

The Vindicator

Charter schools fail to make grade (Op-Ed)

Monday, March 11, 2013

By Janetta King

[Special to The Vindicator](#)

When charter schools burst on Ohio's education scene about 15 years ago, proponents claimed they could educate at-risk kids better — and more cheaply — than traditional public schools.

A decade and a half later, the reality is quite different. Charters cost the state more than twice as much per pupil as traditional public schools. And with a handful of exceptions, their academic performance actually is worse.

Moreover, the “deduction system” Ohio currently uses to fund charters (in which charter money is “deducted” from the total amount allocated to each school district) not only results in charters receiving more money than they actually spend, but also in traditional school children (who still comprise 90 percent of Ohio's school population) receiving, on average, 6.5 percent less funding than the state itself says they need and are entitled to receive.

On top of that, most of the money being transferred to charters is going to schools whose student performance scores are worse than the school districts from which the money and students came.

Clearly, reform is in order. And since Gov. John Kasich and the Ohio legislature now are developing a new school funding system as part of the 2014-15 state budget, there couldn't be a more propitious time.

Innovation Ohio, the progressive think tank of which I am president, believes at least three fixes are needed. You can read our full report at www.innovationohio.org

First, charter funding should not be based, as it currently is, on the amount needed to educate a child in a traditional school. Instead, it should be based on what the charters themselves actually spend. Charters pay teachers far less than traditional schools (\$34,714 vs. \$57,310, on average); have no student transportation expenses (school districts are required to pay busing costs for all district children, regardless of what school they attend); and have far lower regulatory compliance costs (since they are exempt from roughly 270 different state regulations that apply to traditional schools).

Financially penalized

Second, the governor and legislators must ensure that charter school funding does not come at the expense of traditional school children. Surely everyone should be able to agree that 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 itself says they need — in order to overfund charter schools which educate just 10 percent of our kids.

Third, it is long past time for policymakers to hold charters to the same level of academic accountability they demand of traditional schools.

Yes, there are a few charters that perform well. But they are a distinct minority; only about two dozen out of the nearly 300 charters rated by the state Department of Education score above the state average on performance measures.

Moreover, failing charters are notoriously difficult to close; the process typically takes five to six years, and schools the state finally manages to shutter often just reopen a short time later under a different name.

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

Slick advertising

Charter school boosters never tire of extolling "school choice" for parents and students. But how many parents — whose "choice" is often swayed by the slick and misleading television advertising of charter school operators — know that most kids transfer to charter schools whose performance is 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 are not only enshrined in our Constitution, but will forever remain the backbone of our education system. We simply cannot afford to undercut or underfund our traditional schools. And short-changing the children who attend them is morally indefensible.

Janetta King is president of Innovation Ohio, a progressive think tank headquartered in Columbus.

Original Article:

<http://www.vindy.com/news/2013/mar/11/charter-schools-fail-to-make-grade/?newswatch>