



S.C.P.C.
1323 PENDLETON ST. COLUMBIA, SC 29201
P 803 779 5022
F 803 779 4953
SCPPolicyCouncil.com

OUR MISSION
is to educate members and all South Carolinians about state and local public policy based on the traditional South Carolina values of individual liberty and responsibility, free enterprise and limited government.

Charter Schools and the Road to Reform

Why Public School Choice Isn't Enough

By Neil Mellen

Charter schools in South Carolina, and across the nation, have shown that autonomy and innovation can lead to dramatic results. Nationally, students in charter schools mirror their public school peers in demographic background but consistently outperform them in academic indicators. The unique status of these schools allows some experimentation, but is still limited by intrusive government oversight. The schools face resistance from the very institutional structure they were designed to complement. Revisions in South Carolina's Charter School Act can free these schools to further excel, but this effort should not draw attention from the larger lesson of their success: competition and innovation improves all schools.

EDUCATION'S TRUE REFORM

By all measures charter schools across the country are pleasing their most important constituents. Parental satisfaction is robustly higher than in the public schools.ⁱ Student satisfaction, ranked by likelihood of recommendation to a peer, is very high.ⁱⁱ Teacher satisfaction ratings for charter schools are well above those in public schools.ⁱⁱⁱ

The satisfaction is justified. Academically, charter school students outperform students in regular public schools. This is true when comparing charters to the nearest regular schools, and those schools with the most similar racial composition.^{iv}

Effective charter schools can even facilitate success in other schools. A study in Texas discovered that charter schools had “a positive impact on student performance – at least in terms of test score – for students remaining in traditional public schools.”^v Researchers in North Carolina reached the same conclusion. They identified “a considerable return to school choice” as there was a clear “increase in achievement when a traditional school faces competition from a charter school.”^{vi}

INHERENT LIMITS OF CHARTER SCHOOLS

Certainly the national experience with charter schools in the last decade has been a positive one. What is holding the charter schools back in South Carolina? How might they achieve even greater success?



The limited autonomy that makes charter schools unique can be a double edged sword. Because charter schools are still affiliated with the public school system, the ability to provide innovative educational alternatives is perpetually threatened by the degree of oversight required. Charter schools find themselves engaged in an unending battle against the very bureaucracy under which they operate.^{vii}

The over-dependence on government oversight leads to a funding cycle that is rarely based on achieving results in the classroom. Studies show that the few charter schools that have closed “suffered primarily from managerial and fiscal problems, not inadequate student achievement.”^{viii} This seems to be the predictable result of an oversight system that is “often focused more on compliance and financial stability than on student performance.”^{ix} In a true choice scenario, academically successful schools would have the option to adjust tuition or radically alter their business model. Such opportunities are not afforded to charter schools.

The lack of independence in reporting and evaluation is an example. Specific feedback on charter schools is essential, but rare. This is particularly true in light of the “highly polarized context in which many reforms are being implemented.”^x

South Carolina was singled out in a 2001 study, not for lacking a rigorous reporting system, but for having no evaluation at all (the State’s first and only report was released in 2002, three years after the schools began).^{xi} Indeed there seems to be little incentive for public school officials at either the state or district level to provide objective analysis. In South Carolina the local district’s hesitancy seems to “center around the fact that the charter school is a competitor that has the potential to make the regular district look less appealing to the public.”^{xii}

THE ROAD TO REAL CHOICE

Despite the wariness of traditional school officials, charter schools have performed well, and have served as examples of the value of innovation and choice.

