



My Opinion

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Give charter schools room to grow

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Charter schools have been growing in popularity, but one influential voice has suggested that it's time to make changes -- changes that could strangle their growth.

Charter schools are public schools, free and open to all students. In a typical arrangement, they are able to operate without some of the usual bureaucratic rules that can stifle administrators and teachers alike. In exchange, they receive a contract -- a charter -- that sets out academic goals. The charter is reviewed every few years. Unlike other public schools, charter schools can be shut down if they do not perform.

As of October 2005, there were over 3,500 charter schools in 40 states, serving over 1 million students. But in a recent editorial, the New York Times called for more regulation of charter schools, saying that the current approach was "discredited."

Are charter schools discredited? Not if you ask parents who want to use them. According to the Center for Education Reform, charter school enrollment increases by over 10 percent each year. Right now, more than half a million children -- outnumbering the total K-12 enrollment in Kansas -- can't get in because of limited capacity. Maybe their parents don't appreciate the wisdom of the Times.

Charter schools can work

Charter schools, though still young, have some impressive results on their side. Two researchers, one from Harvard and another from Columbia University, found that students who enroll in charter elementary schools in Chicago have achieved significant gains in math and reading over similar students in regular schools.

Meanwhile, a researcher with the Brookings Institution found that test scores for schools receiving charters in 2000 were "rising sharply." Further, the gains made by charter schools exceeded those achieved by other public schools.

These accomplishments are even more impressive when you consider who enrolls in a typical charter school. Far from taking the best-performing students, charter schools often serve those who have been performing poorly elsewhere.

The benefits aren't only for the students who attend the charter schools. The theory of competition suggests that when regular public schools are forced to compete with charter schools, they will improve. In other words, the students who remain in regular public schools benefit as well.

Theory became practice in North Carolina. That state had no charter schools in 1996. By 2000, 1 percent of its students attended a charter school. In a paper written for the National Bureau of Economic Research, three scholars looked at districts that had a charter school within their boundaries. They found that the introduction of charter schools boosted the performance of all students in those districts by the equivalent of one quarter of a school year.

Even more remarkably, charter schools work at a financial disadvantage. Nationally, they get somewhere from 66 to 80 percent of what regular public schools get for each student. The federal government gives some grants for start-up expenses, but as a rule, charter schools receive no state or local money for buildings or other capital expenses.

Time for Kansas to unleash charters

Despite ongoing interest across the country, there aren't many charter schools in Kansas. Some people say that is because Kansans are satisfied with public schools as they are. Perhaps. But a more likely explanation is that Kansas has one of the country's most intimidating and restrictive charter school laws. The Center for Education Reform gives Kansas a "D" for its charter school law. Of the states that have a charter law, only two fare worse. Kansas suffers as a result, for as the Center observes, the states with higher grades on its report card have enjoyed more gains in student performance than the others.

Kansas gets low marks for allowing only the local school district to grant a charter. A state that also allows universities or the state board of education to grant charters will have more charter schools than one such as Kansas that does not.

Another weakness in Kansas law is that charter public schools have no legal or financial independence. Funding for charter schools is at the discretion of regular public schools. The national experience shows that for charter schools to be effective, they must be independent of local districts, and not subject to their veto.

Right now, charter schools in Kansas are being strangled. It's time to give them some room to grow by making changes to the restrictive charter school laws or eliminating them altogether.

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