



# Myron Orfield, Director, Institute on Metropolitan Opportunity

Interview with The Civic Caucus

8301 Creekside Circle #920, Bloomington, MN 55437

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## Notes of the Discussion

**Present :** Dave Broden, Janis Clay, Pat Davies, Rick Dornfeld, Sallie Kemper, Dan Loritz (vice chair), Walt McClure, Clarence Shallbetter.

**Summary of Discussion:** Charter schools have often promised innovative solutions to the problems that plague the public school system. Myron Orfield argues that charter schools in the Twin Cities have aggravated racial segregation, while failing to deliver academic improvements for students. Orfield provides several proposals to reduce this segregation and enhance the quality of education received by Twin Cities' public school students.

## Introduction of the Speaker.

Myron Orfield is the Director of the Institute on Metropolitan Opportunity, a non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., and an affiliate faculty member at the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs.

He teaches and writes in the fields of civil rights, state and local government, state and local finance, land use, questions of regional governance, and the legislative process.

Orfield graduated, summa cum laude, from the University of Minnesota, was a graduate student at Princeton University, and has a J.D. from the University of Chicago, where he was a member of the University of Chicago Law Review. Following law school, he clerked for the United States Court of Appeals for the 8th Circuit and then returned to the University of Chicago Law School as a Research Associate and Bradley Fellow at the Center for Studies in Criminal Justice. After working as an associate at Faegre & Benson (now Faegre Baker Daniels) in Minneapolis, he served as a Special Assistant Attorney General of Minnesota in the Solicitor General's Division.

In 1990, Orfield was elected to the Minnesota House of Representatives, where he served five terms, and to the Minnesota Senate in 2000, where he served one term.

## **The problem: Twin Cities' charter schools are failing to improve academic outcomes, while driving increased school segregation.**

Charter schools unhindered by the oversight and regulation of traditional districted public schools were hailed as part of the solution to the problems facing the American education system. With fewer restrictions, charter schools are supposed to provide the necessary innovation to address low performance, achievement gaps, and unmet specialized educational needs.

However, Myron Orfield, co-author of a recently updated study: "[Failed Promises: Assessing Charter Schools in the Twin Cities](#)," (Institute on Race and Poverty, January, 2012) has found that most charter schools underperform their districted public counterparts and are driving the re-segregation of Twin Cities public school systems.

### **Segregation in the schools**

"I don't oppose the principal of charter schools, but I have found problems with the way they have been administered by the State of Minnesota," said Orfield.

One of the biggest problems Orfield finds is that charter schools currently are exempt from state civil rights laws allowing the development of single race or ethnic group schools. Though these schools promise improved educational outcomes for students there is little evidence that supports this claim.

Charter schools further have siphoned resources from traditional public schools. To compete for market share, school districts have sought and received state approval to develop their own single race public schools that cater to a particular racial or ethnic group. The Minneapolis Public School District, for instance, would like to create its own network of single race charter schools. Most of the single race, non-white public schools and the single race, non-white charters are among the lowest performing schools in the state. The development of predominately white charter schools over the past decade has further aggravated the racial segregation in the school system. Orfield's study found that "In 2000-01, white charter students were actually less likely to be in a predominantly white school than their traditional counterparts-56 percent compared to 81 percent. However, by 2010-11, the share of white charter students in predominantly white schools had risen to 74 percent while it declined to 57 percent in traditional schools" (2012, 3). These white charters most often are formed in racially diverse suburban school areas where white families want to flee from non-white students. The loss of white students in these areas has caused public schools to draw school boundaries to create whiter public schools to compete for students with the white charters for enrollment. In this way the charters' segregated attendance has pushed the public schools into even greater segregation to compete with the charters for enrollment.

"Charter schools have proliferated and sadly they haven't done better," said Orfield. "They have done worse and they have driven the public [districted] schools into lower achievement."

According to Orfield, the number of segregated schools has grown exponentially since 1995, which has gutted the public districted schools financially. The exact number of non-white segregated charter

and districted public schools in the Twin Cities has increased from near zero in the early 1990s to more than 100 in 2011.

**Districted public schools outperform their charter counterparts.**

"At a given rate of poverty public [districted] schools outperform their charter counterparts," said Orfield. "A few charter schools do outperform the mean and they get all the publicity."

Orfield's study reports that charter schools have "proficiency rates that are 7.5 percentage points lower for math and 4.4 percentage points lower for reading in charter elementary schools than in traditional elementary schools" after controlling for student poverty, race, special education needs, limited language abilities, student mobility rates and school size (2012, 7).

Despite poor performance charter schools are difficult to close because they often develop powerful constituencies. Orfield finds that charter schools hire members of the community creating perverse incentives for keeping a school open.

