

# **Inquiring Minds topic – 31 August 2018**

**Moderator: Riv Swartz**

## **Charter Schools**

**Public education in the United States has been under a good deal of legitimate scrutiny for many years. Our students have not consistently demonstrated stellar achievement when compared with other industrialized countries such as Russia, Japan and China. Such results are of particular concern within a democracy because this system of government relies on the knowledge and insights of its citizens in order to maintain an effective electorate.**

**Over the years, various methods have been attempted in order to produce a higher level of achievement with consistent, accountable and predictable results. One of the latest attempts to improve our educational system over the last several decades has been the establishment of Charter Schools. The information below provides key ingredients in understanding the Charter School movement.**

### **Questions to Consider:**

- 1. What are the pros and cons of Charter Schools?**
- 2. How would you compare Charter Schools with more traditional schools?**
- 3. Why is it difficult to research the effectiveness of Charter Schools?**
- 4. Do Charter Schools have a place in a democratic system of government?**
- 5. If you were enrolling your child in school today, would you consider a Charter School?**

### **What are charter schools?**

**Simply put, a charter school is a non-religious public school operating under a contract, or “charter,” that governs its operation. All details of school operation—its name, organization, management and curriculum—are set by the charter, which also outlines how the school will measure**

**student performance. Since charter schools are publicly funded, they must have open enrollment policies, may not charge tuition, and must still participate in state testing and federal accountability programs.**

# Charter Schools: Problems and Solutions

By [Paul Heroux](#)

As a State Rep, I get a ton of emails about supporting and opposing raising the cap on charter schools in Massachusetts. One side contends that there should be more choice in public schools and the other side contends that charter schools take money away from traditional public schools. Both sides are correct. But there are more issues to consider than these two concerns.

## Funding

The first issue is one of funding. Charter schools take money away from traditional public schools. If I may simplify it, the average cost per pupil is shifted from the public school district to the charter school to pay for the education of that individual student, and this doesn't even consider transportation. However, this is problematic. The average cost of a student is different from a traditional public school and a charter school, and then it is further complicated when we consider that the fixed costs and the marginal costs of the student that create the average costs are different between charter schools and traditional public school. The issue is still further complicated when a student leaves a charter school; after a certain period of time the money would not follow the student back to the traditional public school. If the money would just follow a student on a prorated basis throughout the academic year, there is still the issue of the difference in fixed, marginal and average costs between the traditional public school and the charter school.

The way to fix the issue is for the legislature to create a second funding stream in the budget for charter schools so that money is not taken out of traditional public schools. This issue is in need of a Legislative branch fix.

### **Performance**

Another issue is one of performance. Charter schools often contend that their students perform better on standardized tests than traditional public schools. This may or may not be true. First, I have serious problems with standardized tests because the scores reflect many non-academic influences. Second, charter schools often compare their scores to other traditional public schools, but they shouldn't. A charter school is a self-selected group of students who have parents who want their children to do well so much so that they took the time to enroll them in another school. This is a cohort or self-selection bias. Comparing charter students to a group of people who are made up of people who wanted to get into a charter school mixed with people who didn't is inappropriate. It compares apples to oranges.

The way to correctly measure the performance of a charter school is to compare a group of students in the charter school to a specific group of students in a traditional public school. We can do this using the lottery process. Charter schools often have more applications than they have seats. As such, a lottery is (supposed) to randomly select students. This random selection creates a group of two sets of students with no consistent difference between the two groups except that one group got into the charter school and the other did not. The group of students who did not get into the charter school is a subset of students in the traditional public school; this is who the charter school students should be compared to. Even then, it should be the same cohort that is compared. By doing this, we are comparing apples to apples. This issue is probably in need of an Executive Branch regulation on the performance indicators.

### **Innovation**

A third issue I have is that charter schools are supposed to be laboratories for best practices. As of right now, most charter schools I know of are open to visitors. However,

this transparency doesn't ensure that the outcomes or practices are in-fact better than traditional public schools. This is why I believe that we need to properly measure the outcomes of charter schools, which was my previous point. Even then, we still need to have a systematic way to disseminate the best-practices. This is both a Legislative and Executive branch issue.

### **Failing Schools**

A fourth issue is that we need to find out which charter schools are failing and which are succeeding. Again, this gets back to proper outcome measures. But alas, we too often see useless numbers on a page and not real outcomes.

### **Students with Disabilities**

A fifth issue is that some charter schools allegedly cherry pick their students and exclude students with disabilities. This is against federal law and if it is happening, those charters should be penalized, which is probably a judicial branch issue.

I support raising the cap on charter schools because it gives parents better choice about where to send their children. But before we raise the cap, we need to address these outstanding issues first. If we don't we create more problems than we solve, and we still won't know if a charter school is better than a traditional public school.

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