In practice the charter school experience has dispelled many common myths about school choice. Charter schools have not catered to elite students, nor have they resulted in ethnic segregation. Nationwide, charter schools have student demographics similar to their neighboring traditional schools, and in many cases they are home to greater percentages of minority and Title I children.^{xiii} The physically challenged have not been left behind either. Both able and challenged students “receive more individualized attention than they did at



their previous school.”^{xiv} Charter schools have not “skimmed” the best students from their adjacent public schools either.^{xv}

Critics of choice, both public and private, voiced fear about lower standards for teachers. Rates of accreditation have been cited. Charter schools do in fact attract more non-certified teachers, as well as teachers with less formal experience, but this sample of teachers has still produced higher achievement among students than is experienced by their public school peers, demonstrating that traditional gauges of teacher readiness may be less significant than commonly assumed.^{xvi}

Charter schools have also debunked funding myths. For decades private schools have operated, and thrived, spending far less per pupil than the public schools. Critics assume that higher charter school outcomes are correlated with greater spending, but in fact “the per pupil allocation charter schools receive for operating expenses is often somewhat less than regular public schools receive.”^{xvii} More importantly, charter schools “almost always receive significantly less money than regular schools – or no money at all – to cover capital costs such as construction and maintenance.”^{xviii}

CHARTER SCHOOL STATUS IN SOUTH CAROLINA

What about the Palmetto State – do South Carolina’s charter schools mirror the successes found in other states? They do. During the 2005-06 school year there were 27 charter schools operating in South Carolina.^{xix} They serve 5,213 students, ranging from kindergarten through 12th grade. While several of the high schools serve specialized populations which make generalizations difficult, on the whole the evidence of success is clear.

In South Carolina these schools have lower student to teacher ratios, as well as lower teacher salaries, than traditional public schools.^{xx} Charter school pupil attendance is comparable, and teacher attendance is higher. Parental participation in teacher conferences is higher, and the number of children suspended or expelled from these schools is far below the state average. Initial PACT scores show that the charter schools are “providing at least comparable, if not better, education in mathematics and English/language arts as other similar elementary schools.”^{xxi}

The bulk of South Carolina charter high schools serve special populations. While this makes apples-to-apples comparisons with other high schools more difficult, these schools are still serving their populations more effectively than the standard district schools. For example, Greenville Technical Charter is home to “students



belonging to historically underachieving groups.” The school’s students still outperform similarly challenged peers in both the exit exam and graduation rate.^{xxii} They also outperformed the statewide average.

South Carolina’s charter schools are performing well, but like all charter schools nationally, they are limited by the same systems which they should be improving.

FLAWS IN SOUTH CAROLINA’S CHARTER SCHOOLS

Some have declared South Carolina’s current charter school law to be “strong” for allowing autonomy and promoting innovation, that assumption is false.^{xxiii} The Act’s provision for granting charters by local school boards, as well as the ability for the State Department of Education to overrule these decisions, provides for two tiers of entanglement. South Carolina’s charter schools often find themselves at odds with the system for which they should be serving as a laboratory of change.

Since the 1996 passing of the original Charter School Act there have been many revisions. Most changes have complicated the process of creating and running an effective charter school through expansion the bureaucratic processes.

Laws attempting to force the success of charter schools on all districts have failed to promote real improvement. Such mandates undermine the basic intent of initiative and choice-driven incentives that distinguish charter schools from the traditional public system.^{xxiv} Loosening racial quotas has provided slightly more freedom than was allowed in the original act, but ignores the fact that nationwide charter school populations tend to mirror local schools even without regulation.^{xxv} Such restriction can inhibit schools from serving greater numbers of minority students because they constitute a barrier to establishing new charters in areas with a limited numbers of non-minority pupils. Another revision to the Act, the introduction of state level advisory committee to provide an initial review of applications, created a third layer of red tape in the approval process.^{xxvi}

CONCLUSION

Refinement of charter school law in South Carolina can improve the way these schools work, but should not supplant the emergence of real school choice. Charter schools have demonstrated their ability to provide equity in education and surpass adequacy in results. While success and satisfaction for charter schools are high nationwide, it is not clear that the South Carolina charter schools are meeting their main objective to serve as opportunities for statewide innovation and options.



South Carolina's public schools remain among the worst in the nation, and the handful of charter schools add up to little more than a small scale distraction. Expanding the Charter School Act can further free these special schools from intrusive government regulation. This will help build upon charter school success, but these institutions will remain handicapped until a true public and private choice model is embraced. Only increasing competition among all schools will lead to more competitive graduates.

