

# Corporate Charter Schools: *Finding out the facts: At a glance*

Charters are a relatively new educational experiment, and credible research is just starting to become available. They need more research, oversight, and true evaluation to fulfill their purpose of being laboratories that traditional public schools can learn from.

The incomplete research behind charters means that many states may be heading into a reform strategy without a clear understanding of how charter schools work best, or how they interact with and affect traditional public schools. Here are some things we know:

## **Choice hasn't improved performance**

There is little evidence to support the claim that school choice and competition provide improved educational outcomes. Sweden started a voucher system in 1992 but achievement levels have fallen for two decades. Chile's voucher system from the 80's has yielded no real improvement. Cleveland, Milwaukee, and DC vouchers have no measurable student achievement. Charter schools also show no achievement advantage. The NAPCS found that lack of school choice did not lessen achievement.

## **Charter performance is a mixed bag**

A 2014 Pennsylvania report finds that, "overall academic performance of charter schools and particularly cyber charter schools is disappointing and trails the academic performance of traditional public schools."

Education Justice reports that, "Most national research shows that on average public schools perform as well as charter schools or better...it is clear that charter schools are no panacea for improving education in this country. Policy-makers would be wise to be realistic about what charter schools are actually likely to achieve -- such as alternate curricular offerings, for example - and not simply rely on inaccurate hype to conclude that 'charterness' somehow inherently equates to a higher-quality education."

CREDO studies of Ohio and Texas found that charters scored significantly worse in mathematics than public schools. A 2013 comprehensive CREDO study found that charters performed worse in math and only very slightly better in reading; they do not out perform public schools.

## **Charters weed out students**

A Colorado professor has found that corporate charter schools "can shape their student enrollment in surprising ways." He identified a "Dirty Dozen" methods used by charters "that often decrease the likelihood of students enrolling with a disfavored set of characteristics, such as students with special needs, those with low test scores, English learners, or students in poverty."

## **Inexperienced teachers may not innovate**

Charter teachers have more diversity, but also fewer years of experience and are paid less than those at public schools. Many charters hire inexperienced instructors from Teach for America. These inexperienced teachers are less able to innovate and differentiate instruction to meet students' needs. Charters have high teacher turnover, leading to schools with very few experienced teachers to guide the new teachers. Strict instructional guidelines and rigid school cultures fill the experience gap. These models are easily and profitably replicated in the corporate charter chains, the fastest growing segment of charters as consolidation grows.

## **Consolidation trend limits choice**

NACSA reports that the "rate of charter school growth has been nearly three times the rate of authorizer growth during the last five years," with a trend towards large portfolios. One authorizer may now oversee hundreds and hundreds of charter schools.

In New Orleans, there are just a few charter networks dominating the market. Independent charter schools are dwindling. Consolidation is more profitable for management corporations due to economies of scale, but it reduces school choice for parents and students. Charter advocates fear that charter networks will replicate the centralized bureaucracies they replaced.

## **Wall Street loves charters**

The Washington Post reports that, "Pennsylvania is seen by hedge fund managers as prime ground for 'investment opportunities' in charter schools. Publicly funded schools should not be serving to line the pockets of private companies and individuals."

Wall Street hedge fund operators, leverage-buy-out artists and investment bankers often finance charters and then sit on the association and management corporation that run the schools. They often make support of charter schools one of the criteria for donations to politicians.



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Corporate school reform is the driving force behind corporate charter schools: publicly funded schools that are privately managed, often by for-profit corporations. Research shows that charters have not improved overall student performance and outcomes, and are actually detrimental for some students.

Because they are free from the protections required for public schools, they are very profitable to operate, making them popular with hedge fund managers and Wall Street investors. This freedom makes charter schools extraordinarily difficult to describe or evaluate at a national level.

## **Multiple authorizers = poor outcomes**

States that allow multiple authorizers—from municipal agencies to colleges and non-profits—had the weakest student achievement data for charter students when compared to students at traditional public schools. CREDO found “a significant negative impact on student academic growth” for charters in states that allow multiple agencies to authorize these schools.

A 2014, Pennsylvania report cites a “comprehensive study of charter school performance in 16 states found lower achievement in states with multiple authorizers, including non-profit organizations and higher education authorizers.” Authorizers that remove control from elected officials are “unfair to taxpayers.”

## **Virtual charters have low performance**

Virtual or cyber charter schools deliver online instruction to students. Virtual corporate charters are extremely profitable because they receive the same per-pupil funding as other schools, but do not provide equivalent resources such as buildings, classroom equipment, sport teams, etc. Student performance is lower in online corporate charter schools. For-profit EMOs are very involved in the virtual sector.

