

Peter Greene ♥ Become a fan

Teacher and writer; blogger,
curmudgucation.blogspot.com

There Can Be No Successful All-Charter School System

Posted: 11/21/2014 11:10 pm EST | Updated: 11/21/2014 11:10 pm EST

Writer-researcher Mark Weber published [a piece about charters on NJSpotlight](#) this week that deals with charter schools in New Jersey, but which has implications for the charter movement all across the US.

Weber is perhaps better known in the "edublogverse" as Jersey Jazzman, and his research prowess (coupled with that of Julia Sass Rubin of Ruthers) is highly respected. This piece brings together much of what he's published in the past; a trip through [the pages of his blog](#) will reveal considerable more detail for those who want it.

The bottom line is that New Jersey charters do not serve the same population as the districts that house them. Specifically, they serve a smaller percentage of poor students and students with extra learning challenges.

As Weber reports, even Cami Anderson has admitted this in public. And the numbers, readily available from public sources, fully support this conclusion. There really are no grounds on which to dispute it. And yet many charteristas continue to do so.

Why? The most obvious reason would be that the numbers explain away what little success some charters can claim. It raises the bar of expectations of charters-- if you've creamed all the better students, why are you doing any better than you are?

But more importantly, it reveals the limits of the charter business model.

New Jersey can never be a 100% charter state system. At least not with the current charter operating system. Let's sort students into two groups-- let's call students who come from better economic backgrounds and have no special needs Low Cost Students, and students from lower economic backgrounds or with special needs will be called High Cost Students. If the state wide ratio of LCS to HCS is 3:1, but the ratio inside charters is 12:1, we cannot get all the students in New Jersey into a charter school. Somewhere we're going to have a big old pile of leftover High Cost Students.

In the meantime, it would also be nice to have Condoleeza Rice visit NJ and see how charters provide the machinery for de facto segregation. [Charter opponents are racist, my Aunt Fanny.](#)

Plenty of folks have always assumed that the end game would be a private system for the best and the-- and if not brightest, at least the least poor and problematic-- and an underfunded remnant of the public system to warehouse the students that the charter system didn't want

But those folks may have underestimated the greed, ambition and delusions of some charter backers. "We stop at the icing," operators say, "when we can have the whole cake?" And chartercrats like Arne Duncan with dreams of scalability dancing in their sugarplum heads, may really think that full-scale charter systems can work because A) they don't understand that most charter "success" is illusory and B) they don't know why.

It's telling that while chartercrats are cheering on complete charter conversions for cities from York, PA to Memphis, TN, no charter chains have (as far as I know) expressed a desire to have a whole city to themselves. The preferred model is an urban broker like Tennessee's ASD or the bureaucratic clusterfarfegnugen that Philadelphia schools-- charter operators can jostle for the juiciest slice of the steak and try to leave the ground for some other poor sucker.

It's not even that charters are worried about how successful they will look. The business model is still evolving, and charters are learning how to spin and market almost anything that comes out in their numbers. They do need good numbers, and they have gotten better at getting them. But the numbers that they are attentive to are the ones on the bottom line, and that's why no charter operators in their right minds would want a 100% charter system that they had to be responsible for.

I sorted students into High Cost and Low Cost because that's how charter operators see them. It's not that easier to get good numbers out of a smart, rich kid. It's that it's cheaper. Students with special needs, students from poor backgrounds, students who have behavioral issues-- these students cost more money. And never forget-- every dollar that a charter operator has to spend on a student is a dollar the charter operator doesn't get to put in his pocket.

Here's one more reason that free market economics do not belong in public education-- in the free market all customers are NOT created equal. All customers are NOT equally desirable to businesses. And the free market deals with these undesirable customers very simply-- it doesn't serve them. (This is why, for instance, when you hire FedEx or UPS to deliver a package to your uncle on some back road in Bumfargel, PA, FedEx and UPS turn around and hire the United States Postal Service to deliver it for them.) In a charter system those High Cost Students become human hot potatoes.

"Well, we'll just require charters to serve a certain segment of the population in our 100% charter system," you say. And I will remind you of one other critical difference between charters and true public schools. Traditional public schools do not say, "It's too hard to turn a profit in this business environment, so we are just going to close our doors." Traditional public schools are in it for the long haul. Charter operators are in as long as it makes business sense to be in it. If they don't like the deal you're offering them, they don't have to stay.

A effective total charter system is not going to happen. If you're not convinced by the ongoing slow-motion [disaster in New Orleans](#), just look at the number from New Jersey. It's unsustainable and unscalable.