



Kentuckians for Science Education

Strong Science for a Strong Tomorrow

ky4sci@gmail.com
kysci.ed.wordpress.com

Kentuckians for Science Education (KSE) is a non-profit non-partisan group of citizens dedicated to ensuring that our Commonwealth maintains high quality science education.

The Impact of Charter Schools on Academic Achievement

Policy Statement

Overview

Two pieces of legislation have been introduced into the Kentucky State Legislature that would create a program to fund charter schools (HB 149, SB 25). As hybrids of public and private schools, charter schools are funded through a voucher program that allows parents to redirect the funds for their children from public schools to pre-approved private schools. Though charter schools must comply with federal civil rights laws and regulations, they are exempt from many of the state and local regulations governing public schools, allowing more autonomy in methods and curricula. Advocates of charter programs claim that they provide free alternatives for underperforming students as well as improve student outcomes.

However, **the evidence available does not conclude that charter schools increase student achievement.** On the contrary, the lack of accountability with regards to student outcomes has resulted in high variability in program quality, and most charter schools have poorer student outcomes than what is found in their respective public schools. **Those that do demonstrate increased student success are those with rigorous academic structure and high standards of accountability.** Additionally, the lack of transparency with regard to a particular school's educational outcomes results in a false choice scenario, in which parents and students lack the information necessary to make informed choices. Finally, charter school success is demonstrated most often for underserved, minority students in urban areas. The parents of these students are often overworked and lack the time and resources necessary to investigate school choice options, even assuming eligible schools are available in their area. This dynamic creates a self-selection bias that results in the students who would most benefit from these programs being unable to access them.

For these reasons, **Kentuckians for Science Education (KSE) is opposed to the implementation of the Education Opportunity Account program proposed in HB149 and SB25.** Section 11 explicitly states that the education service providers will not be required to meet any standards regarding student outcomes or academic achievements, nor will they be required to report their student outcomes to either the state or to parents and students. Additionally, there are no provisions for prioritizing and recruiting students best served by charter programs except for income level (Section 2).

In sum, the program as proposed neither provides parents with a true choice with regards to their child's education, nor is it designed in such a way to maximize student achievement. Instead of this program, KSE recommends investment in voucher programs with rigorous academic structure in urban populations, or in programs that can increase the variation of school-related options while also enhancing student performance. These include, but are not limited to, support for preschool and after-school programs, tutoring support, and nutrition and wellness programs.

Charter Schools and Educational Outcomes

Voucher programs and charter schools often begin out of a desire to increase school choice under the assumption that increased competition increases quality by increasing incentives for high achievement¹. However, charter school success is highly variable, with significant and substantial differences from school to school and with no consistent pattern that indicates improved academic performance^{1 2}. Many charter school advocates argue that the average outcome of charter schools - whether it be test score, college admission, or later earnings - is comparable with that of public education. However, the “average” program is far from the “typical” one; most charter schools underperform. The rare high-performing charter schools are marked by a disciplined approach to academics, substantially more instruction time, and rigorous curriculum¹. However, they are not indicative of charter schools on the whole and should not be presented as such.

Some of the positive student outcomes that have been seen may be less related to the choice of school and more related to parental involvement. There is a strong link between a student’s academic achievement and parental engagement, and parents who are more able to invest in their child’s education may also be more likely to take the initiative to investigate charter programs. This results in disadvantaged students concentrated in the public school system¹. Therefore, any comparisons in outcomes between charter school and public school performance may be due to this self-selection bias.

Unfortunately, this bias results in the students who would benefit the most from charter schools being unable to access them. Low-income minority students from urban areas show the greatest success in charter schools, though they are disproportionately unrepresented in them compared to the local public schools¹, a trend that furthers school, social, and workforce segregation³.

Charter Schools and Economic Feasibility

At first glance, charter schools appear to be a more economically feasible option as they generally require less funding per student. However, comparing the costs of charter schools to public schools is far more complicated than per-student comparisons of state funding. In fact, taking all factors into consideration, economic analyses suggest that charter schools increase the cost of K-12 education by 25% or more¹.

