



A Citizen’s Response to the President’s Charter School Education Proclamation: With a Profile of Two “Highly Performing” Charter School Organizations in Arizona

by Amanda U. Potterton – November 01, 2013

This article examines two Arizona-based charter school organizations, well known for their high academic rankings locally and nationally. In response to President Obama’s May 5th through May 11th 2013 “National Charter Schools Week” proclamation, and his call for the nation’s support of highly performing charter schools, the author analyzes the schools’ demographic profiles, using data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the Common Core of Data (CCD), and the Arizona Department of Education (ADE). The author also explores current public discourses surrounding the two charter school organizations. The findings are relevant and timely in light of Obama’s call to extend and replicate successful charter schools throughout the United States, because the results problematize the definition and nuances of charter school “success” by considering the study’s schools in relation to their underrepresentation of disadvantaged students. Based on evidence discovered in the study, the author provides relevant policy questions and suggestions for local, state, and federal education policymakers.

“America’s success in the 21st century depends on what we do today to reignite the true engine of our economic growth: a thriving middle class. Achieving that vision means making sure our education system provides ladders of opportunity for our sons and daughters. We need to equip all our students with the education and skills that put them on the path to good jobs and a bright future -- no matter where they live or what school they attend.” - Barack Obama (2013)

President Obama declared May 5th through May 11th 2013 “National Charter Schools Week.” In his proclamation, he commended the nation’s charter schools, teachers, and administrators and stated that we should “replicate [successful schools] that produce dramatic results” (Obama, 2013). Yet some charter schools are not truly serving all students. As a resident of Arizona and an educator, I examined this issue by taking a look at charter schools in Phoenix, Arizona.

Presently, there are over 500 charter schools in Arizona. To begin I zeroed in on two well-known, Arizona-based charter school organizations, known for their high academic rankings locally and nationally. In the 2013 *U.S. News & World Report Best High Schools* list (2013), two BASIS schools ranked amongst the top high schools (#2 and #5) in the nation. Also, the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) ranked high schools by SAT scores (Gonzales, 2013), and Great Hearts Academy charter schools are five of the top 11 ADE ranked schools (Great Hearts Academy, 2013).

I compiled publicly available demographic and statistical information about the highly ranked schools listed above. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2013) provides basic demographic information about schools, and the information provided below is taken from the most recent Common Core of Data public school data, from the 2010-2011 school year. While the methods of the U.S. News and ADE high school rankings systems have been criticized, I focused on the schools they widely and publicly identified as “highly performing” since these are the schools that presumably should be replicated.

Table 1. Demographics of BASIS and Great Hearts Academy Schools

	BASIS Scottsdale	BASIS Tucson	GHA Chandler	GHA Glendale	GHA Mesa	GHA Scottsdale	GHA Veritas	GHA Anthem	GHA Teleos	Arizona
Grades Served	5 - 12	5 - 12	K - 12	6 - 12	6 - 12	6 - 12	6 - 12	3 - 12	K - 12	
US News Rank	5	1	2 Recognized Nationally “Amongst Highest” (Great Hearts Academy, 2013)	10	7	4	8 Recognized Nationally			
AZ Highest Average SAT Scores Rank										
Number and Percent of Students Eligible For Free Lunch	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	41 (16.1%)	374,905 (35.0%)

