



# THE RIPPLE EFFECT

*Charters are impacting the way  
local school districts teach kids—for the better*

Competition drives American business. The threat of being beaten by the competition causes businesses to work harder and to improve their products. If one company develops an edge in the market—say, by offering a new product—a ripple effect typically results as competitors quickly try to catch up, often by imitating the trend-setter.

The same basic principle applies to public education. Until 1998, Pennsylvania school districts were a monopoly with no public-sector competition. Since then more than 100 charter schools—that is, independent public schools that can compete with local school districts—have opened in Pennsylvania, including 11 in the Pittsburgh area. Charter schools now enroll about 3,500 students locally and 1.5 million students nationally. It is beginning to appear that the competition charter schools have created is having a ripple effect on district run public education programs.

Nationally, charter schools have taken the lead in adopting educational reforms like longer school days, school uniforms, innovative curricula and foreign language immersion. In response to this competition, school districts are working harder to improve their own performance. In Arizona and Michigan, states with large numbers of charter schools, local school districts that compete directly with charters show higher test scores than those with no competition. In one study, one-quarter of public school district administrators indicated that they have increased their own emphasis on innovation as a direct result of competition from charters.

Competition from charters has had an impact locally as well. As Propel Schools moved forward with plans for a second charter in Woodland Hills, that district opened an “academy” of its own for K-6 students. Students at the Woodland Hills Academy wear uniforms, have an extended school day and school year, and have extensive opportunities to engage with technology from an early age. All of these are part of the program in place at Propel’s charter schools.

The Pittsburgh Public Schools have also responded to the arrival of charters, particularly in their high schools. Last year the district was awarded a \$40 million Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation grant to improve the way it recruits, trains, and rewards teachers. Part of the proposal discussed their high school initiative where PPS is considering trimester scheduling, longer school days, smaller school size (500-600) and looping (keeping cohorts of students with the same teaching team). All of these ideas have been implemented successfully (over the last eight years) at City Charter High School in downtown Pittsburgh.

Regardless of where a child goes to school, one thing is clear: their chance of receiving a quality education increases if schools are competing for their enrollment. A school district motivated to keep its students will try harder to succeed, and that is a good thing for kids. Clearly the introduction of public charter schools has contributed significantly to U.S. educational quality, and we should continue to support and enhance charter school development in the years ahead.

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



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