



MODEL BEHAVIOR

New York's aggressive approach to charters can work in Pittsburgh.

The Big Apple has some big ideas when it comes to education. In 2002, Mayor Michael Bloomberg took control of the city's failing school district, focusing on accountability—from administrators, principals, and teachers. A key element of the plan was an open door policy for charter schools.

While school districts around the country have opposed charter schools, the country's largest school district has embraced them.

"Choice makes it more likely that parents will find what they want for their children," says Joel Klein, New York's charter-friendly schools chancellor. "Competition creates better outcomes for children."

Charters are autonomous public schools run by their own non-profit board of directors, instead of local school boards. They were created in the 1990s as places for experimentation and innovation. New York's charters have become labs for learning what works in the classroom. There are charters for students with autism, a school for children in the foster care system, and a school where all teachers make six-figure salaries.

New York City's department of education has even helped charters acquire or lease school buildings, one of the most difficult undertakings of any new charter.

As a result, New York's charters have flourished. A whopping 43,000 students will be on charter school waiting lists this fall for a total of 8,000 seats. In Harlem alone, 14,000 students had applied for 2,700 open seats in charters this fall. These include schools like Promise Academy Charter School, part of Geoffrey Canada's award-winning Harlem Children Zone, where nearly all children score at or above grade level in reading and math.

Citywide, New York's charter school students outperform their counterparts in the city district schools by 8 points in math, and 9 points in reading.

Can our region learn from the New York experience? The 11 charters in Allegheny County have drawn more than 3,000 students, with waiting lists of almost 2,500. When given the opportunity for choice, local parents have jumped on board.

Yet local districts have been cool to the charter phenomenon. Pittsburgh Public Schools has made a habit of slowing or denying charter applications, even to worthy applicants. Until recently, the district refused to lease or sell empty schools to charters. Last November, Pittsburgh Public spurned a \$350,000 offer from a charter group for a vacant school in Hazelwood in favor of a \$15,000 bid from a church group.

Surrounding districts have done the same. Propel's high-achieving charter schools have all had their charters denied by local school boards, only to have won on appeal before a state review board in Harrisburg.

In defending a school board decision to deny a charter at the Hazelwood site, Pittsburgh superintendent Mark Roosevelt said: "[W]e are a district faced with declining enrollment and so we obviously are naturally worried about the pressure of competition."

New York City's experience has shown it need not be so. It's time for the region to turn the page. If school leaders are serious about the needs of children, charter schools should be the least of their worries.

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



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