Number and Percent of Students Eligible For Reduced Price Lunch	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	15 (5.9%)	107,139 (10.0%)
Number and Percent of Students Who Are English Language Learners	0	0	1 (0.1%)	0	0	0	0	0	0	4 (1.6%)	76,320 (7.1%)
Number and Percent of Students Who Have Individualized Education Plans	4 (0.6%)	14 (2.1%)	13 (1.4%)	5 (1.8%)	9 (2.8%)	6 (1.4%)	15 (3.5%)	5 (1.9%)	20 (7.8%)		125,806 (11.7%)
Number and Percent of Students Who Are American Indian	1 (0.2%)	11 (1.6%)	2 (0.2%)	0	2 (0.6%)	0	0	0	0	2 (0.8%)	55,312 (5.2%)
Number and Percent of Students Who Are Asian/ Pacific Islander	246 (38.0%)	147 (21.9%)	164 (17.2%)	10 (3.5%)	16 (5.0%)	26 (6%)	12 (2.8%)	22 (8.3%)	2 (0.8%)		32,427 (3.0%)
Number and Percent of Students Who Are White/ non- Hispanic	373 (57.7%)	356 (53.1%)	642 (67.4%)	228 (80.6%)	236 (73.1%)	372 (85.9%)	310 (72.8%)	220 (83.3%)	15 (5.9%)		459,348 (42.9%)
Number and Percent of Students Who Are Two or More Races	1 (0.2%)	1 (0.1%)	20 (2.1%)	23 (8.1%)	7 (2.2%)	5 (1.2%)	25 (5.9%)	6 (2.3%)	16 (6.3%)		12,832 (1.2%)
Number and Percent of Students Who Are Hispanic	22 (3.4%)	132 (19.7%)	87 (9.1%)	16 (5.7%)	47 (14.6%)	19 (4.4%)	66 (15.5%)	11 (4.2%)	52 (20.4%)		452,283 (42.2%)
Number and Percent of Students Who Are Black/ non- Hispanic	4 (0.6%)	23 (3.4%)	37 (3.9%)	6 (2.1%)	15 (4.6%)	11 (2.5%)	13 (3.1%)	5 (1.9%)	168 (65.9%)		59,549 (5.6%)
Total Numbers of Students	647	670	952	283	323	433	426	264	255		1,071,751

The basic demographic information shown in Table 1 highlights a critical issue that should be considered alongside enthusiastic calls for the support of charter schools. These top-ranked schools rarely serve all students. When the demographics of these top-ranked schools are compared to demographics of all public school students in the state, it is clear that disadvantaged students are vastly underserved by these schools.

The BASIS schools included in this study did not serve any students who received free lunch, who received reduced lunch, or who were English Language Learners. In comparison, 35% of Arizona’s students received free lunch, 10% received reduced fee lunch,

and 7.1% were English Language Learners. Few students who had Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) attended BASIS schools, as compared to 11.7% of Arizona’s total student population. Similarly, the Great Hearts Academy schools provided little to no service to students with special needs and to those who were English Language Learners. Given these statistics, it is possible to hypothesize that, for those students with such requirements, their needs were potentially mild, requiring only minor adjustments from teachers in return for the extra money that had been received for their attendance at the school. Supporting this hypothesis, Garcy’s (2011) empirical study of Arizona’s charter schools’ service to students with special educational needs concludes that, “it would be highly premature to rule out arguments suggesting that charter schools in Arizona restricted the enrollments of more severely disabled students intentionally, or unintentionally” (p. 21).

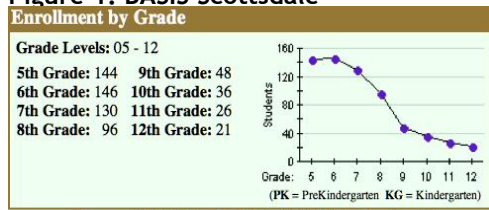
Five English Language Learners attended Great Hearts schools, four of whom attended Teleos Preparatory Academy. With the exception of Teleos Preparatory Academy, which serves a diverse population of students, all of these top-ranked schools served between 53.1% and 85.9% white students, percentages that exceeded the percent of Arizona’s white students, which was 42.9%. On the other hand, every school underrepresented the state’s percentage of American Indian students, Hispanic students and Black students (except for Teleos Preparatory Academy, the majority of whose students were Black/ non-Hispanic). Among all the schools noted above, Teleos serves the most poor and minority students, and state accountability data tells us that student achievement at Teleos is lower than student performance at the other Great Hearts Academy schools (ADE, 2013). Producing high test scores with low income minority children is apparently as hard to do for charter schools as it is for regular public schools.

These data raise questions about whether these schools ought to be praised for their high performance or, rather, be acknowledged as serving populations of students that are widely known to perform well on standardized tests. Policymakers interested in expanding charter schools should also consider the following questions:

1. Can these schools’ apparent success be attributed to “innovative curriculum” practices when these schools may simply be serving highly performing students? Would these schools be as successful if they were serving less advantaged students?
2. Should educational management organizations be encouraged to replicate their schools where they are likely to be successful based on what is already known about socioeconomic status, special needs populations, and educational “outcomes,” or should such organizations be encouraged to open new schools in high need areas?
3. Should federal and state policymakers focus on the educational opportunities available to disadvantaged students rather than praising schools for serving already-advantaged students?

