



ON THE MONEY:

Can Charter Schools do More with Less?

Debates over public education often hinge on one basic question: how much should we spend? Some say we spend too much on education, and others say we spend too little. The debate is hard to resolve, because quality public education has become very expensive but remains essential to America's future.

Lost in this debate is an idea anyone who's ever owned a business understands well: value. Rather than arguing about how much to spend, can we get more out of the public education dollars we do spend? Can we get innovative classrooms, smaller class sizes, and a broad range of schools that deliver high-quality instruction, all without breaking the bank?

Experience with charter schools is suggesting that the answer is yes. In the Pittsburgh area, charter schools—autonomous public schools run by non-profit boards—spend about 25 percent less per pupil than the local school districts from which their students come. For example, in 2007-2008, city charter schools spent an average of \$14,565 per pupil, while the Pittsburgh Public Schools spent \$20,214. True, the school district is still responsible for transporting charter school students, but even when you subtract this cost, charter schools' spending is still significantly lower.

Charter schools provide an array of options for parents – from an African-American history-based curriculum at the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh Charter School, to the outdoor education emphasis offered by the Environmental Charter School at Frick Park, to the career preparatory instruction at Career Connections Charter School, to every student having a laptop at City Charter High School.

These schools accomplish all this while expending significantly less money per student. We could analyze various reasons for their efficiency, but the simplest explanation is that they have less money at their disposal. Charter schools receive money according to a legislatively mandated formula that requires that only part of the money that would be used to educate a child in a district run school follow the child to the charter school. **The result: charter schools have less to work with—generally between 70 and 80 percent of the district's per-pupil costs.**

As a result, charter school directors have become very good at controlling costs and wringing the most out of their budgets, without sacrificing quality of instruction. Charter schools often lease their buildings, lowering long-term capital costs. When feasible, they enter into creative partnerships with other schools and nearby organizations—for example, to share or lease gym facilities, as City Charter High School does with the Downtown YMCA. These decisions are borne of necessity, but they lay at the heart of why charter schools can offer robust educational opportunities at a lower cost than conventional school districts.

In an ideal world, of course, all schools would have unlimited funding options. But with current economic realities, schools must operate in as fiscally responsible a manner as possible. Yes, education costs money. But, as charter schools are proving, fiscal responsibility and educational quality and innovation don't have to be mutually exclusive.

This series is brought to you by a consortium of Allegheny County charter schools.



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