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State Funding Unfair to Traditional Schools

Abstract

The present budget crisis in Pennsylvania has brought many lingering tensions to bear as school districts scramble to pay their bills without any support from the state. Notably, there has been a lot of talk about holding back payments to charter schools, which naturally sparks controversy. In order to make sense of the situation - and in order to understand the passionate debate which surrounds it - it's worthwhile to know something about the history, theory, and funding of charter schools. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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The present budget crisis in Pennsylvania has brought many lingering tensions to bear as school districts scramble to pay their bills without any support from the state. Notably, there has been a lot of talk about holding back payments to charter schools, which naturally sparks controversy. In order to make sense of the situation—and in order to understand the passionate debate which surrounds it—it's worthwhile to know something about the history, theory, and funding of charter schools.

The modern charter school movement is generally traced back to a speech in 1988 by Albert Shanker, long-time president of the American Federation of Teachers. Influenced by German educational environments, Shanker was addressing the fact that traditional American classrooms didn't serve the needs of all students equally, and he wanted to provide opportunities for creative responses to student needs. Although conservative policy-makers were lukewarm to the topic at the time, this position has changed as part of a more widespread social movement for school choice.

In any case, charter schools were originally conceived as hot-houses for teaching innovation, and were intended to be evaluated according to the criteria in their charters, not according to the outcomes-assessment models forced upon traditional schools by recent legislative trends. In a sense, then, to compare the two educational models is to compare apples and oranges. Tension ensues from the fact that many folks fail to note this distinction, a circumstance which is exacerbated by the reality that traditional schools are constrained both by far greater legislative controls as well as by the cost burden of supporting charter schools in addition to their own educational missions.

I'm not against the pedagogical principles foundational to charter schools: far from it. As someone who has garnered some small recognition internationally for creative teaching, I have a considerable body of professional work to buttress my claim that I'm all for the freedom for innovation charter schools originally were designed to cultivate; indeed, my criticism of the teaching to the test which necessarily ensues from top-down edicts like No Child Left Behind stems largely from

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the fact that the emphasis on outcomes assessment so often stymies and stifles the very kinds of out-of-the-box thinking the original charter schools were supposed to foster.

I do have a problem, however, with the way charter schools are funded in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. There is a mistaken perception that local districts realize savings when students transfer to charter schools – this is the famous fallacy that “the money should follow the child.” Broadly speaking, however, no money at all “comes” with any child. The annual tuition rate is simply the annual operating budget for direct education divided by the number of students, giving us a rough estimate of how much of that budget is dedicated to a given child. In my own Upper Adams School District, for example, our ADM (Average Daily Membership) cost is \$9,722.66 per student for regular education for this year; the cost for special education is \$21,970.28 per student. That's what we pay under the state formula if one of our kids goes to a charter school. As of this writing, we have 84 regular ed students and eight special ed students enrolled in some form of charter school. Our total cost thus is expected to be along the lines of \$992,465.68, which is 3.73 percent of our annual budget. The trick is that none of these children actually show up with \$9,722.66 for tuition; in fact, they well could come from families which may pay little or nothing toward the taxes which support the schools. Even those families which do pay such taxes would likely pay far less than their child(ren)'s share of the budget. Every child who leaves the district schools for a charter or cyber option thus takes a large chunk out of the operating budget, although generally speaking the relative costs do not fall at anything like a commensurate rate.

Think about it: unless a district were to lose an entire classroom full of students of the same grade level, the district's expenses (paying for a teacher, the overhead for classroom space, etc.) remain effectively the same. A legislative agenda concerned with providing the best possible education for all Pennsylvania students would ensure a less costly, fairer, and more predictable charter school funding formula that would empower the Department of Education to control and to reimburse charter schools for appropriate expenditures.

In addition to the traditional American public school education they have received in the Upper Adams School District, my own children have sampled a variety of learning environments including homeschooling, cyberschool, and wide-open Danish classrooms which brought to mind those German ones Shanker lauded; all these teaching styles had their strengths and weaknesses, as a reasonable person might surmise. Education need not be a one-size-fits-all endeavor, and different learners thrive in different environments – the research is clear on this point. Traditional schools often try to be creative and responsive, of course, but they are constrained by far greater numbers, wider ability ranges, and the mandate to educate all children in the district, not a self-selected sample. Proponents of charter schools often fail to acknowledge, moreover, that the vast majority of students in this Commonwealth by financial necessity must remain in traditional schools, schools which are often forced to dedicate more and more instructional time to test preparation at the same time that they are impoverished by providing funding for more flexible approaches for a tiny percentage of students sent to charter schools. In sum, a key problem in Pennsylvania is that the method of funding alternative educational models unfairly disadvantages the traditional public schools, and the students least likely to have active advocates are most likely to suffer as a result.

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