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The Truth About “School Choice” Privatization advocates ignore evidence

National School Choice Week, the brainchild of corporations and conservative groups like the American Legislative Exchange Council and the Heritage Foundation, kicked off on January 25 as a celebration to “shine a spotlight on effective education options for every child” with events planned in Ohio and nationally. What advocates for the privatization of public schools won’t be able to demonstrate, however, is meaningful evidence that their approach really does “provide an essential and beneficial solution for parents across the country.” A relative handful of higher-performing charter schools clearly plays an important role in education for some Ohio children and families. But Ohio’s approach to charters and vouchers, which has emphasized quantity over quality, has hurt the movement here. Research and analysis of school privatization in Ohio calls into question the very solutions being advocated as part of School Choice Week. That research clearly shows that charters and vouchers have not helped strengthen a public education system that works for all Ohioans.

Charter schools

Evidence on the quality of charter schools presents a troubling picture. Stanford University’s Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) and the Rand Corporation have studied the academic achievement of charters across multiple states, including Ohio, and found mixed results. [CREDO](#) found that only 17 percent of charter schools outgained their traditional public school counterparts; students in Ohio’s charter schools performed significantly below their public school peers in math, showed no difference in reading, and had an initial loss of learning in both subjects, which continued in math well after the first year.

According to an [analysis](#) of Ohio’s 2011-12 achievement test scores, charter schools continue to struggle with only 6 percent meeting the state goal of having a performance index over 100 and only 10 percent rating excellent or above. Furthermore, a 2009 analysis of scores on Ohio’s Kindergarten Readiness Assessment – Literacy found that kindergartners entering charters and district magnets come to school more prepared than children first enrolling in district neighborhood schools, giving these schools a head start.

The [Rand report](#) linked Ohio’s poor academic results to the state’s lax policies for charter authorizers and low-performing charter schools, and Policy Matters has consistently uncovered [weak oversight](#) by charter sponsors leading to [improper practices](#) by for-profit and non-profit charter management companies. Additionally, Ohio lawmakers have repeatedly failed to hold charter management companies accountable, and a recent Policy Matters [report](#) showed how management companies are skirting Ohio’s automatic charter-closure law, taking in millions of dollars in state funding to keep poorly-performing, ineffective charter schools open. State

legislators continued this trend recently when they removed the “high quality operator” provision from charter legislation, giving the green light to all charter management companies, even those with a history of failure. Policy Matters has urged the state to increase accountability for charter sponsors and management companies, and to strengthen closure laws to eliminate failing charter schools. Unfortunately for Ohio students, state lawmakers have instead maintained their “quantity-over-quality” approach to charter schools. With nearly 40 percent of Ohio charter schools in Academic Watch or Academic Emergency last year, it’s clear this approach leads to more options – just not always effective ones.

Vouchers

Ohio lawmakers recently expanded the state voucher program despite little proof of academic benefits for students and major controversy over the use of public funds for private, religious education. Extensive research on [Cleveland’s voucher program](#), one of the first in the country, showed little variation in academic achievement between voucher and public schools students and also indicated the majority of voucher students were attending private schools prior to receiving the voucher. According to 2009-10 state achievement test results, 3rd through 8th grade public school students in [Cleveland](#) consistently outperformed voucher students in math and showed mixed results in reading. Similar results were seen in Akron, Canton, Columbus, and Dayton, but Cincinnati and Toledo elementary school students outperformed their voucher peers almost across the board.

Mobility

The impact of choice policies has yet to be fully explored, but a [study](#) released in November 2012 by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and Community Research Partners offers a hint of the problems posed by school choice. Researchers tracked student movement between districts and schools over a two-year period to understand the consequences of mobility on schools, students, and communities. Mobility rates were highest in large urban districts, where charter schools, vouchers, and intra- and inter-district choice policies are prevalent, and linked to lower academic achievement. Highly mobile students put a strain on schools and teachers, who must deal with the costs and disruptions of accommodating new students, and students who changed schools frequently did worse academically with every move. School choice advocates envision parents and students acting as consumers in an education marketplace, trying out different schools until they find one that “fits,” but as this study shows, the movement this implies clearly has far-reaching effects on teaching and student learning.

Summary

Research on charter schools, vouchers, and choice severely undermines the claims made by advocates of school choice and privatization of public schools. There is no evidence that privatization improves public education, and often it has created far more problems than it has solved. Policy Matters has documented some of these problems in Ohio as well as some of the examples of more effective charters. We implore lawmakers, educators, and parents to listen to the research, not the rhetoric.

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*Policy Matters Ohio is a nonprofit, nonpartisan state policy research institute
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