

“The diversion of public dollars to a private end is a major challenge for us” (5)

The Bethlehem Gadfly Charter Schools, Education, Gadfly's posts, Serious Issues January 25, 2019
(5th in a series on Education)

Now let's look at the other speakers at Lehigh Valley 4 All's Education Summit. (By the way, this is the second meeting of Lehigh Valley 4 All that Gadfly has attended, and that organization has made a very good impression.)

Here are audio recordings and summaries of the five speakers relating to charter schools. If Gadfly were to boil the presentations down, he would say that there is no gripe about the quality of the local charter schools, but the diversion of public dollars to a private end is a major challenge. The gripe from the traditional public school perspective is that the funding



formula is flawed, weighing heavily in favor of the charter schools. And the practice in regard to special ed students is resulting in a higher concentration of lower needs students in charters. The Pa. Association of School Administrators has identified 11 reforms that are easy and inexpensive to implement, but recent legislative attempts have actually been in the wrong direction. Outlook not good.

As we continue to think about the charter school issue, among things that Gadfly would like to know are the exact amount of the BASD payment to charter schools, which schools they are, and how many students are attending charter schools.

Joseph Roy, BASD Superintendent (7 mins.)

“Do we believe in public schools for the public good that serve all children, or do we want to move toward privatization?” Since the 80s there’s been a move from public good and service to privatizing everything. Under the guise of choice, there’s been a movement away from the good of the community to the good of the individual, a notion that everything can be solved through the market. The crux: what’s the agenda behind the privatization movement? We have become consumers, a market. A market solution has been imposed on an inherently public good. And it doesn’t work. We see corruption in charter schools (though not in Bethlehem). Charter schools are publicly funded but privately run. They don’t have elected boards, so we remove them from the notion of a public good under the direction of an elected school board. The diverting of public dollars to privately run schools is a major issue.

\$1.5billion/yr in Pa. goes to charter schools. vouchers/opportunity dollars go to private and parochial schools. “The diversion of public dollars to a private end is a major challenge for us.” If that money stayed in the public system, we’d have a lot less issues with money for the public schools.

Richard Sniscak, Parkland SD Superintendent (9 mins.)

Many costs rising, but charter schools continue to tax budgets. For instance: Allentown \$50m, Bethlehem \$30m, Parkland \$4m. And Parkland doesn’t even have charter schools within the district but are transporting students outside our district. There are good and bad public schools as well as good and bad charter schools. So that’s not his focus. His focus is on the funding of charter schools. Pa. charter school law is obsolete and increasingly out-of-date – especially for cyber charter schools. Pa. Association of School Administrators published a white paper in 2018 to address systemic flaws within the current law, and he went over the 11 recommendations. For instance, change funding formula, change cost of funding special ed students, address over-identification (?), teachers must meet same certification requirements as in public schools (applause!), evaluate by same measures as traditional public schools (applause!), scrutinize lower performance than traditional public schools, school districts have power to oversee charter schools, appeal boards must be composed of neutral members, fill-in discrepancies must be reconciled, transparency of finances, enrollment practices free of discrimination. These things are “low hanging fruit,” easily dealt with without cost, but have eluded legislative change. “Money for charter schools in Pa. is deeply flawed. It is based upon a formula that’s not reflective of actual cost, especially for cyber charter schools.” The funding is based on the cost per

student in the sending school. That cost includes lots of things not included in a charter school's costs, such as extra-curricular cost and busing/transportation. Thus, public schools send more money than is needed to operate charter schools. "Windfall for charter schools and a deficit for public schools." Gives examples of "excessively high" tuition rates.

Susan Spick, President, Education Voters (10 mins.)

Charters can be managed by a for-profit company, with a different objective than educating students, and a different way of reporting their finances. Cost in Bethlehem 2016-2017 was \$10,600 for a regular student and almost \$23,000 for a special ed student. There are 2 things that should happen in Harrisburg. Our state funds about 37% of what it takes to educate a student, national average is closer to 50%. We are 46th in the nation for state funding of public schools. Money is not spread in equitable ways and also grossly inadequate. Public schools everywhere are struggling, and effort is needed to bring charter schools funds back into the system. Quality of education in cyber charter schools is abysmal. Not educating students yet taking in 1/2 billion dollars a year. Legislature caved to charter school lobby on funding formula for special ed students. No relationship whatsoever between what the charter school gets to educate a special ed student and what it actually costs. Gives egregious example. Funding formula creates a big disincentive for charter schools to admit students with significant disabilities. "Perverse disincentive." Students with less expensive disabilities go to charter schools. Charter schools all over the state are reaping a surplus from this funding formula. Children are being segregated by disabilities, and educational segregation turns out, in effect to be racial segregation. Issue is morally wrong as well as financial.

Steve Samuelson, State Representative, 135th District (14 mins.)

Funding: 70% local, 25% state, 5% federal. Gov. Wolf had made education a priority. Still feeling effects of big cuts in 2008. Just now coming back to that level. There have been some bills for charter school reform, but they tend to get stuck in committee. One bill that got to the floor went in the wrong direction, taking authorizing of charters away from the local school board. Another bill would stack the appeal board in favor of charters. There was a bill to require "paid for by tax dollars." Another regarding teacher evaluation adding charter schools also failed. 3 specific proposals coming up to equalize public and charter schools.

Mike Schlossberg, State Representative, 132nd District (7 mins.)

We are lucky in the Lehigh Valley. Most of our charter schools are good. Most of the charter problems are in Phila., and they drive the conversation. Cyber charters are a major problem. Pa has high property taxes, 6th in nation, but concentrated in impoverished or rapidly growing school districts, go west and property taxes are fine. Can't eliminate property taxes but can control, rebates, for instance. Property taxes are the only things major corporations pay. Poverty going up in suburban as well as urban areas. Lack of education funding is the key. Important as funding is it isn't enough. If kids don't go home to a safe environment, it's a waste. Need wrap-around programs.