



School Social Work Association of America Position Paper

Charter Schools

The idea of school choice goes back to economist Milton Friedman (1955), who suggested that “governments could require a minimum level of education which they could finance by giving parents vouchers redeemable for a specified maximum sum per child per year if spent on ‘approved’ educational services.” Freedom of choice is a basic American tenet, and charter schools have grown as a form of public school choice within a historic era where policymakers are increasingly drawing on market mechanisms to shape public policy in areas previously seen as state responsibilities (Lubienski & Theule Lubienski, 2014). From their beginnings in Wisconsin, charter schools have exploded in popularity since the Bush and Clinton administrations; with many reformers and political leaders attracted to the idea that competition and limiting the power of teacher unions would bring about innovations and greater efficiencies to education (Ravitch, 2013). There are now over 6,800 charter schools in more than 43 states (Karaim, 2017).

There are four kinds of charter schools. Over two-thirds of American charter schools exist as single nonprofit organizations. About 22% of charter schools are operated by Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) that hold the charter for multiple schools, such as Achievement First. Within CMOs, there are about 18% that operate as for-profit entities, such as Constellation Schools. Approximately 8% of charter schools are Vendor Operated Schools (VOSs), organizations that manage multiple schools on a contractual basis. The majority (86%) of VOSs are managed by for-profit corporations. Finally, about 1% of charter schools are Hybrid schools that have characteristics of both CMOs and VOSs, such as Chicago International Charter Schools (Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), 2017).

The existence of large networks of charter schools has the potential to disseminate effective practices across a larger community. Evidence of improved student outcomes, however, does not always appear to be a prerequisite for expanding from a single school to a charter network. This paper shines a light on several unresolved issues with charter schools, including effectiveness, conflicts of interests, and transparent governance.

Research about the effectiveness of charter schools has been mixed (Karaim, 2017). CREDO researched 240 CMOs and 54 VOSs operating across 26 states. Over 26% of students enrolled in charter schools are black, but black students make up only 13% of the population in traditional public schools. Charter schools serve a slightly smaller percentage of English language learners (10 percent) than traditional public schools (13 percent). Special education students make up 12% percent of traditional public school students, but only 10% of charter students. The researchers conclude students attending a for-profit charter school have weaker growth in math than they would have in a traditional public school, but similar growth in reading. Similarly, Lubienski & Theule Lubienski (2014) found that despite reformers' belief that private and charter schools would lead to greater innovation due to the autonomy and lack of regulation they have, that is may be the very factor that leads to the underperformance of charter schools. In fact, the more regulated public school sector is more likely to embrace innovation and effective teacher practices, while charter and private schools use their autonomy to avoid reforms

leading to increased curricular stagnation (Lubienski & Theule Lubienski, 2014). Across the country, many charter schools have fought oversight and regulation to their own detriment. In cases where charter schools are well-regulated, the Brookings Institute concluded that charter schools could have positive effects (Cohodes & Dynarski, 2016).

Second, many charters schools are now run by private corporations. As even Milton Friedman (1955) would admit, corporations exist to create value for their shareholders, not for their philanthropy toward children. This creates an inherent conflict of interest (Ravitch, 2013). Corporate charter schools try to reduce costs to increase profits. Many of them deliberately hire new teachers, pay less than regular schools, and do not offer the protections of teacher tenure. Over 80% of Michigan's charter schools are for-profit, and the results have been disastrous. Michigan's schools rank near the bottom in both reading and math skills, and the state's charter schools rank below the state average (Emma, Wermund, & Hefling, 2016).

This conflict of interest is particularly apparent in online or virtual charter schools. The Center on Reinventing Public Education (2015) reports online charter schools are allowed in 34 states and currently operate in 27 with over 200,000 students enrolled. Major studies have confirmed the worst fears about such operations. A CREDO (2015) study of online charter schools across 18 states found that (a) in both reading and math, the majority of online charter students had weaker academic growth compared to their peers; (b) online charter students changed schools 2-3 times more often than they did prior to enrollment in a virtual school, with over 20% eventually returning a traditional school; (c) some online charter schools are effective (e.g., Wisconsin and North Carolina); and, (d) placing more instructional responsibilities on parents was strongly correlated with weaker growth across most settings. Mathematica (2015) came to four conclusions about such schools: (a) most learning is done by self-paced independent study; (b) online schools provide far less teacher contact time than traditional public schools; (c) student engagement is problematic in most virtual schools; and, (d) online charters place significantly more responsibility on parents than traditional public schools.

Recommendations

1. SSWAA supports public charter schools that are held to the same high standards as traditional public schools. The charter bargain has always been “flexibility for accountability.” This accountability should include (a) open meetings and public records; (b) full disclosure of school finances and regular audits; and, (c) enforcement of the same civil rights (including due process protections) for students with disabilities as well as school faculty and staff.
2. In states that allow for-profit charter schools to operate, state policies must ensure such schools have a primary fiduciary duty to their students. While streamlining bureaucratic costs seems reasonable, short-changing students on the quality of instruction does not. All charter school boards should be democratically elected, not management appointed.
3. Online or virtual charter schools should be required by state education agencies to demonstrate (a) data transparency and accountability with regard to student enrollment, attendance, progress, and performance on state exams; (b) student completion data to justify continued state funding; and, (c) provision of specific admission criteria to prospective students and their parents, especially the ability to work independently.

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