

Further conversation on the “Charter School Perspective” post

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(29th in a series on Education and Charter Schools)

Karen Beck Pooley is a Professor of Practice of Political Science at Lehigh University, where she directs the Environmental Policy Master’s Program. She also serves as a Senior Associate at czb LLC (an urban planning and neighborhood development consulting firm), and is a member of the Bethlehem Area School District (BASD) School Board and BASD Proud Parents.

Gadfly:

Here are some replies to your invitation for conversation focused on the bullet points in your previous [“Charter School perspective”](#) post:

- “[Charter schools] educate 7% of all public school students and do so with 15% less taxpayer funding than traditional school districts.”

I’m unclear where these numbers come from. (I’ve seen similar statements made – sometimes stating 15%, sometimes 25%...) In the Bethlehem Area School District, local taxpayers will pay nearly \$31 million this school year in support of “school choice.” That’s the tuition bill we’ve budgeted given the number of students living within the district slated to attend charters. The district would spend well below that if those students returned to our schools – most could be

accommodated in existing classrooms staffed by existing teachers where furniture and electricity is already waiting (all those fixed costs the district is already paying even in these students' absence).

And this upcoming year is hardly an outlier – taxpayers have spent over \$20 million on school choice for the last five years, funding school choice to the tune of \$132.5 million.

School Year	Charter Tuition
2015-2016	\$21,622,269
2016-2017	\$23,320,498
2017-2018	\$27,115,979
2018-2019	\$29,688,464
2019-2020*	\$30,751,221
Combined	\$132,498,431

*Estimated figure.

This year was the first in a long time the district was able to balance its budget with a 0% tax increase. Gaps during these prior years, which ended up requiring tax increases, were all well below these charter school tuition figures. In other words, local school taxes would have held steady or even declined during this stretch if not for the burden of funding “school choice.”

- 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.”

In considering why students leave local public schools for charters, it’s important to consider the way public schools have been portrayed, and how these portrayals often differ dramatically from what’s going on in actual classrooms. (If you’re curious about what kind of education students receive in BASD, please don’t hesitate to visit one of our schools!) In our area just a few years ago, there was this controversy prompted by a mailer went out to attract students to a new local charter: https://www.lehighvalleylive.com/bethlehem/2016/08/why_worry_about_this_type_of_s.html.

- “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.”

Concerning findings about charters' role in resegregating students (<https://www.apnews.com/e9c25534dfd44851a5e56bd57454b4f5>). Also, other findings from the report quoted above (Stanford's Center for Research on Education Outcomes' *Charter School Performance in Pennsylvania 2019*) include:

The latest study shows that overall, students in Pennsylvania charter schools showed similar growth in reading compared to students at traditional public schools while lagging behind in math and losing the equivalent of about 30 days of learning time...

“The evidence shows that Pennsylvania has substantial numbers of under-performing charter schools,” the report authors wrote. “To be clear, the proportion of sub-par charter schools has declined since our 2011 Pennsylvania study. However, with nearly one-quarter of the schools lagging in reading and one-third in math, the collective impact on students' academic careers and later life outcomes remains of deep concern.”

The study found “overwhelmingly negative” results from cyber charter schools which require “urgent attention” from education leaders and lawmakers, the report said.

(<https://www.post-gazette.com/news/education/2019/06/04/Pennsylvania-charter-schools-cyber-students-CREDO/stories/201906040110>.)

- 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.

Let's be clear how much "oversight" a school district and local school board has. . . . Once a charter is approved, that charter (and charter school) is not reviewed again for five years. (That means a charter school would be reviewed just twice as a student moves from kindergarten to high school graduation.) Our district takes these reviews seriously – going over materials provided by the charter school; sending a contingent of administrators, educators, and board members to visit the charters to see programming in action; and debating what we're seeing at multiple public meetings.

What we can do with all this is incredibly limited: when we see problems, our only recourse is to propose adjustments to the school's charter or propose rescinding it entirely. That decision, though, will inevitably get kicked over to the Commonwealth's Charter Appeals Board (CAB). Looking at that board, the 5 current members were all appointed by Governor Corbett and are all serving long past the end-date of their initial term. (These terms ended as recently as June 2018 and as far back as June 2015). What's more, 3 of these 5 members have direct ties to charter schools – as a teacher, parent, or spouse of an administrator. The member filling CAB's "school board member" position was voted off his local school board. As a result, *none* are directly affiliated with or bringing the perspective of traditional public schools to Charter Appeals Board deliberations, which is why districts' requests are typically denied.

And this is only for brick-and-mortar charters. Cyber charters, which have an abysmal record with student success, are reviewed by Pennsylvania's Department of Education (*not* by the districts). Most of these schools have not been reviewed for well over five years and are technically operating with expired charters (<https://www.inquirer.com/news/cyber-charter-schools-pennsylvania-20190114.html>).

Karen

