

“Choice alone not the answer for Colorado’s education inequities” | NOONAN

Autumn is always welcome. The heat drops but it’s still warm; trees brighten but the leaves hold; tomatoes redden, and late garden greens come up. In odd years like 2025, fall also means school board elections which have turned into brawls in certain parts of the state.

Denver Public Schools’ board elections are always contentious. A confab of pro-charter adults got together recently. They learned the academic gap between white students and low-income minority students is wider than ever based on 2024-2025 preliminary performance ratings. Over the decades, especially since Colorado U.S. Sen. Michael Bennet was superintendent of DPS, the promise from the charter school industry was charters would solve the achievement gap challenge. Twenty years later, it’s worse than ever.

Hispanic students comprise 52.6% of DPS and Blacks make up 12.9%. Whites comprise 24.6%. Somewhere between 31% and 36% of students are English Language Learners. Across the district, the academic spread between white students and minority/free-and-reduced lunch students is above 30% for reading and math.

As anyone who lives in the city knows, minority groups cluster in certain neighborhoods as do white families. The district tried busing for 22 years to offset this segregation. Busing resulted in the departure of 30,000 students from the district. Busing produced some academic gains at the outset, but by the end of the idea, with 30,000 fewer mostly white students, segregation again dominated DPS school populations.

Let’s be clear: The district doesn’t decide where people live. People do. For many, the decision is made on the price of homes or rent. Some at the confab asserted

DPS is a racist school district. That's a claim that rings out from the 1960s. Back then, there was good reason.

Now, segregation in DPS occurs not just because neighborhoods reflect how and where people live, but because many DPS charter schools market primarily to minority families. This strategy results in charter schools with low-income, minority populations approaching or exceeding 90% of their students.

Charter schools argue the choices offered in their buildings will transform academic achievement because students "choose" to attend these schools. These students are not tied to their neighborhoods. With choice, education reformers insist, the achievement gap should close. But only in a very few schools does that occur.

DSST: College View Middle School has 93% free-and-reduced lunch students, 98% minority and 69% English Language Learners. Clearly, the school is marketing almost exclusively to minority families, increasing segregation. On the other hand, the school has made it across the threshold for a "green" performance rating. That's good for them.

At the other end are charter schools that do not meet the "green performance" standards. Four KIPP charter schools rate in the "improvement" category. The four schools exceed district numbers for minorities, free-and-reduced lunch, and English Language Learners. One can argue KIPP is marketing almost exclusively to minority students increasing segregation in the district. Their approach of strict discipline, uniforms and standardized curriculum has not budged the academic gap between their students and white students.

School choice as a remedy for academic achievement gaps is spotty at best. An original goal of charter schools was to innovate and replicate successes. But students aren't replicable widgets. This intractable truth makes replication of "best practices" inadequate to the academic gap challenge. Best practices don't work best in all circumstances.

As of now, there are DPS school board candidates receiving support and money from a charter school PAC. Their parent organization's name, Denver Families for Public Schools, sounds cheerful and helpful. But it's disingenuous. The group

through its PAC will no doubt exceed its \$1 million spend on pro-charter school candidates in this election season. The Denver teachers' union has endorsed another set of candidates. Voters should look past these endorsements to the core beliefs of candidates.

Voters should ask candidates about their positions on the marketing strategies of charter schools that result in segregating too many low-income minority students. Marketing produces income for those charter schools through state and district tax dollars, but in too many cases, it hasn't produced promised results.

Voters should explore how candidates view the state's standardized testing and performance rating structure. The current narrative according to Denver Families for Public Schools is the district has failed students in "low performing" schools. The more accurate view is we voters have failed the schools and their students. What should we voters bring to this challenge to reduce segregation and create learning environments where students can thrive?

Here are some questions to ask candidates. Do they support: increased funding for public schools; accountability and transparency related to school or district governance and finance; compliance with state curriculum standards; allowing school waivers from specified state and district regulations and policies; disciplinary policies and actions with disproportionate effects on minority students; and equity in special needs instruction?

Finally, voters should determine candidates' commitment to the public in public schools. If they don't support the "public" in education, what is their replacement idea? Choice, alone, is not the answer.

Paula Noonan owns Colorado Capitol Watch, the state's premier legislature tracking platform.