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The True Purpose of Charters?

By Peter Greene on February 4, 2015 8:45 AM

The prevailing sales pitch for modern charters is that they will be engines of equity and incubators of innovation. Certainly Albert Shanker, the original charter pitchman, [saw them that way](#). And in many instances, that's how teacher-led, student-centered charters unfolded.

But it's not how charters are working today. The problems with fraud and mismanagement are [widespread and well-documented at this point](#), but there are problems to consider with charters that aren't obvious pits of incompetence and greed. There's growing evidence that [the charter movement is increasing segregation](#) in many urban areas-- not just by race, but by economic status as well. There's no solid evidence that charters produce better student results. There have been no widespread adoption of successful new education techniques developed in the charter laboratories. And if you believe that a charter system lowers the costs of public education, then you must also believe that owning two homes is less expensive than owning one.



Government support for the charter movement is greater than ever, up to and including [the Obama budget proposal](#) with its increased determination to direct public tax dollars to private charter operators. This despite the fact that charters have thus far not accomplished any of the goals they claim to pursue.

We really need an honest national conversation about charters; however, few charter boosters seem prepared to have a conversation based on anything but well-polished PR points. But one commentator on the charter advocacy side has been willing to talk honestly about the purpose of charters.

Mike Petrilli is currently head of the Fordham Foundation, a thinky tank that advocates for Common Core and school choice. But Petrilli raised a few eyebrows last December when he appeared in the New York Times [advocating for charters as a way to get Worthy Students away from The Rabble](#). This is not a new point of view for Petrilli, who back in January of 2013 was calling charters "[the last salvation of the strivers](#)." Back then he was talking about the high expulsion rate for charters (and saying, basically, "so what?"). This week [he stepped up to this plate again](#), this time in response to the kerfluffle about backfilling seats in charters. His point this time? Why should charters fill empty seats with students they don't choose to take and who might not be in line with the school's preferred profile for its student body?

We get the clearest picture yet of Petrilli's vision of the purpose of charter schools.

This isn't just a technical challenge; there's a moral question too. Backfilling is surely good for the student who gets to claim an empty seat. But what if it's bad for their new peers? What if the disruption to the many outweighs the benefits to the few?

It's not that those of us who work in public education don't understand his point. I would estimate that roughly 99.9% of public school teachers have thought at least once in their careers, "Boy, if Pat McSlacksalot would just stay home, this class would work a whole lot better." Charters just get to indulge that impulse.

Of course, roughly 99.9% of public school teachers can also tell a story (and it's one of the stories that energizes them) about reaching a young McSlacksalot. And we also learn early in our careers that the student who is a disaster for me may well be a whiz in the class down the hall. Are there students who are clearly way over the line in terms of bad attitude and poor drive? Sure. But there's a large number who fall into a grey and malleable area, who can be influenced and helped. And it's the oldest mistake in the classroom to confuse compliance and ability. Kudos to the charter schools who believe they have the magical skill to sort all the many varied forms of students. In public education, we can't toss them out, and so we're forced to, you know, actually teach them.

Great schools spend a lot of time building strong cultures--the almost-invisible expectations, norms, and habits that come to permeate the environment, such as the notion that it's cool to be smart and it's not OK to disrupt learning. Culture-building is a whole lot harder to do if a school is inducting a new group of students every year in every grade.

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Well, yes. We know this is true, because we live with that truth in every public school. The basic premise here seems to be that some students deserve a good school, a good culture, a good learning environment-- and others do not. How can we possibly decide which students are which? Well, apparently "we" as a society should not get to make that determination at all.

As witnessed by the headline "Backfilling charter seats; a backhanded way to kill school autonomy," Petrilli is most concerned about how these issues affect the charter's freedom to make its own rules. Forcing charters to accept any student would be immoral. Here we see clearly one of the true features of the choice movement-- "school choice" is really "school's choice." It's not about parents and students having their choice of educational opportunities; it's about charters having their choice of students. Why do they need that autonomy?

*When we force charters to backfill, or adopt uniform discipline policies, or mimic district schools' approach to special education, we turn them into **the very things they were intended to replace.*** (emphasis mine)

What we're talking about is a two-tiered system. Charters will decide which students "deserve" a "better" school, and the rest will be warehoused in public schools, where teachers and staff try to do their jobs with whatever resources the charters have left for them.

"Better" in this scenario doesn't really mean educationally superior, a promise which few if any charters have been able to fulfill. "Better" means "surrounded by the Right Kind of People and not forced to sit in class with any of Those People." Ultimately, this is a system founded on simply abandoning students that charter operators deem unworthy. This is a system built on the idea that separate and deliberately unequal is not only okay, but desirable. There's no question that in many places, we have not fulfilled the promise of a good public education for all. But if our response is going to be to throw up our hands and say, "Never mind. It was a dumb, hopeless promise anyway," we need to have more honest conversation than we've had so far.

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