For those charter schools that do show rapid improvement in student academic performance, Orfield questions whether or not those gains are real because they do not tend to last for more than three or four years. He also has found little evidence that non-white charter school students are going to college—further undermining claims that these schools are improving education outcomes.

**Solution: Increase charter school oversight, carefully place subsidized housing, and develop districted schools that better cater to student needs.**

"We have an achievement gap," said Orfield. "And evidence suggests that best way to close it is through racial integration and systematic efforts within that environment."

**Better oversight and compliance with civic rights laws are essential.**

Orfield argues the charter schools should be required to comply with the same civil rights laws as districted public schools. Orfield also argues for the implementation of a rule requiring metropolitan-wide desegregation based on a proposal by former Minnesota Governor Arne Carlson's state board of education. He also believes that \$83 million in integration aid provided by the state should be used to incent schools to meet desegregation goals.

According to Orfield, "the empirical literature shows that, all else equal, integrated schools contribute to higher test scores, lower drop-out rates, higher college attendance rates and greater earnings later in life for students. Integrated magnets schools in poor neighborhoods can help to strengthen the housing markets in those neighborhoods" (2012, 8). Orfield further argues that getting lower-income kids into middle-income schools improves life outcomes and enriches the experiences of all students. Parental success is the greatest predictor of a child's educational and economic success, while the second biggest predictor is the background of an individual's peer group. Orfield argues we can improve student educational outcomes by ensuring all students attend economically and racially diverse schools.

"Low-income kids who attend racially integrated schools are much more likely to go to college and to find jobs with middle income salaries than those who attend segregated schools," said Orfield.

Despite the powerful role of education and segregation on life outcomes many underperforming charter schools wield a great deal of influence making them difficult to close. Orfield proposes instituting a policy of automatically closing any charter school that underperforms its districted public school peers for more than two years. This policy would better serve students and schools by eliminating the worse performing charters and freeing up resources for other public schools.

### **Subsidized housing should decrease segregation, not aggravate it..**

Orfield has found that 85% of the Twin Cities' subsidized housing is built in region's poorest neighborhoods or in parts of the suburbs where the schools are losing their white students. From 1970 to 1986, the Metropolitan Council enforced Housing Policy 1339 requiring that any new community that wanted roads and sewers had to build its fair share of subsidized housing. As a result during this period 70% of subsidized housing was being built in the whitest parts of suburbia. Without this policy, 85% of subsidized housing is being concentrated in already impoverished or racially transitioning neighborhoods, which has the added effect of increasing school segregation.

"We are gaining deeply segregated neighborhoods and charter schools are making that worse than it would have been in their absence," said Orfield.

Orfield believes that the placement of 12,000 well-placed units of subsidized housing could eliminate public school segregation by 2025. As an added incentive for Minnesota policymakers to mandate subsidize housing policies that lead to integration, Orfield points to the cities of Detroit and Cleveland as examples of urban areas that have failed to integrate their regions.

"The segregated places like Detroit and Cleveland are dying. They have huge immobile workforces that are products of segregated city schools," said Orfield. "Much of this population is unskilled and unable to respond to the needs of the economy."

These populations are unable to move to other areas of the United States with greater economic opportunity because they are poorly educated. According to Orfield, the Twin Cities currently are developing a large number of highly segregated schools like those found in Detroit.

### **Open new districted schools that cater to student interests.**

Orfield believes that new magnet districted public schools (probably math and science themed) should be opened in the core cities near job centers. By design these schools would attract middle-income suburban students to help strengthen the educational performance of core city schools, while enriching the experience for both groups of students.

"We should build really good magnet schools near job centers that fit the needs both of children of in-commuters and those living in nearby neighborhoods," said Orfield.

Some schools like this already exist in the Twin Cities such as South High School and Clara Barton Open School in Minneapolis and Central High School and Capitol Hill Magnet School in Saint Paul.

### **Conclusion: Education innovation shouldn't come at the cost of increased segregation**

Orfield believes that Minnesota could do a better job of educating students in Twin Cities' area (particularly in the core cities) at lower cost by integrating Minneapolis and Saint Paul with suburban communities.

"Wake County, North Carolina and Louisville, Kentucky have had integrated schools for 40 years, and Wake County in particular has some of the best results on closing the achievement gap," said Orfield. "They have strong support for their programs of integration from the business community and they have more kids going to college."

According to Orfield, neither of these two metropolitan areas have extensive charter school systems that compete with districted public schools. In both of these cities metropolitan-wide integration did not impact the quality of education received by suburban students, while dramatically increasing it for urban students.

"We could do a better job with less money if we moved to an integrated system like Raleigh or Louisville," said Orfield. "We could cut the achievement gap dramatically and substantially increase the graduation rate of non-white students."