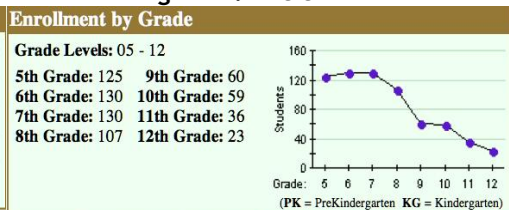
Furthermore, reports about BASIS schools have drawn the attention of community members, who have discovered questionable methods for enrollment procedures, high attrition rates, and methods including “counseling out” of students who might negatively affect average school performance rankings (Safier, 2013). According to the data I collected above, the “highly-ranked” BASIS schools appear to serve a privileged demographic, and then, as suggested by Safier, they likely select even further among that privileged group. Visually striking declines in student enrollment at Arizona’s BASIS and Great Hearts schools in 2010-2011, as compared to the state of Arizona’s student population in 2010-2011, are shown below in graphs made available from the U.S. Department of Education (NCES, 2013).

Figure 1. BASIS Scottsdale



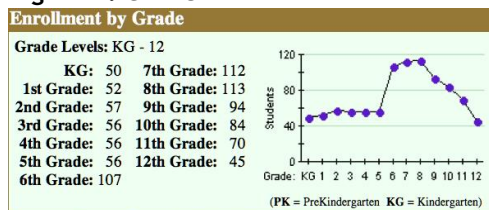
(Source: CCD Public school data 2010-2011 school year)

Figure 2. BASIS Tucson



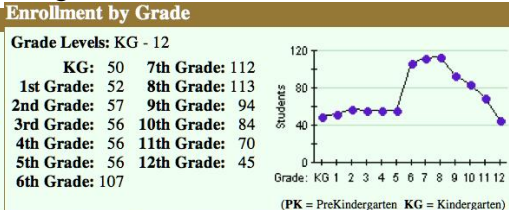
(Source: CCD Public school data 2010-2011 school year)

Figure 3. GHA Chandler



(Source: CCD Public school data 2010-2011 school year)

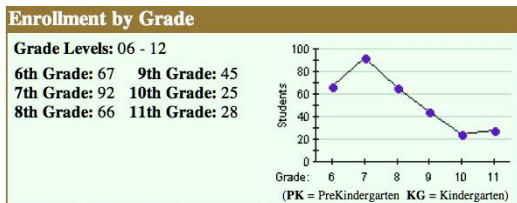
Figure 4. GHA Glendale



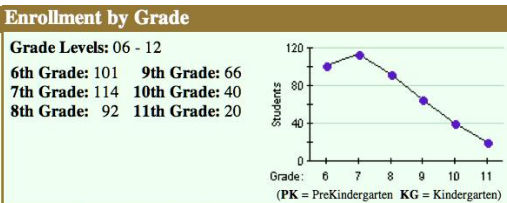
(Source: CCD Public school data 2010-2011 school year)

Figure 5. GHA Mesa

Figure 6. GHA Scottsdale



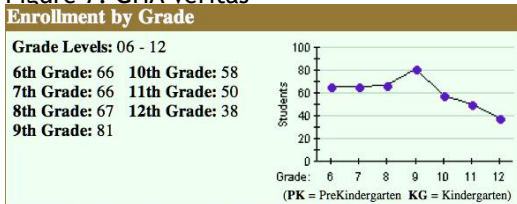
(Source: CCD Public school data 2010-2011 school year)



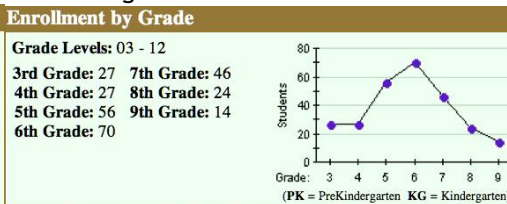
(Source: CCD Public school data 2010-2011 school year)

Figure 7. GHA Veritas

Figure 8. GHA Anthem



(Source: CCD Public school data 2010-2011 school year)

