

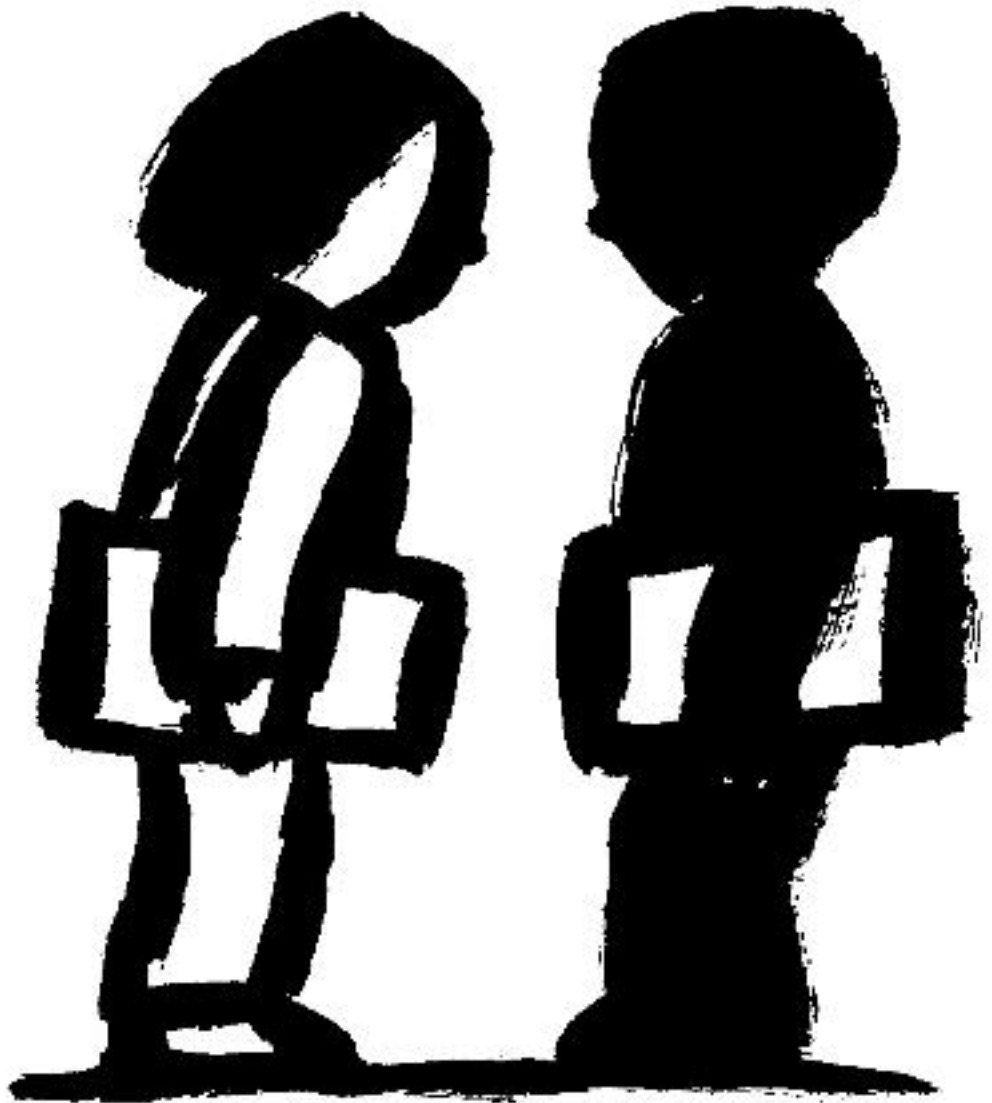
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## In praise of strong charter schools

- Article by: BILL WILSON and JOE NATHAN  
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Schools like Higher Ground Academy and historically black colleges serve students well.



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Having worked to advance civil rights for a combined 90 years, we were disappointed by a recent column criticizing award-winning charter public schools like Higher Ground Academy (“Back to the ’50s with school segregation,” May 16).

Some critics don’t seem to understand the huge difference between forcing people, because of their race, to attend a school, and giving new options to people, especially those from low-income families and families of color.

Our decades in public education — and for one of us, being the first African-American elected to the St. Paul City Council and serving as Minnesota’s human rights commissioner — lead us to praise either district or charter public schools that are serving students well.

Minnesotans may want to consider five things in judging attacks on charters.

1. As a child growing up in southern Indiana, one of us knew far too well what segregated schools were. He was bused past three all-white schools in order to attend the one school designated for children of color. The pseudo-segregation arguments that are typically advanced by the University of Minnesota’s Institute on Metropolitan Opportunity, where the commentary’s author is a researcher, are little more than academic distractions from the primary causal issues of societal segregation — income inequality, lack of affordable housing, the systemic undereducation of students of color and of students from lower-income households regardless of color. Given Minnesota’s horrendous education gap between white and black students, more attention needs to be placed on education and less on spurious arguments about segregation.

2. A 2010 U.S. Civil Rights Commission report found huge benefits to attending a historically black college or university (HBCU), most of whose students have been African-American. HBCUs have produced many of the nation’s finest political and artistic leaders, including the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Toni Morrison, the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Spike Lee, Alice Walker and Oprah Winfrey.

Although HBCU students tend to have lower SAT scores and high-school grades than their African-American counterparts at historically white institutions, HBCUs produce 40 percent of black science and engineering degrees with only 20 percent of black enrollment.

Of the top 21 undergraduate producers of African-American science Ph.D.s, 17 were HBCUs. Many of those students would have been considered underprepared by majority institutions.

Like the best HBCUs, successful charter schools focus on modeling and mentoring, not just on test scores.

3. Just as the country moved from the Supreme Court cases of Plessy to Brown, civil rights activists have evolved since 1954. Rosa Parks spent time late in her life helping to create charters in Detroit. Kenneth Clark, an African-American child psychologist whose “doll research” was cited in the Brown decision, concluded by 1968 that the country needed, as he called them, “alternative public schools” created outside of traditional school districts. He recommended creating “realistic, aggressive and viable competitors to the present public

school systems. ... The development of such competitive systems will be attacked by the defenders of the present system as attempts to weaken the present system and thereby weaken if not destroy public education. This type of expected self-serving argument can be briefly and accurately disposed of by asserting and demonstrating that truly effective competition strengthens rather than weakens that which deserves to survive. ... Public education need not be identified with the present system of organization of public schools.”

4. What opportunity is there for university law school students to read about Clark, to review research about historically black colleges or to see other advantages of strong charters? The institute’s longtime opposition to charters is clear. Are there equally strong, well-funded faculty who present different views?

5. Where is the criticism of metro-area schools that are 90 percent or more white, not because anyone was assigned, but because that’s where white families choose to live? (For example, Orono, 92.5 percent white, Waconia, 92.6 percent white.)

Education is a driving force for the production of a diverse, robust workforce and active citizens capable of meeting the demands of our growing technology-based workforce and complex world. The HBCU record, as well as the record of several strong charters, including Higher Ground Academy, shows that these are options that should be available and complimented, rather than condemned.

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