

The charter school perspective

The Bethlehem Gadfly Charter Schools, Education, Serious Issues September 3, 2019

(28th in a series on Education and Charter Schools)

Jeff Piccola, “Your View by a former state senator: Why Pennsylvania needs its 180-plus charter schools.” Morning Call, August 28, 2019.

James Hanak, “Why it can be misleading to call charter schools ‘privately run’.” Morning Call, August 31, 2019.

Kevin Duffy, “Lehigh Valley Academy reveals plans for 3-story school in Bethlehem Township.” Morning Call, August 27, 2019.

Gadfly keeps thinking stories about charter schools have run their course.

Foiled again.

Gadfly has already told you that he hopes to visit our Charter Arts soon.

And finally he has access to statements from the charter school perspective.

In the third article linked above we have the latest on Lehigh Valley Academy’s building plans — which at some point, as Gadfly understands it, will have to get Bethlehem Area School District approval. LVA enrolls the most BASD students who attend charter schools.

You are aware that in Gadville we always want to know both sides of an issue.

Here are key points from the first two articles linked above that we should put alongside all that we have heard that is anti-charter, or at least all that we have heard about the budget aspects of charter schools:

- “[Charter schools] educate 7% of all public school students and *do so with 15% less taxpayer funding than traditional school districts.*”
- We should consider why “these students want to leave” traditional schools: “The regular public school is either failing, unsafe, not meeting the educational needs of the student, or all the above.”
- “The truth is Pennsylvania’s charter schools are serving a higher percentage of minority and low-income student populations and working with less financial support.”
- “The solution is and always has been educational choice.”
- The governor should be focusing on the bigger picture: “He continues to neglect the issues in our major cities.”
- The ills the governor wants to correct “rarely occur and, if they do, the charter school is shut down because those things are already provided for in the Charter School Law.”
- The governor should hold traditional schools accountable instead of “giving them more money and rewarding them for failure.”
- “Charter schools generally get students who are already performing at a low level because of the failing district school they came from.”
- The governor is trying to eliminate “teachers’ unions and the school board associations.”
- Charter schools are not private: “the sponsoring school district has oversight.”
- The charters are not easy to get from the sponsoring school district, and they are subject to evaluation and withdrawal at any time.

- “The local school district has complete control over whether to continue to provide funding for a charter school.”
- “All charter schools are public schools. They are just different kinds of public schools.”
- Charter schools are “accountable” to outside entities in ways that private schools are not.

We now have some specific counterpoint, and Gadfly invites conversation focused on these bullet points.

Jeff Piccola, “Your View by a former state senator: Why Pennsylvania needs its 180-plus charter schools.” Morning Call, August 28, 2019.

The headline in the print edition was “Pennsylvania charter schools provide a needed alternative.”

Gov. Wolf recently proposed a series of so-called reforms to the Charter School Law. He asserted that Pennsylvania’s Charter School Law is one of the worst in the nation.

If you look at the law from the perspective of high cost and failing school districts, he may be right. Charter schools, which are public schools, educate 7% of all public school students and do so with 15% less taxpayer funding than traditional school districts.

The question is: Why do these students want to leave? The answer is simple and can be simply stated by every parent who chooses to send their child to a charter school. The regular public school is either failing,

unsafe, not meeting the educational needs of the student, or all the above.

Even many of our so-called “good” school districts are not meeting the needs of all their students. The truth is Pennsylvania’s charter schools are serving a higher percentage of minority and low-income student populations and working with less financial support.

The solution is and always has been educational choice. Unfortunately, until the late 1990s, the only alternatives to traditional school districts were expensive private or parochial schools, or home schooling.

These laws unleashed a tremendous wave of entrepreneurial effort that has resulted in over 180 charter schools in Pennsylvania The demand for choice in education is great. Over 135,000 students attend a charter school in Pennsylvania.

The governor says he is wants to limit enrollment in charter schools as well as put a moratorium on new cybercharter schools. However, while the governor’s sole focus is on charter schools, he continues to neglect the issues in our major cities.

Due to their abysmal performance as well as several other issues such as safety, these districts are experiencing a mass exodus of students whose families are opting for charter schools instead.

The governor also wants to hold charter schools to the same transparency, conflict of interest and discrimination standards that supposedly apply to all traditional public schools. I have been in and around charter schools for over 20 years, and the things the governor alleges rarely occur and, if they do, the charter school is shut down because those things are already provided for in the Charter School Law.

Incidentally, that is the great thing about charter schools. They are market driven and if they are not meeting the needs of the families they support, they go out of business, as they are being held accountable by parents, school districts and the Pennsylvania Department of Education. A traditional public school operating under the same low standards simply cites the lack of money as the cause for their issues and ask you, the taxpayer, to pay more in taxes while blaming their financial woes on charter schools.

The question that needs to be asked is what is this governor willing to do to hold the traditional public schools accountable. They educate 93% of public school students in the state, and have a disastrous record with regard to accountability. He is giving them more money and rewarding them for failure.

One thing you must remember is charter schools generally get students who are already performing at a low level because of the failing district school they came from. What you must look at is the academic growth of each student, each year, and note their progress toward achieving at the proper grade level.

The governor attacks charter schools and makes allegations about deficiencies in the law in order to set up a straw man so he can severely limit or eliminate charter schools. His political friends in the teachers' unions and the school board associations hate charter schools because they hate competition.

James Hanak, "Why it can be misleading to call charter schools 'privately run'." Morning Call, August 31, 2019.

Charter schools are public schools that not only receive public funding, but these same schools are not truly private as a true "private school" would be.

Private schools are totally independent of the public school system when it comes to the running of that school — even though private schools may receive some funding from the state for curriculum and busing (for example).

A private school has its own board of directors that make all the financial decisions of the private school. The state has the authority to see that private schools are not acting illegally but the running of the school is left up to the private school board.

A charter school board of directors has the authority to run the day-to-day operations of a charter school. The local school district, however, has oversight responsibilities for the charter school. The local school district evaluates the application for a charter and grants the charter to the school. The initial charter and each renewal lists the charter school's board of directors.

The charter that is granted by the school district is not easy to obtain. Those who create the charter application must demonstrate they have the expertise and the community support to run a fully accredited public school.

At any time, the school district may evaluate the charter school's annual report or ask for additional reports/information from the charter school that can be used to evaluate whether the charter school is functioning properly. At any time, the school district may revoke the original charter or any renewal of the charter.

The local school district has complete control over whether to continue to provide funding for a charter school. Because the local school district has the authority to oversee the operation(s) of the charter, forcing it to fulfill the terms of the charter, stop doing anything that might be illegal

and shut the charter school down if necessary, the charter school is not a “private” school.

All charter schools are public schools. They are just different kinds of public schools. Instead of being accountable to the general public through a publicly elected school board, they are accountable to their own independent school board, the local school district school board and to the parents of their school who can “vote” with their feet if the charter school is not meeting their family needs. This is very different from being a “privately run” school.

Kevin Duffy, “Lehigh Valley Academy reveals plans for 3-story school in Bethlehem Township.” Morning Call, August 27, 2019.

Here’s what seems to be the rub at our local level: money.

Plans for the size and scope of a proposed new Lehigh Valley Academy Regional Charter School in Bethlehem Township have begun to take shape.

LVA’s sketch plan presentation to the township Planning Commission on Monday calls for a three-story, 200,000-square-foot building with 476 parking spaces and enough parking for 35 buses, said Terry DeGroot of Terraform Engineering.