clear understanding of the student's family situation can better provide accurate help and resources for students. A report provided by the National Charter School Resource Center (NCSRC) mentions that charter schools should leverage the community to improve student outcomes and enhance education equity by supporting healthy and responsive school environments for students [19]. It is because when the resources of charter schools are not enough to support their

students with special needs, schools can leverage community partnerships to receive services from the community, such as tutoring, after-school programming, and occupational therapy, to enrich students' choices and resources. Providing appropriate resources and support enables these students to thrive academically and socially, fostering a more equitable educational experience for them.

6. Conclusion

Educational equity is a difficult and sophisticated problem left over from history. Although this problem cannot be solved quickly, the emergence of charter schools effectively alleviates this long-lasting issue and enhances educational equity in America. The education equity issue is mainly caused by racial discrimination, students' SES, and school funding allocation, which are relieved a lot due to the emergence of charter schools. The characteristics of charter schools open a gate for students from minority groups or low-income families to receive a relatively equal educational opportunity and resource. Although charter schools can create a more equitable learning environment for students with special needs, they still have much space to work hard to achieve their primary goals of enhancing educational equity, such as making access to charter schools become genuinely equitable for every student, creating an inclusive learning environment by using some appropriate and effective approaches, and establishing good communication and collaboration with community partnerships to obtain more resources for students. Charter schools bring hope and precondition for achieving education equity in America.

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