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Brent McKim | The many problems of charter schools

Proponents' ads ignore failings

By Brent McKim

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Recently, proponents of charter schools have been spending remarkable sums of money on advertisements designed to make our public schools look worse and charter schools look better than they really are. Before jumping on the charter school bandwagon, Kentuckians should consider these points:

Charters would divert critical funding from our public schools. At a time when the state repeatedly fails to fund textbooks for children, it would be terribly damaging to redirect crucial funding and resources away from our public schools to charter schools.

We don't need charters. Advocates claim charters cut through red tape and empower school buildings, but in Kentucky, site-based decision making already cuts through red tape and empowers schools locally.

Our public schools are making greater progress statewide than neighboring states with charters. In fact, Stanford University found that the more charters there are in a state, the more likely the state is to be going down in state-by-state comparisons. Since the passage of KERA, Kentucky's ranking in the highly respected "Quality Counts" report by Education Week has gone from near the very bottom to 14th in the nation, passing most states with charter schools in the process.

In spite of better funding, charters are more likely to do worse than the regular public schools they replace, according to Stanford.

Charters lack oversight. The only thing public about charter schools is their funding. They are often not subject to open records laws, open meetings laws, or other safeguards. This lack of oversight has led to countless charter school scandals.

Charter schools kick out kids who don't perform well, and yet they still perform worse than regular public schools who accept the students being exited from these charter

schools.

Charters claim to accept all students, but they intentionally screen out special-needs students. By requiring parents of special-needs students to sign waivers saying they understand that the charter school will not provide special education services for their child, charter schools effectively screen these students on the front end.

There are much better ways than charter schools to promote innovation. The Jefferson County Public Schools are at the center of creativity and bold initiative, launching high-quality programs for students, such as many successful new magnet schools. This has only been possible because our community has come together to support JCPS. The fragmentation and disruption created by charter schools would only undermine the community's efforts to create powerful programs in an equitable way. To further this progress, the Jefferson County Teachers Association supports Rep. Carl Rollins' "Districts of Innovation" bill, which would empower our public schools to obtain waivers from state laws and regulations, in order to try even more innovative strategies.

Wall Street financiers and land developers are making windfall profits off charter schools. This explains how charter advocates have funding for expensive TV ads and glossy pamphlets. It should be no surprise that two out of the three board members of KARE, including Hal Heiner, have either direct or indirect ties to real estate and land development interests.

The turnover rate for students in charters is very high. A nationwide Western Michigan University study found the turnover at KIPP charter schools from grade 6 to grade 8 to be 40 percent, which is much higher than at regular public schools.

The turnover rate for teachers in charters is very high. In Los Angeles charter schools, teacher turnover was found to be 3 times higher than regular public schools.

The turnover rate for administrators in charters is very high. A recent study by the University of Washington verified this and pointed out that, in general, charters have no plan for addressing this problem.

Charters do not promote stable learning experiences for children. Charter proponents boast that ineffective charters will be shut down. However, most parents do not want their child to have to go to two or three elementary schools because one after another is being shut down. Surveys show parents would much rather help their child's school improve, rather than shut it down.

Charter advocates use misleading NAEP statistics to misrepresent successful public schools as failures. Charter proponents point to what they say is the low percentage of proficient students in public schools, based on the NAEP test. However NAEP proficiency levels have been repeatedly identified as ridiculously high benchmarks. For example, studies have shown that even the top-scoring countries would have

more than half of their students failing the proficiency bar on NAEP. NAEP itself says its scores are only appropriate for making relative comparisons, not for looking at proficiency percentages. When NAEP scores are used for relative comparisons, charters score lower on NAEP nationally than regular public schools.

Charter advocacy organizations are funded by right-wing foundations that oppose essentially every program and service designed to support poor and minority children, but we are asked to somehow believe that on the one issue of charter schools they have a monopoly on caring about these children.

Charter schools are really an effort to undermine teacher unions. The anti-union backers of charter schools, like the Walton Family Foundation, also support other anti-union organizations like the National Right To Work Foundation. These anti-labor groups know that almost all charter schools are nonunion. However, a number of studies have found that students are more successful in states and local school districts where teachers collectively bargain their working conditions. This is because teachers' working conditions are also students' learning conditions.

Charters are often more expensive to operate. For example, the state of New Mexico found they cost 26 percent more per student. The additional cost for charters is often made up by private donations from organizations traditionally opposed to free public schools, like the Walton Family Foundation. A Western Michigan University study found the per-pupil funding in KIPP charter schools to be about \$6,500 more per student, with most of this funding coming from the private sector.

Charter schools are segregating our schools and undermining democracy. Public education has been a pillar of our democracy, allowing students to understand the diversity they will experience as adults. Learners interact with others of different races, religions, beliefs and income levels. However, studies have found that charters are segregating our public schools. Many serve only black, or only Muslim, or only Asian, or only affluent children. This should concern anyone who cares about the ability of the members of our diverse society to be able to get along well with one another and value the rich diversity found in our democracy.

For these and other reasons, charter schools would do more harm than good for the children of Kentucky. We can all be proud of the remarkable accomplishments of our public schools since the passage of KERA in 1990. Let's build on this success by recommitting ourselves to support our public schools. Diverting funding and resources to charter schools would accomplish just the opposite.
