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CHARTER SCHOOL MANAGEMENT STRUCTURES, DISCIPLINE, AND THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE

Valerie Hirschberg

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This research focused on understanding how charter school organizational structure and the school-to-prison-pipeline interact in unique ways. Charter schools are often cited as having higher expulsion and suspension rates in comparison to traditional public schools, especially for racial minority groups. These disciplinary practices have been shown to have a multitude of adverse effects on students. Charter schools do not all subscribe to the same organizational structure, curriculum, or pedagogical values, yet they are often treated as monolithic in research and public discourse. Despite this variation, organizational structure—which was hypothesized to play a significant role in the perpetuation of the school-to-prison pipeline—is largely overlooked in previous research on charter school discipline. To add nuance to this literature, this quantitative research examined variation in charter school discipline rates by organizational structure. Drawing federal data from the U.S. Office of Civil Rights, this study used statistical analyses to identify significant differences in discipline rates among three types of charter schools. Findings revealed that vendor-operated schools suspended students at significantly higher rates in comparison to independent and charter management organization operated schools. In addition, analyses revealed that charter schools with predominantly Black or predominantly Black and Hispanic populations suspended students at significantly higher rates. Yet, when controlling for the racial composition of schools, analysis revealed that vendor operated schools still suspended students at higher rates, pointing to the importance of organizational structure in affecting discipline rates. Conclusions speak to the ways in which this study complicates our understanding of charter school organization and discipline, both of which perpetuate the school-to-prison pipeline.