## **Charters lack transparency**

Even though corporate charter schools rely on public funding, they argue that they are not public agencies and are not subject to sunshine/transparency laws and have refused FOI requests. “Compliance with FOIA would significantly distract, undermine and obstruct” charter schools, says Dacia Toll, president of Achievement First.

## **Profits diminish performance**

Rocketship, a low-performing cost-cutting charter chain in Milwaukee, offers “a narrow curriculum focused on little more than reading and math test prep, inexperienced teachers with high turnover, and ‘blended learning’ products designed to enrich charter school board members’ investment portfolios.”

## **Charter funding hurts public schools**

It is difficult to collect accurate data on state policies for financing charters. Finn, Hassel, and Speakman (2005) stated, “This analysis revealed beyond our wildest fears how uneven, incommensurable, and in many cases plain shoddy and gap-filled are state and local school-finance data. It’s hard enough to figure out how much money flows into the coffers of district-operated schools...To find these things out for charter schools in any fashion that can begin to be compared with district (or state) data verges on impossible.

Charters can be costly for districts. Los Angeles Unified District is struggling with a \$591 million financial drain primarily from charter enrollment. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Kentucky is one of 10 states with the biggest cuts to K-12 funding since 2008. Kentucky’s districts face negative fiscal impacts from charters because the public schools cannot reduce costs on a per-pupil basis.

In Pennsylvania, there is no cap on charter schools fund balances and they are not required to return unspent funds to the school district. Tax dollars fund physical schools and cyber schools at the same rate, even though student costs are significantly lower for online schools.

Elizabethtown passed a resolution opposing “a funding formula that unilaterally takes critically needed funds from the local school districts and redirects them to charter schools, thereby debilitating the significantly underfunded existing system of funding for public education for all Kentucky students...They will take taxpayer money, money from the people we represent, and put it into a private enterprise for personal gain with no substantial data to support a better education system than a public school system.” The Board “expressed concerns about charter schools siphoning money from public schools, lacking similar transparency and accountability standards as public schools, and failing to help at-risk students.”

Moody’s Investor Services found that charters negatively impact public schools when the charter approval process is not restrictive and growth is not capped.



# Don't let it happen in Kentucky!

*Charter schools have all too often also become laboratories for ways to misuse public funds and mislead their supporters. Examples of mismanagement and worse make headlines regularly. -- Nonprofit Quarterly, June 2015*

*I think it's critical if we are going to have charter schools and add charter schools ... that we have transparency. When you take public money and invest in anything, we need to have utter transparency." -- Beth Bye, Connecticut Senator*

## Charter School Vulnerabilities to Waste, Fraud, and Abuse

A 2016 study reports that taxpayers in 15 states have lost around \$216 million because of waste, fraud, abuse, and mismanagement in corporate charter schools..

The Department of Education's Office of the Inspector General issued a report raising concerns about vulnerabilities in charter school oversight, finding that "state level agencies were failing to provide adequate oversight needed to ensure that Federal funds [were] properly used and accounted for."

The Center for Popular Democracy and Integrity in Education issued a report titled "Charter School Vulnerabilities to Waste, Fraud, and Abuse" in response. They reported that "charter operator fraud and mismanagement is endemic" and "at least \$100 million in public tax dollars has been lost due to fraud, waste, and abuse."

They organized the fraudulent practices in six categories:

1. Charter operators using public funds illegally for personal gain
2. School revenue used to illegally support other charter operator businesses
3. Mismanagement that puts children in actual or potential danger
4. Charters illegally requesting public dollars for services not provided
5. Charter operators illegally inflating enrollment to boost revenues; and
6. Charter operators mismanaging public funds and schools

Federal funding for corporate charter schools continues to increase despite the "repeated criticism from the Office of the Inspector General for suspected waste and inadequate financial controls within the federal Charter Schools Program."

Access the full report at:

[https://populardemocracy.org/sites/default/files/FraudandMismgmt5-3-14\(FINALx3.0\)REV.pdf](https://populardemocracy.org/sites/default/files/FraudandMismgmt5-3-14(FINALx3.0)REV.pdf)

## Fraud in Ohio

The "unusually diverse group" of authorizers in Ohio has directly resulted in tax payer fraud, corruption, and poor student outcomes that have labelled that state the "wild, wild West" of charters. One example, General Chappie James Leadership Academy, a recently-closed charter school in Dayton, Ohio, now owes taxpayers close to \$1.2 million after it was said to have falsified its attendance records and received state funding for students who never attended the school.