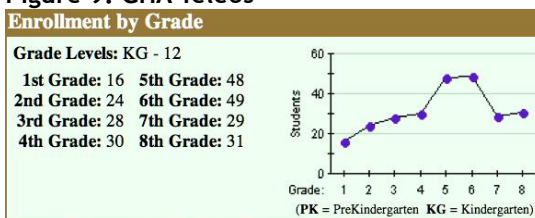


(Source: CCD Public school data 2010-2011 school year)

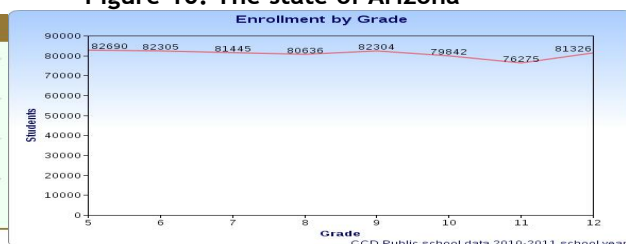
Notes. Through 9th grade only

Figure 9. GHA Teleos

Figure 10. The state of Arizona



(Source: CCD Public school data 2010-2011 school year)



Notes. Through 8th grade only

Researchers have previously discussed declining enrollment numbers in the years nearing graduation at BASIS schools (see, for example, Casanova, 2012). BASIS school representatives responded in defense (BASIS_Communications, 2012) by challenging interpretations of the low numbers shown in the data, albeit without adequately addressing Casanova’s main concern about “enrollment drop across grades.” Casanova’s analysis highlights very low numbers of enrolled students in the upper grades. Extending from her critique, the graphs displayed above raise a question of basic comparability: is it even fair to include these schools in a comparison with Arizona’s public schools, since they do not come close to matching Arizona’s student enrollment trends? Kevin Welner (2013) describes the various ways that many charter schools systematically engage in student enrollment practices that give them a competitive advantage over other schools, and these practices obviously widen gaps between disadvantaged students and their more advantaged peers.

Ann Ryman (2012) recently uncovered business practices within BASIS and Great Hearts Academy schools that reveal potential conflicts of interest between board members and owners. These charter school organizations make large profits at the expense of the government and community members, through fees, book purchases, and building contracts. Other investigators have highlighted questionable practices that provide considerable access to policy makers who influence Arizona’s lawmakers; as one example, Mercedes Schneider (2013) outlined the following map of Great Hearts connections:

- Clint Bolick, member of the Great Hearts board of directors, also serves as the litigation director for the Goldwater Institute, an Arizona-based, conservative public policy advocacy and research organization (Schneider, 2013).
- Goldwater Institute members also sit on the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) task forces, including its Education Task Force. The ALEC task forces have a mission to advance free-market enterprises (ALEC, 2013).
- It is significant that ALEC has a mission to advance free-market enterprises, and that ALEC, in “[constructing] and [advancing] model legislation” also acts to “financially benefit its members,” which includes Goldwater and Great Hearts members (Schneider, 2013).

Such access between executives of charter school management organizations and policy leaders who influence lawmakers further complicates the problems of educational inequality. Such influence provides charter schools with unfair competitive advantages. Children and taxpayers are the losers when public education dollars are at stake.

The President's call to Americans to support our schools, and his hopes to replicate highly performing charter systems, should be viewed more skeptically in light of the alarming demographic statistics and the powerful political clout of these top-ranked schools. Like other researchers and educators who once believed in the possibility of innovative charter schools that would help improve the schools of this nation (Baker, 2013; Ravitch, 2013), I am very worried by the facts.

In conclusion, the President's proclamation calling for support of the nation's charter schools should have also included a call for them to serve all the students of the United States, not just those that can produce the highest achievement test scores for the lowest cost. The analysis of Arizona's "highly performing" charter schools provided in this study highlights suggested trends of market-oriented charter schools' tendency (Lacireno-Paquet, Holyoke, Moser, & Henig, 2002) to underrepresent students with special educational needs and students who are English Language Learners. The schools in this study also underrepresent minority students in comparison to Arizona's student population. Nationally, while charter schools grow in lower-income communities and communities of color (Henig, 2013), a skimming process (West, Ingram, & Hind, 2006) is also observed, whereupon children from more advantaged families within these communities attend the schools. Therefore, we need more presidential proclamations that address the needs of our disadvantaged students, and fewer that support those who would make profits in education by serving the students easiest to teach.

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