There are several reasons for this. In addition to the heavy subsidization of charter schools by public schools¹, the funding formulas for charter schools vary widely, with some taxpayers carrying disproportionate tax burdens³. Additionally, charter schools have access to many funding streams. Depending on the regulations, this can include local, state, and federal government; initiative-based funding (e.g. class-size initiatives); and private and religious organizations. Because these funding sources must be sought out separately, efforts to secure this funding takes substantial time and energy from the school³, thereby helping to negate one of the benefits of charter schools, which is less administration and bureaucracy and more time to focus on educational activities¹.

¹ The Committee for Economic Development of The Conference Board (2018). Charting a Path Forward for Charter Schools: A Policy Brief by the Committee for Economic Development of The Conference Board. Center for Economic Development <https://www.ced.org/reports/a-path-forward-for-charter-schools>

² Wixom, M.A. (2017) Voucher Programs: Policy Analysis. Education Commission of the United States. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED574527.pdf>

³ Carnoy, M. (2017) School vouchers are not a proven strategy for improving student achievement. Economic Policy Institute <http://www.epi.org/publication/school-vouchers-are-not-a-proven-strategy-for-improving-student-achievement/>.

Key Components of Effective Charter Schools

The high degree of variability in charter school success has allowed researchers to identify the attributes that are unique to successful charter schools. These attributes include those with highly disciplined codes of behavior, increased time for educational instruction, and a high priority on academic achievement¹.

A fourth attribute has been identified as a crucial component: accountability. A review of voucher programs shows that the lack of accountability in charter schools results in a failure to improve both individual student achievement and school district performance and is associated with high attrition rates. One case study is particularly striking. The voucher program in Milwaukee is one of the most popularly cited examples of a successful charter school. However, the gains demonstrated in this program were only demonstrated *after* strong measures of accountability were implemented by the state legislature³. Other reports point to mismanagement and exclusionary practices in charter schools that go uncorrected due to the lack of regulations and transparency¹. A 2014 report on Ohio's charter schools indicated that over 40% of the schools are in "urgent need of improvement."¹

The argument that charter schools increase school quality because of an increase in competition hinges upon parents, guardians, and students being able to make informed choices. This includes ensuring that a program's success is measured using the same metrics as other available options and that all information is easily accessible. That advocates of voucher programs have, at times, opposed data collection, transparency, and independent educational evaluations⁴ is worrisome.

Recommendations

Not only is there no evidence that charter schools in general improve academic achievement, the high degree of variability and lack of accountability present in many charter schools presents itself as a significant harm to the education and success of students. Therefore, Kentuckians for Science Education (KSE) strongly recommends against implementing this program as proposed. If charter schools are implemented, KSE urges the creation of strong measures of accountability, transparency, and quality control. Charter schools must be held to the same level of accountability as other programs and should work in close relationships with local and state governments in addition to the charter school authorizers.

Additionally, because minority, low-income students, and low achieving students in urban areas have had the greatest success in charter programs, we urge the legislation to prioritize placing charter schools in these locations with the express directive to serve these populations. We also urge the implementation of methods that would recruit students based on eligibility as opposed to waiting for applications from already-motivated parents, thus avoiding the self-selection bias that further disadvantages these students.

Finally, regardless of the implementation of a voucher program, we urge the legislation to support other choice-based programs that are strongly linked to academic achievement. Expanded access to preschool, afterschool, and summer programs as well as health, nutrition, and wellness programs³; intensive tutoring programs¹; investments into school counselors; pre-service training for educators; and schools with high standards for math, science, and reading are all highly effective low-cost ways of improving academic success³ while offering both parents and students a wide range of education-related choices.

⁴ Herzenberg, S. (2011) No Accountability: Pennsylvania's Track Record Using Taxpayer Dollars to Pay for Private and Religious School Tuition <http://keystoneresearch.org/EITC-accountability>