## Corruption in Connecticut

In 2014, the Hartford Courant began revealing a series of problems: Jumoke leader, Michael Sharpe, had a years-old criminal record for embezzlement, and his charter management organization had hired family members and people with criminal backgrounds. These lapses caused some legislators and local education leaders to lose confidence in the state education department's ability to oversee charter schools. Stricter charter legislation was introduced.

## Problems in Pennsylvania

A founder of PA Cyber Charter schemed to steal \$1 million in public dollars. There were 11 federal fraud and tax conspiracy charges filed against him. In Philadelphia, 8 charter schools have officially plead guilty to federal fraud charges. Charter spending practices were referred to the FBI over concerns of "Pennsylvania tax dollars going towards building a school in Ohio."

## Gulen Schools scandal

According to an attorney with Amsterdam & Partners in London, "The Gulen movement is a global organization thriving on taxpayer money." The schools are involved in a real estate scam that has fleeced Ohio tax payers of \$19 million. Los Angeles closed Gulen schools for using the H-1B program to replace teachers and staff with Turkish nationals. The charter school chain is affiliated with the Gulen Movement, led by a Turkish cleric the Turkish government is trying to extradite for connections to a failed military coup to oust Turkish President Erdogan.



# Corporate charter schools are a problem, not a solution

*School reformers keep talking about charter schools as if they were the answer to public education's problems, when there is a great deal of evidence that shows big problems with the charter sector.*

*Valerie Straus, Washington Post*

## Charters are a problem for:

| <b>Rural Students</b>   | <b>Low-Income Students</b>  | <b>Students with Disabilities</b>  |
|---|---|--|
| <p>Charters in Kentucky are being presented as an option for low-performing urban schools, but Hal Heiner has also been speaking about Pataula Charter Academy, a Georgia charter that draws students from 5 rural counties (concentrating the athletes and scholars). The charter was granted against the wishes of all 5 school boards. Calhoun County, population less than 7,000, lost 118 students and \$500,000 to Patuala, resulting larger class sizes, furloughs days, and reduced student services.</p> | <p>Charters do not have to provide student lunches (including free and reduced lunch). In 2014, only 35% of North Carolina charters provided lunches for students, a burden for low-income students.</p>  | <p>Many charter schools do not serve students with disabilities and “counsel out” students with disabilities which limits the access special education students have to services and leads to segregation because school choice is only available to able-bodied students.</p>   |
| <p>Charters damage rural communities, where the local school system is the biggest employer.</p>  | <p>Charters do not have to provide transportation for students , a burden for low-income students.</p>  | <p>Kentucky HB 103 opens the door for warehousing students with disabilities in special schools. Sections 3(8)(a) and 3(5)(c) permit the creation of these schools and Section 4(3)(c)(2) permits “counseling out” to a “more appropriate setting,” probably an underfunded public school.</p>   |
| <p>In one Pennsylvania rural district, virtual charters cost the district \$500,000 leading to program cuts and closed buildings.</p>   | <p>Charters do not have to offer athletic teams, extracurricular or afterschool activities, impacting low-income students especially hard. Charter students may participate in sports at public schools, if available. Public schools can be forced to cut these activities for all students when charters reduce their enrollment and funding.</p> | <p>Research shows that charter schools in some states accept a lower percentage of children with disabilities than public schools do. Charters enroll significantly less students with severe disabilities and are often less equipped to provide necessary services to students with special needs, despite federal laws.</p>             |
| <p>Rural schools are a hub of community activity and services plus a source of identity. To remain profitable, rural charters often consolidate schools from several districts, stripping these assets.</p>   | <p>Low-income families may not take advantage of school choice, as in Jefferson County, Kentucky, because they are not engaged in the system and unable to complete the steps required to change.</p>   | <p>In 2014, only 2 out of 28 of Pennsylvania's high-performing charters have a significant special education population.</p>   |
| <p>Rural areas do not respond to markets in the same way as urban areas. School choice requires that there are enough options to allow the bad schools to close, which is not applicable in rural communities.</p>  | <p>Charters may REQUIRE activity fees and specific volunteer hours from parents, a burden for low-income families.</p>  | <p>Massachusetts is touted as having some of the highest-performing charters, but 25% do not have special education teachers (compared to 3% for public schools). Charters with special education teachers average 14 more students per teacher than public schools. 16/21 districts with low special education services are charters.</p> |
| <p>Virtual charters are often the primary option of choice for families in rural settings. This is a concern for rural school district stakeholders because of the negative educational performance outcomes</p>  | <p>Charters have opened their enrollment for only a few hours on one day, making it difficult for working or distressed families.</p>   |  |
|   | <p>Cost-cutting charters offer an “educational model deemed substandard for more privileged suburban children but is being vigorously promoted—perhaps even forced—on poor children.”</p>   |  |

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[kypolicy.org/charter-school-proposal-negatively-impact-funding-kentuckys-existing-public-schools/](http://kypolicy.org/charter-school-proposal-negatively-impact-funding-kentuckys-existing-public-schools/)

## Would Charter School Proposal Negatively Impact Funding of Kentucky's Existing Public Schools?

*By Ashley Spalding*

One of the key questions about how charter school legislation would change education in Kentucky is how it would affect funding for traditional public schools. Looking at what has occurred in other states and how HB 103 proposes to fund charters, there are reasons for concern.

