



THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of April 30-May 4, 2012

Charter as Models and Obstacles for Public Education

by UCLA IDEA

Twenty years ago charter schools were created to introduce innovation in teaching methods, in staffing, in school funding and in school organization in order to improve students' learning. It was hoped that, by operating outside the established district structures, which charter advocates portrayed as inefficient and stifling innovation, charters would develop successful practices that could be used as models for non-chartered, public schools.

There is no question that the charter movement has grown: today, there are almost 1,000 charters enrolling more than 360,000 students in California. And just this week two dozen elementary and middle schools in the San Fernando Valley requested to become affiliated charters in the Los Angeles Unified School District—in part so that they can capture an additional \$385 per student in state block grant funds.

But how has the charter experiment played out? Have charters generated realistic examples for districts seeking to serve all students well; or are they obstacles to that all-important goal; or both? Charters continue to raise difficult questions as witnessed by the move of schools in San Fernando Valley as well as several other news stories that have surfaced recently.

Districts provide public oversight of many charters, but is that oversight timely, adequate, and well-enough resourced?

In Los Angeles, board members issued a notice of violation to the Birmingham Community Charter High School, the first of three steps in revoking a charter. The school must respond to allegations that it mishandled school admission and discipline issues. The board members are concerned about the lack of communication between the district and school. Last month, Oakland district officials considered not renewing the high-scoring American Indian Charter School's charter for fiscal mismanagement.

Are gains for charters losses for traditional public schools?

Proposition 39 granted charter schools access to unused space in local school districts. Known as co-location, a charter school would operate out of the empty classrooms on public school. Sometimes shifting enrollments and other factors result in charters occupying space that is not actually "empty." Los Angeles students at a Silver Lake elementary school would have its bilingual kindergarten curtailed if a co-located charter gets the space. A Bay Area charter competed for space until it reluctantly agreed to split up its k-8 program onto two separate campuses. Teachers at Franklin High School protested a proposed charter co-location that would limit student access to libraries and the gym, and further burden administrator. These incidents point to an emerging tension as charters, which have positioned themselves as rivals to local public schools, now seek to forge partnerships.

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Page 2

Do charters provide better educational opportunities with comparable amounts of money?

A new report published by the National Education Policy Center points to inconsistent funding and successes across the country, with the unsurprising finding that the more successful charters outspend neighborhood public schools. Charters receive both public and private funds and sometimes, as in California, separate grants from the state. Federal programs, like Race to the Top, are also directing more resources to charters. According to the report, "Spending by the Major Charter Management Organizations," with limited pools of private/public funds that schools can draw upon, claims of charters' superior results should be balanced by their funding advantages. Perhaps, in many cases, it's not the innovation, but the money that makes the biggest difference.

California and LAUSD (with more charters than any district in the nation) must stop treating charters as fragile experimental sites. If charters are going to be permanent features in our education landscape, all public schools must have access to comparable resources and oversight.

"I don't think anyone foresaw that they would be a substantial proportion of your overall system of public education," Rogers said. "And now we're reaching that point and our structure of policies doesn't really have the regulations in place to deal with this new reality."

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