



Understanding St. Louis Public Schools Network: Neighborhood Schools, Magnets, and Charters

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As a result of a history of segregation, redistricting, school closures, poor funding, and accreditation problems, the St. Louis Public School District (SLPS) is fragmented. Due in part to a 56% graduation rate and mounting debt, SLPS lost full accreditation in 2007, improved to provisional accreditation in 2012, and did not regain full accreditation until 2017 [1].



With ongoing questions about closing neighborhood schools, funding, and charter schools, it is important that the community, in addition to those who create, and those who implement policy, understand the landscape of public education in St. Louis.

ST. Louis Public School District Fragmentation

St. Louis Public School Type	# of Schools	Source of Funding	Local Governing Body
Neighborhood	44	Local, State, Federal	SLPS School Board
Magnet	30	Local, State, Federal	SLPS School Board
Charter	36	Local, State, Federal	Independent Local Education Agencies

[2],[3],[4]

Neighborhood Schools, VICC Program and Magnet Schools

SLPS has 44 neighborhood schools, with the neighborhood a child lives in determining which school they go to. Children can, however, attend schools outside of their neighborhood if there are open seats in the desired school.

The Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation (VICC) program, Black SLPS students who meet certain criteria to attend school in participating suburban districts. The VICC program also allows White students from suburban districts to attend SLPS magnet schools.

The 30 magnet schools in St. Louis are SLPS schools. Enrollment in these public magnet schools is open to all students living in the SLPS district. Student enrollment at magnet schools requires advanced application with students chosen by a lottery process, and that certain requirements are met by the student. Magnet schools often have a specific focus or emphasis on certain themes or subjects. Students



wishing to attend SLPS magnet schools may be required to have a certain level of academic achievement, acceptable attendance and behavioral records, and may require specific skills or abilities [5].

While magnet schools were created to encourage diversity within SLPS by drawing in White suburban students, suburban student participation in the transfer program has been declining since 1999. SLPS magnet schools remain racially segregated with predominately African American students [6,7]. The VICC program is officially in its wind-down phase and will end completely when the last students in the program graduate from high school or meet a natural transition point (like that from elementary school to middle school).

Charter Schools

In St. Louis City, 16 local education agencies (LEAs) operate 36 charter schools. According to DESE, “Charter Schools are independent public schools that are free from some rules and regulations that apply to traditional public districts as specifically identified in charter school law. In exchange for flexibility, charter school sponsors are to hold the schools accountable for results. Charter schools are non-sectarian, do not discriminate in their admission policies and may not charge tuition or fees.” [8,9]

History of Charter Schools in St. Louis

Charter schools gained popularity in St. Louis after Missouri passed its 1998 charter school law stating that charters could be opened in the struggling Kansas City and St. Louis public school districts. Any student living in the SLPS district can attend a charter school. Charter schools are independent in their curriculum, how they operate, and how they serve their students. Like magnet schools, some charter schools have specific focuses or themes [10,11].

In addition to being under the governance of an independent board working under the direction of an LEA, charter schools in Missouri must have an approved sponsor that has the responsibility of holding their schools accountable for performance and program implementation as laid out in the school’s charter application and agreement. Charter sponsors develop various policies and procedures to govern and assess the implementation of programs in their schools; they have the authority to close schools that do not comply with expressed policies and procedures. There are seven eligible charter school sponsors that serve the City of St. Louis, including St. Louis City Public Schools, St. Louis University, University of Missouri-St. Louis.

Questions surround the quality of education a child who attends a charter school may attain knowing that there is limited state and local oversight of these publicly funded, independently operated institutions. Some charter schools in St. Louis have maintained poor performance over the years and continue to operate due to the inability of the Missouri Board of Education to intervene. As of 2017, Confluence Academy, once of the city’s well-known LEAs, had underperformed on Missouri standardized tests throughout its entire history. As the Missouri Board of Education has no other choice due to a lack of direct oversight authority, it has continued to renew the school’s operating license [12].

In addition to concerns regarding the lack of state and local oversight, some believe that the popularity and competitive nature of charter school selection and application threatens diversity within the schools. With SLPS only regaining full accreditation in 2017, charter schools have become a very appealing option for families causing accessibility issues for predominantly African American low-income students. As the areas surrounding high performing charter schools grow and attract more families, they are becoming less accessible for lower-income St. Louisans [13].



Read more in:

- [1] State Board Grants Full Accreditation for St. Louis Public Schools. Retrieved from <https://dese.mo.gov/communications/news-releases/state-board-grants-full-accreditation-st-louis-public-schools>
- [2] SLPS School List: <https://www.slps.org/domain/5110>
- [4] SLPS Magnet School List: <http://slpsmagnetschools.org/programs>
- [4] St. Louis Charter School Directory: <https://dese.mo.gov/sites/default/files/qs-Charter-STL-school-directory-7-13-20.pdf>
- [5] A Parent's Guide to Schools in the City of St. Louis. Retrieved from [A Parent's Guide to Schools in the City of St. Louis](#)
- [6] Grooms, A.A., & Williams, S.M. (2015). The Reversed Role of Magnets in St. Louis. *Urban Education*, 50(4), 454-473.
- [7] VICC Application/Enrollment History. Retrieved from [Projected Actual VICC Application/Enrollment History](#)
- [8] Charter Schools. Retrieved from DESE [Charter Schools](#)
- [9] St. Louis Charter School LEAs:
- [10] Charter Schools. Retrieved from <https://www.dese.mo.gov/quality-schools/charter-schools>
- [11] Charter Schools 101. Retrieved from [Charter Schools 101](#)
- [12] Taketa, K. (2017, February 26). These St. Louis charter schools have struggled for 14 years, but continue to evade closure. Retrieved from [These St. Louis charter schools have struggled for 14 years, but continue to evade closure](#)
- [13] Taketa, K. (2017, January 23). Some St. Louis charter schools worry their popularity threatens diversity. Retrieved from [Some St. Louis charter schools worry their popularity threatens diversity](#)