About the South Carolina Policy Council and the author:

Nothing in the foregoing should be construed as an attempt to aid or hinder passage of any legislation. Copyright 2005. South Carolina Policy Council Education Foundation, 1323 Pendleton Street, Columbia, South Carolina 29201. Visit the Policy Council online at www.scpolicycouncil.com.

Neil Mellen is the Research Director of the South Carolina Policy Council. He is a graduate of the Virginia Military Institute and a former English teacher. Mr. Mellen served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Micronesia where he created rural libraries.

ⁱ Gill B.P. "Rhetoric Versus Reality: What We Know and What We Need to Know About Vouchers and Charter Schools." RAND Corporation, 2001.
ⁱⁱ Horn, J. et al "First Annual Report of the Evaluation of the Charter Schools and the Charter School Initiative in the State of Connecticut." Evaluation Center, Western Michigan University, 1998.
ⁱⁱⁱ Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement. "Minnesota Charter Schools Evaluation." University of Minnesota, 1998.
^{iv} Hoxby, Caroline. "A Straightforward Comparison of Charter Schools and Regular Schools in the United States." Harvard University and National Bureau of Economic Research, September 2004.
^v Booker, Kevin. Et al. "The Effect of Charter Schools on Traditional Public School Students in Texas: Are Children Who Stay Behind Left Behind?" September 2005.
^{vi} Holmes, George. Et al "Does School Choice Increase School Quality?" Department of Economics, East Carolina University, and National Bureau of Economic Research. March 2004.
^{vii} Bulkley, Katrina, et al. "A Decade of Charter Schools: From Theory to Practice." Policy Brief, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania, April 2002.
^{viii} Ibid Bulkley
^{ix} Ibid Bulkley
^x Miron, Gary et al. "Student Academic Achievement in Charter Schools: What We Know and Why We Know So Little." The Evaluation Center, Western Michigan University, December 2001.
^{xi} Ibid Miron
^{xii} Rogers, Weaver. "South Carolina Charter Schools: Five-Year Evaluation Report." Submitted to the South Carolina Department of Education, July 2002.
^{xiii} RPP International. Challenge and Opportunity: "The Impact of Charter Schools on School Districts." Office of Educational Research and Improvement, US Department of Education, 2001. also RPP International. "The State of Charter Schools, Third Year Report: National Study of Charter Schools." Office of Educational Research and Improvement, US Department of Education, 1999
^{xiv} Fiore, Harwell et al. "Charter Schools and Students with Disabilities." Office of Educational Research and Improvement, US Department of Education, 2000.
^{xv} Fuller, B. "The Public Square, Big or Small? Charter Schools in Political Context." *Inside Charter Schools: The Paradox of Radical Decentralization*. Harvard University Press, 2000.
^{xvi} RPP International. "The State of Charter Schools, Third Year Report: National Study of Charter Schools." Office of Educational Research and Improvement, US Department of Education, 1999.
^{xvii} Greene, Jay. "Apples to Apples: An Evaluation of Charter Schools Serving General Student Populations." Center for Civic Innovation, Manhattan Institute. July 2003.
^{xviii} Ibid Greene
^{xix} "South Carolina Charter School (Composite) 2005-06. South Carolina State Department of Education, January 20, 2006.
^{xx} Rogers, Weaver. "South Carolina Charter Schools: Five-Year Evaluation Report." Submitted to the South Carolina Department of Education, July 2002.
^{xxi} Ibid Rogers
^{xxii} "Greenville Technical Charter Annual School Report Card 2005" Compare HSAP initial pass rate of 94.0 to "High Schools with Students Like Ours" of 87.4, and graduation rate of 96.3% to 88.5%.
^{xxiii} "South Carolina Charter School Law Among Nation's Strongest." State Department of Education Press Release, 1996.
^{xxiv} Senate Bill 727 from the 1999 Secession mandated the creation of at least one alternative school per district.
^{xxv} Senate Bill 12, from the 2001-2002 Secession was contested, but held as constitutional by the State Supreme Court.
^{xxvi} Ibid SB 12

