

Charter schools leaving many Idaho kids behind

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Six years ago, the Idaho State University Center for Policy Studies, Education Research and Community Development confirmed what many suspected about Idaho's charter schools: They were engaging in de facto segregation.

Sought by school superintendents from Rexburg and Twin Falls, the ISU study suggested like-minded parents - largely affluent whites - were gaming the system to place their children in quasi-private schools using public dollars.

Whites were 12 percent more likely to attend a charter.

On the other hand, if you were Hispanic, American Indian, struggling with English and low-income, odds favored you attending a traditional school.

Now comes the Idaho Public Charter School Commission's annual report. The commission, which supervises about three-quarters of Idaho's charters, reported the following:

- 90 percent of its schools were less racially diverse than the Idaho school population as a whole.
- 87 percent had fewer non-English proficient students than the state average.
- By comparison with the state, 55 percent had fewer special education students.
- 77 percent had an under-enrollment of students whose family incomes were sufficiently low to entitle them to free and reduced lunches.

With the exception of Moscow's Palouse Prairie School of Expeditionary Learning - which had more non-white and more children from low-income households than the community as a whole - the pattern played out across the state.

For instance, 44 percent of Boise's school children qualify for free and reduced lunches. That's compared to one charter, where 1 percent of the students live in low-income homes. In the other two, about 35 percent qualify for free and reduced lunches.

In Canyon County's Vallivue School District, 37 percent of the students are non-white - compared to 9 percent of the charter school student body. Meanwhile, 12 percent of Vallivue's student body has limited English skill - vs. none of the students attending the charter school.

Forty-two percent of the children attending Coeur d'Alene schools qualify for free and reduced lunches - compared to 2 percent of the students in the charter school.

Levi B. Cavener, a teacher at Vallivue High School in Caldwell and a left-of-center education blogger, says the pattern is deliberate. Getting admitted to first grade - where the bulk of seats are open - is subject to a lottery. But preferences are given to children whose parents are among the school's founders, who serve on the board or work at the school. Preferences also are allowed

for children who have a sibling enrolled in the school or - thanks to a new law - were enrolled in another brick-and-mortar charter elsewhere in the state.

Only after those slots are filled do the outsiders get a chance at enrollment. In other words, if a charter's parents, board members, teachers and existing student body are white and affluent, the newest group of students will be as well, Cavener says.

Parents also self-select. If they need transportation, non-English-speaking faculty and staff as well as special education needs, they're less inclined to find them at charter schools.

All of which puts a greater burden on traditional schools, which are responsible for 93 percent of the children enrolled in public education. It may contribute to local schools turning increasingly to supplemental property tax levies to pay the bills.

Nearly 20 years ago, Idahoans struck a bargain with the people advocating charter schools: The bulk of Idaho kids attending traditional schools were promised they, too, would benefit from the innovation incubated in the charter school environment.

If that's happening, it's not apparent. Isn't it time to find out why? - M.T.