

Ohio's charter schools: Costlier and worse (Op-Ed)

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When charter schools burst onto Ohio's education scene about 15 years ago, proponents claimed they could educate at-risk children better and more cheaply than traditional public schools. Today, the reality is quite different — and alarming.

Charter schools cost the state more than twice as much per student as traditional schools do. And with a handful of exceptions, their academic performance is worse.

Ohio's system of deducting charter-school funding from the amount of state aid to school districts gives charters more money than they spend.

Meanwhile, students in traditional schools — who account for 90 percent of Ohio's school population — get, on average, 6.5 percent less funding than the state says they need and are entitled to receive.

Most of the money transferred to charters goes to schools whose students' performance scores are worse than in the school districts from which that money and those students came. Clearly, reform is in order.

Since Gov. John Kasich and the General Assembly are developing a new school funding system as part of the 2014-15 state budget, there couldn't be a better time for change. At least three fixes are needed:

- Charter-school funding should not be based, as it is now, on the amount needed to educate a child in a traditional school. Instead, it should be based on what charters actually spend.

Charter schools pay teachers far less than traditional schools (\$34,714 a year compared with \$57,310, on average). They have no student transportation expenses; school districts are required to pay busing costs for all children in a district, regardless of what school they attend.

Charters also have far lower costs to comply with regulations, since they are exempt from roughly 270 state rules that apply to traditional schools.

- The governor and lawmakers must ensure that charter school funding does not come at the expense of students in traditional public schools. Surely the 90 percent of Ohio children who choose to remain in traditional schools should not be financially penalized — or receive less state money than the state says they need — to over-fund charter schools that educate just 10 percent of our children.

- It is long past time for Ohio policy makers to hold charter schools to the same level of academic accountability they demand of traditional schools.

A few charter schools perform well, but they are a distinct minority. Only about two dozen of the nearly 300 charters rated by the Ohio Department of Education score above the state average on performance measures.

Moreover, failing charter schools are notoriously difficult to close. The process typically takes five to six years, and schools that the state finally manages to shutter often reopen a short time later under different names.

Even charters that aren't failing often perform far worse than traditional schools, but keep raking in taxpayer money. In the 2011-12 school year, more than 90 percent of state aid to charters went to schools that rated, on average, 18 points lower on the state's performance index score than the traditional schools from where the students and money came.

Charter school boosters never tire of extolling "school choice" for parents and students. But how many parents who are swayed by the slick and misleading television advertising of charter-school operators know that most students transfer to charters that perform worse than the traditional schools they left?

Nothing is more important for Ohio's future than education. Neither our children nor our state can prosper in the highly competitive world of tomorrow unless we build a world-class educational system today.

Doing so will require innovation. It will mean being open to new ideas and being receptive to new approaches. Charter schools can be a healthy addition to Ohio's K-12 mix.

But they can never supplant the traditional public schools that not only are enshrined in our constitution, but also will forever remain the backbone of our education system.

We cannot afford to undercut or underfund our traditional schools. And shortchanging the children who attend them is morally indefensible.

Janetta King is president of Innovation Ohio, a progressive think tank headquartered in Columbus. Its full report on charter schools is available at innovationohio.org.

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