

# Charter schools damage public education



Los Angeles, CA - November 4: Students complete a questionnaire at the Magnolia Science Academy 1 charter school in 2016. Gulen charter schools are publicly-funded charter schools that are founded run by individuals who are followers of a Turkish imam named Fethullah Gulen. (Photo by Patrick T. Fallon for The Washington Post)

**By Diane Ravitch**

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In 1988, teachers union leader [Albert Shanker had an idea](#): What if teachers were allowed to create a school within a school, where they could develop innovative ways to teach dropouts and unmotivated students? The teachers would get the permission of their colleagues and the local school board to open their school, which would be an R&D lab for the regular public school. These experimental schools, he said, would be called “charter schools.”

Five years later, in 1993, Shanker publicly renounced his proposal. The idea had been adopted by businesses seeking profits, he said, and would be used, like vouchers, to privatize public schools and destroy teachers unions. He [wrote](#) that “vouchers, charter schools, for-profit management schemes are all quick fixes that won’t fix anything.”

Shanker died in 1997, too soon to see his dire prediction come true. Today, there are [more than 7,000 charter schools](#) with about 3 million students (total enrollment in public schools is [50 million](#)). About [90 percent](#) of charter schools are nonunion. Charters are more segregated than public schools, prompting the Civil Rights Project at UCLA in 2010 to [call charter schools](#) “a major political success” but “a civil rights failure.” They compete with public schools instead of collaborating. Charter proponents claim that the schools are progressive, but schools that are segregated and nonunion do not deserve that mantle.

The charter universe includes corporate chains that operate hundreds of schools in different states. The largest is KIPP, with 209 schools. The second-largest has 167 schools and is affiliated with Turkish preacher Fethullah Gulen. About [one of every six](#) charters operates for profit; in

Michigan, [80 percent](#) are run by for-profit corporations. Nationally, nearly [40 percent of charter schools](#) are run by for-profit businesses known as Educational Management Organizations.

The [largest](#) online charter chain, [K12 Inc.](#), was founded with the help of former junk-bond king Michael Milken and is listed on the [New York Stock Exchange](#). The biggest single virtual charter was the Ohio-based [Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow](#), which collected [\\$1 billion](#) from Ohio taxpayers from 2000 until its bankruptcy earlier this year. The charter's 20 percent graduation rate [was the lowest in the nation](#).

Charter schools pave the way for vouchers. More than half of states now have some form of public subsidy for religious and private schools. Voucher schools are not bound by civil rights laws and may exclude students based on religion, disabilities and LGBT status.

Charters are publicly funded but privately managed. They call themselves public schools, but a [federal court ruling](#) in 2010 declared they are “not state actors.” The National Labor Relations Board ruled in 2016 that [charters are private corporations](#), not public schools. As private corporations, they are not subject to the same laws as public schools.

The anti-union [Walton Family Foundation](#) is the biggest private financier of charters. The foundation in 2016 [unveiled a plan](#) to spend \$200 million annually over five years for charter schools, and the organization claims credit for opening one of every four charters in the nation.

The Waltons and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, using both public and private funds, are pouring hundreds of millions annually into what amounts to a joint effort to privatize public education. The federal government spends [\\$400 million annually on charter schools](#); a congressional budget proposal seeks to increase that amount for fiscal 2019.

On average, charters do not get better academic results than public schools, according to the [National Education Policy Center](#), except for those that have high attrition rates and that control their demographics to favor high-scoring groups. The lowest-scoring urban district in the nation is Detroit, where [more than half](#) the children are enrolled in charters. The highest-ranked charters in the nation are the [BASIS charters](#) in Arizona, where [83 percent of students are either Asian or white](#), double the proportion of these students in the state.

Charter schools drain resources and the students they want from public schools. When students leave for charters, the public schools must fire teachers, reduce offerings and increase class sizes. Some districts, such as Oakland's, teeter on the edge of financial ruin because public funds have been diverted to charters.

In 2016, the NAACP [called for a moratorium](#) on new charter schools until charters are held to the same accountability standards as public schools, until “public funds are not diverted to charter schools at the expense of the public school system” and until charter schools “cease expelling students that public schools have a duty to educate.”

American education seems to be evolving into a dual school system, one operated under democratic control (overseen by a board that was either elected by the people or appointed by an elected official) , the other under private control. One is required to find a place for every student who shows up, no matter that student's academic skills, language or disability. The privately managed charter sector can limit its enrollment, exclude students it doesn't want and accept no new students after a certain grade level. Charters can even close school for the day to take students to a political rally for the school management's financial benefit. That is not fair competition, and it is not healthy for democracy.