

Great Schools for All: How Ohio's School Choice Turnaround Has National Implications

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By **Stephen Dyer**



Sen. Rand Paul, R-Kentucky, center, participates in a round table discussion on school choice with Sen. Rob Portman, R-Ohio, and Rep. Brad Wenstrup, R-Ohio, at Carpe Diem-Aiken, a tuition-free public charter school, Friday, May 16, 2014, in Cincinnati. (AP Photo/Al Behrman)

RCEd Commentary

“If I’m gonna make it there, I’m gonna make it anywhere.”

These lines describe a common mentality in New York City, but they might as well describe Ohio and its charter schools. Ohio has had charters for more than 15 years, but because the state’s accountability and transparency regime is weak, its schools mostly fail.

Republican Ohio Gov. John Kasich has declared that **charter accountability will be a priority this year**. His decision was certainly influenced by several recent, impactful studies on the state’s charter schools: **ACREDO** study showing how rampant Ohio charter school failure is, another

from Bellwether Education Partners outlining a new path **forward**, and **several** by the Ohio Charter School Accountability Project showing both the **rarity** of high-quality Ohio charters and how the funding system hurts **kids**.

These studies weren't produced in a vacuum – they were the culmination of work begun early last year that brought together diverse interests in the charter school issue. Much of this work was done behind the scenes, few knew it was happening. But as a result, Ohio is on the precipice of a new, exciting chapter in its charter school story that could have implications for America as a whole.

Two major campaign contributors -- David **Brennan**, who runs White Hat Management, one of Ohio's largest for-profit charter operators, and **William Lager**, who runs the Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow, an online public charter school – have **collected** more than \$1.7 billion in state taxpayer dollars since the Ohio charter program began in 1999. That's about 1 in 4 state dollars **spent** on Ohio charter schools. At the same time, they've contributed more than \$6 million to Ohio politicians – easily the largest individual contributors during the time period.

In last year's state budget, Brennan's schools (which mostly **fail**, according to the state Report Card) received the largest per pupil **increase** of any large Ohio Charter School chain. Many high performing charters, on the other hand, had the state cut their aid. Meanwhile, Lager's ECOT got the state's largest dollar **increase**, and Kasich spoke at ECOT's 2011 graduation **ceremony**. The school only **graduates** about 35 percent of its kids. On the most recent report **card**, it got all Fs and one D.

It has been tough overcoming this political reality. But the quality-focused charter community began to stand up after the 2013 budget. As a state legislator, I sort of knew Greg Harris while he was at KnowledgeWorks, a nonprofit non-partisan education-focused organization. That group helped me, as an education subcommittee chairman, develop a host of education reforms in 2009 that earned Ohio the Frank Newman Award from the Education Commission of the **States** as the country's most bold, innovative and nonpartisan education reform.

Early in the 2013 budget process, Harris, **who now is the State Director for StudentsFirst Ohio**, started talking about things that were generally unheard of from Ohio charter school advocates: accountability, quality and shutting down failing schools. While the Fordham Foundation did mention this in previous **years**, having Michelle Rhee's organization say it amplified the view.

After the 2013 budget so overwhelmingly rewarded failing charter schools, Harris told the **Beacon Journal** that the state should stop “wasting kids' lives” and what matters here is “how well your lobbyist is paid.”

As the Education Policy Fellow for the progressive think tank Innovation Ohio, I had tried to strike a new tone for Ohio's progressives toward charter schools. In a report I wrote about

Ohio-Schools (that education historian Diane Ravitch cited in her latest book "Reign of Error,") I said charters are important because "no Ohio parent should feel his or her child is trapped in a substandard school." Accepting charters was a significant step for this state's progressive side.

So when I read what Harris said, I realized we were both trying to move our respective camps toward common ground. That's when I suggested we work together. Along the way, we included Fordham, who funded the CREDO and Bellwether studies, and others.

Knowing how toxic this issue was politically, though, we met quietly behind the scenes. We involved parties who could barely stand to be in the same room together, let alone hammer out details of a meaningful piece of charter school legislation. But we did it. I dubbed the effort "Great Schools for All" and worked tirelessly to lead the group down a meaningful path. A year later, we had a bill drafted based on principles to which our diverse group unanimously agreed. Many of the recommendations were similar to the ones laid out by Bellwether and were included in the Ohio House charter reform bill introduced this week. The governor and Ohio Senate will be introducing their version this year as well.

If Ohio effectively addresses this issue, our work here will provide a much-needed blueprint for nationwide success. For if the progressive and free market sides of the issue can collaborate. If Democrats and Republicans stop worrying about their campaign money. If the often combative participants in the Education Reform Wars put down their blindingly preconceived notions of each other, roll up their sleeves, and find common ground. If all this can be done, then I will be proud to have played a role in showing the way.

For if it can be done *here*. It can be done *anywhere*.

Stephen Dyer – a lawyer – is the Education Policy Fellow at Innovation Ohio – a progressive Columbus, Ohio think tank. He served four years in the Ohio House, focusing on education policy and chairing an education subcommittee dealing with finance and reform. Prior to that, he reported for nearly a decade on education and other issues with the Akron Beacon Journal.

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