



Website compares Ohio charter schools, districts

By [Jim Siegel](#) *The Columbus Dispatch* • Wednesday October 1, 2014 8:03 AM

Noting the current difficulty in finding information about charter schools and how they compare with traditional Ohio public schools, a progressive policy-research group and the state's largest teachers union teamed up to create a website that allows for quick comparisons.

But charter-school advocates quickly criticized the site as "really misleading."

[Knowyourcharter.com](#) allows people to search by traditional public-school district or charters to bring up a variety of academic performance, personnel and financial information. Calling up a public school district also brings up a list of all the charter schools that at least one student from that district attends.

Viewers can find out how the district's performance index grade compares with charters, how much state money from that district goes to charter schools, and a variety of other data.

Innovation Ohio and the Ohio Education Association, a pair of groups that have sharply criticized charter schools over the years for lack of accountability and test scores that fall below traditional public schools, spent months developing the site.

Charter schools don't have their own line-item in the state budget, so money is passed through local school districts and is difficult to track, said Keary McCarthy, president of Innovation Ohio.

"Before this website, it wasn't easy for parents to do a side-by-side comparison of their local public-school district and a charter school," he said. "We believe it's critically important for data such as this to be readily available and easily accessible."

Becky Higgins, president of the Ohio Education Association, said the project was done "under the belief that most people don't really know or understand how the charter-school system works in Ohio.

"It's no secret that we think the evidence is strong that Ohio's charter schools are not living up to their promise."

Chad Aldis, vice president for Ohio policy and advocacy for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a charter-school supporter, argued that the site improperly compares a charter school's performance with entire school-district averages. Some districts, such as Columbus, offer widely varying educational experiences across its school buildings.

“Parents choose a school. They don’t choose a district,” he said.

The website’s school-spending figures, Aldis said, use state funding per student instead of total funding, which makes it appear charters are spending more than traditional schools that also get local tax revenue.

“It’s not even trying to be balanced and fair,” he said.

Greg Harris, Ohio state director for StudentsFirst, another charter-school backer, doesn’t like that the site says state money is “transferred” from public schools to charter schools.

“This only makes sense if you are operating on the assumption that education tax dollars belong to school districts,” he said. “But if you ... embrace the notion that money should follow the child, then it makes sense for these tax dollars to follow students to the schools their families choose.”

McCarthy said the data setup speaks for itself.

“We think this is about providing that choice for parents and about providing a new level of financial transparency that will help inform the policy debate and strengthen our education system,” he said.

Original Article: <http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2014/10/01/website-compares-charters-districts.html>