It might sound like adopting public charter schools would mean no harm to resources — traditional public schools would lose students to charter schools but would no longer bear the costs of educating them. But that's not the case. As noted in a recent Economic Policy Institute (EPI) report, research shows charter schools often have negative fiscal impacts on traditional public school districts in large part because it is not possible for them to reduce costs on a student-by-student basis. This is of particular concern in our state as Kentucky schools — especially poorer school districts — are already struggling financially. A recent report ranked Kentucky third worst in the country when it comes to per-student cuts to state formula funding for K-12 between 2008 and 2017.

Research has shown:

### **These negative impacts occur through a number of channels.**

- Districts aren't able to reduce their costs on a student-by-student basis. Schools' costs range from fixed costs (districtwide and school overhead costs that are not reduced by the transfer of individual pupils) to step costs (that include classroom level costs, which are also not reduced by the transfer of individual pupils) to variable costs, which can be reduced on a student-by-student basis but make up a relatively small share of school district budgets.
- Operating essentially two systems of public schools (traditional and charter) under separate governance arrangements can create extra costs or inefficient expenditures. As noted in the EPI report, "while inducing fiscal stress on host districts, charter expansion may also be increasing total overhead costs." For instance, studies show that charter schools operating fiscally independently of local public school districts have particularly high administrative expenses. This higher spending is for administrative functions traditionally performed at district central offices as well as in school buildings. A study found that at charter schools in New Jersey not only were administrative expenses at charters nearly \$1,000 per pupil higher than those of other schools in the district but local public school districts still had the responsibility to provide some services to charter school students.
- According to Moody's Investor Services, the negative impacts of charters on traditional public schools are felt particularly hard in school districts that are already experiencing financial distress and in states where the approval processes for new charters are not very restrictive and where there are few limits on charter growth.

### **There are many examples of charter schools hurting funding for traditional public schools.**

- According to Moody's a small but growing number of school districts experience severe financial stress due to charter school expansion. Among the cities highlighted in the report were Cleveland, Detroit, Kansas City, St. Louis and Washington, D.C.
- Academic research has shown charter school expansion produced harmful fiscal impacts for school districts in Albany and Buffalo, New York.
- A consultant's report concluded that charters in Nashville are causing the transfer of state and local per-student funds to charter schools without reducing the traditional schools' operational costs, increasing direct and indirect costs, and worsening overdue maintenance issues at school buildings.

**Some concerns about funding in HB 103 specifically are:**

- HB 103 makes no mention of the fiscal impact of charters on traditional public schools in Kentucky, unlike a Senate charter school bill, which actually makes charter school approval contingent upon its minimal adverse effects on the school district in which it is located. Some states require that an analysis be conducted on the impact the new charter would have on traditional public schools.
- Unlike school districts charter schools would not be able to levy their own taxes, but HB 103 would divert a proportionate share of tax revenue generated by local districts that those districts choose to levy to fund district programs, projects and expenses. This diversion of what are called Tier I and Tier II funds from the districts that raise them (and in the case of Tier II funds, the voters who approve them) may hinder the ability of the school district to meet its obligations or to continue projects or programs funded with those revenues.
- School boards, elected by and accountable to taxpayers, would lose control over how funds they raise from taxes they levy are used when those dollars flow to charter schools. In large districts where many charter schools could be authorized, the loss of fiscal control could be significant.
- HB 103 describes the creation of a public charter school facility revolving loan program as “composed of federal funds obtained by the state for public charter schools...and any other funds appropriated or transferred to the fund by the state,” but does not clarify where in the state budget such funds might come from or how they would be appropriated. Without a specified source and process for capital funding, concerns also arise about adequate and equitable facilities for charter school students as well as reduced resources for traditional schools.
- Similarly, the bill fails to ensure adequate transportation funding for charter schools even as it diverts and dilutes already-inadequate transportation funding for public schools.

These questions and concerns about the fiscal impact of charter school legislation on traditional public schools in Kentucky need to be at the forefront of policy conversations about charters. Our public school system is already underfunded, and potential negative impacts of the proposed legislation on traditional public schools should be thoroughly understood.



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