

OP-ED MARCH 10, 2017 6:05 PM

Why I was wrong about charter schools, why Kentucky is better off without them



A kindergarten class in Floyd County, one of Kentucky's many education success stories. May Valley Elementary principal Greta Thornsberry helped Vincent Osborne with his shoelaces in 2015. **Herald-Leader**

BY DAVID W. HORNBECK

In 1989, I had the privilege of helping the Kentucky legislature to craft the most courageous and comprehensive education reform act in America.

In many ways, though I have served as a state superintendent of schools for 12 years in Maryland and as superintendent of what was then the fifth-largest school system in the United States in Philadelphia, the results Kentuckians have achieved since passing and sustaining the Kentucky Education Reform Act is my most fulfilling professional accomplishment.

The reason? It has worked for children. Kentucky children have made more progress than any other state in the nation. The quality of life for hundreds of thousands of Kentuckians is better because you carefully crafted legislation that resulted in many more schools that work for their communities, families and children. You not only enacted KERA in the first place but for 27 years, with both Democratic and Republican leadership putting children first, you have sustained the essential elements of



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KERA. That sort of stable bipartisan leadership is sadly rare. You have kept your eye on what's important, the children and Kentucky's track record of success.

I believe you teeter on the edge of undoing your success in considering House Bill 520. Regrettably, I speak from the perspective of experience. As Philadelphia's superintendent of schools, I recommended the approval of more than 30 charter schools because I thought it would improve educational opportunity for our 215,000 students. The last 20 years make it clear I was wrong.

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Those advocating change in Kentucky's education law through proposed legislation to introduce and build charter schools are no doubt committed to educational improvement. But they are equally wrong. You stand on the brink of embracing a strategy with a track record that is mixed at best and a serious failure for children at worst.

Mixed academic results: Charters, on the whole, do not result in significant improvement in student performance. It's mixed at best. In some evaluations, charter schools overall actually underperform regular public schools.

Funding and unequal opportunity: Charter funding negatively affects regular public schools. Charter advocates rely on the premise that as money flows from a regular school to a charter school, the costs of the regular school go down proportionately. Sounds good; it's just not true. Costs in schools sending students to charters cannot shift as fast as students and revenue leave. The costs for the principal, heating, lights, building debt and many other things remain; thus, the remaining children face the prospect of larger class sizes and cuts to core academic programming, music, art and other inequities. Opportunity for the charter-school students is in part funded by the loss of opportunity for the remaining students without a commensurate performance improvement by charter-school students.

According to Moody's Investors Service, charter schools pose the greatest credit challenge to school districts in economically weak urban areas and may even affect their credit ratings.

Further, the proposed legislation also assumes all students cost the same to educate. Again, not true. It costs more to provide a quality education to some, such as those with severe disabilities, who are rarely served by charter schools, leaving traditional schools to disproportionately bear this cost at the expense of all students.

States with "stronger" charter laws are not doing better: Charter advocates say "strong" charter laws are required. Pennsylvania's law is one that is characterized as strong; yet its charter growth is contributing significantly to a funding crisis that includes draconian cuts to teachers, nurses, arts, music and counselors in Philadelphia.

Charters do not serve students with the greatest challenges: Charters will be quick to point out they enroll high percentages of low-income students. Some do. However, the district-wide charter lottery inherently skims. Every student chosen has someone (parent,

pastor, friend) who encouraged and is advocating for her/him to apply and succeed. That fact by itself creates a select pool of students and a corollary depletion of those students in non-charter schools. That’s bad policy if your goal is the success of all students.

Charters create an incoherent system: The proposed law creates a separate entity to decide when a new school is authorized. By definition, that creates incoherence and undermines another of the hallmarks of KERA — equity. Kentucky’s constitution calls for the state to provide a thorough and efficient system of education. The result of charters in every place of which I am aware is that when a charter school decides, for whatever reason, a student is unsuitable for its program, the local school system has the responsibility to educate that child.

Charters are not more innovative: It is often argued that traditional schools can learn from innovative practices of charter schools. There are two problems with the assertion. It is rare, perhaps even non-existent, where a system is set in motion to transfer knowledge and practice. In addition, there are as many or more innovations in traditional public schools as in charters in Kentucky and beyond. If the interest is learning from best practices, one does not need to set up a new more expensive system that undermines equity.

Charters are not substitutes for broader proven reforms: In fact, chartering is not an education reform. It’s merely a change in governance. A charter law doesn’t deal with the hard and often costly slog of real reform.

We know from research and experience what works to build schools with thriving students. I urge you to keep your eye on that prize:

- High standards;
- Quality teachers;
- Prekindergarten for 3-year-olds;
- Lower class sizes through the third grade;
- Continue to attack concentrated poverty through such innovations as Family Resource and Youth Service Centers

Let’s do what we know works.

David W. Hornbeck was Maryland State Superintendent of Schools from 1976 to 1988 and Philadelphia Superintendent from 1994 to 2000).

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