



CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE EDUCATION REFORM

Question: What education reform is providing a popular public-school alternative for thousands of Allegheny County families and directly improving student achievement? Answer: charter schools.

The report card for charters in the Pittsburgh area is decidedly upbeat. Charter schools remain extremely popular; the 11 charters in Allegheny County enroll a total of 3,500 students, with nearly 2,500 more on their waiting lists.

Charters have upheld their promise of putting innovation into classrooms and providing quality education to students. In Allegheny County, economically disadvantaged students in charter schools outperformed their counterparts in the Pittsburgh Public Schools by 10 percent in both reading and math scores, according to recent figures from the Pennsylvania Department of Education. They do this on a relative shoestring, spending approximately 80 cents for every dollar per pupil spent in local school districts. So it's not surprising that charters are gaining wide acceptance among parents, teachers, lawmakers, and foundations.

But getting everyone on board with charters remains a work in progress. School districts, teacher unions, and other pillars of the education establishment often maintain an adversarial stance toward these innovative schools. They claim (usually with no supporting evidence) that charters undermine school districts by peeling away the top tier of students away from district-run schools. Their opposition can stunt or delay charter school expansion, because state law dictates that local districts oversee the very charter schools they compete with—an arrangement akin to letting McDonald's regulate Burger King.

Charter schools do indeed compete with local school districts for students, but this isn't necessarily a bad thing. Research shows that students in communities

with school options fare better than those without them. Locally, we have seen the Pittsburgh, Woodland Hills, and Steel Valley school districts all take steps to improve their programs in response to competition from charter schools. This is good news for all students in these districts.

One area where charter schools have excelled is in encouraging innovation, partly because charter school principals generally have much more autonomy than their district counterparts. If they think a policy or curriculum can help their students, they can implement it without the challenge of unwinding miles of red tape.. Charter schools are kayaks; school districts are ocean liners.

According to a report by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, it is this freedom from bureaucracy that allows charters to perform at a high level. "Autonomy," the report states, "gives principals, school leaders and teachers authority to make decisions that directly enhance student achievement."

Many such innovations are flourishing at Pittsburgh-area charter schools. For example, some local charters use curricula centered on arts, the environment, or African-American history. Longer school days and years and increased use of technology to better track student performance are other changes implemented at local charters.

Continuing and expanding the charter school movement is a key to making school reform a reality in Western Pennsylvania. No longer are failing public schools the only game in town. Parents now have a choice, and students are the winners.

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



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