

The Realities of Charter Schools

Below are excerpts from newspapers and articles reporting on the myriad of issues communities are facing in America with charter schools.

Charter schools foster segregation

<http://www.businessweek.com/news/2012-01-04/segregated-charter-schools-evoke-separate-but-equal-era-in-u-s-.html>

Six decades after the U.S. Supreme Court struck down “separate but equal” schools for blacks and whites, segregation is growing because of charter schools, privately run public schools that educate 1.8 million U.S. children. While charter-school leaders say programs targeting ethnic groups enrich education, they are isolating low-achievers and damaging diversity, said Myron Orfield, a lawyer and demographer.

“It feels like the Deep South in the days of Jim Crow segregation,” said Orfield, who directs the University of Minnesota Law School’s Institute on Race & Poverty. “When you see an all-white school and an all-black school in the same neighborhood in this day and age, it’s shocking.”

Charter schools are more segregated than traditional public schools, according to a 2010 report by the Civil Rights Project at the University of California, Los Angeles. Researchers studied 40 states, the District of Columbia, and 39 metropolitan areas. In particular, higher percentages of charter-school students attend what the report called “racially isolated” schools, where 90 percent or more students are from disadvantaged minority groups.

Unregulated charter schools

<http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2012/04/02/treasurers-mishandle-finances-at-charter-schools.html>

Spend first, ask permission later, and don’t bother with receipts.

The loose financial systems at some of Ohio’s charter schools have led to questionable spending in recent years. Some schools hired treasurers with spotty track records; others hired qualified treasurers but disregarded their advice when they insisted on better checks and balances.

The recent case of a charter-school treasurer who misspent more than \$600,000 in public money over a decade at several schools has highlighted how common

fiscal missteps have been in charters. Fifteen of the 20 entities with the most charges of misspending by the state auditor are charter schools.

And the misspending wasn't all at the hands of Carl W. Shye Jr., the treasurer from New Albany who lost his school treasurer's license last month. A handful of other charter treasurers have racked up dozens of demands for repayment by the state totaling hundreds of thousands of dollars at multiple schools.

State Auditor Dave Yost said he's pushing for a law that would strengthen accountability for school treasurers and require more training about how to manage public dollars.

<http://www.texanreport.com>

C o r r u p t i o n , s c a n d a l a n d w a s t e i n T e x a s C h a r t e r S c h o o l

The El Paso School of Excellence, an embattled Texas Charter School, has closed its doors. The failed Charter school is officially part of the Rylie Faith Family Academy Charter schools located in Dallas, Texas and operated by Karen and Don Belknap. It is worth noting that J.L. Lewis founded the El Paso School of Excellence in 2000, and is the brother of Karen Belknap.

Both schools have engaged in nepotism and suffered from questionable accounting practices and general mismanagement resulting in the placement of a TEA monitor for much of the school's ten-year existence. Dr. Jack Ammons was given the responsibility of monitoring the school and has only recently seen the need to oust the school's founder, J.L. Lewis, as Superintendent. This ouster resulted in the school's charter being surrendered back to the State of Texas, effectively closing the school.

<http://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/article/3-plead-guilty-to-fraud-through-charter-schools-1932680.php>

THREE PLEAD GUILTY TO SWINDLING STATE THROUGH CHARTER SCHOOLS: FAMILY MEMBERS INFLATED STUDENT AND LUNCH FIGURES, REAPED \$5 MILLION

Three relatives pleaded guilty Monday to swindling at least \$5 million from state and federal governments by inflating the enrollment and the number of free lunches served at the defunct Prepared Table Charter School.

The guilty pleas, in a case that tarnished the reputation of charter schools and inspired tougher laws governing their operation, come three weeks after the death of the accused mastermind, the Rev. Harold Wilcox.

Wilcox and three family members were accused of using the bank accounts of the Greater Progressive Baptist Church, where he was pastor, to launder fraud profits.

http://www.nysut.org/files/media_100427_charterschools.pdf

A \$2 Billion Decision The Case for Reforming New York's Charter School Law

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There are 141 charter schools now operating in New York State, and others in the pipeline could bring the state to its authorizing limit of 200 later this year.¹ As the state approaches its statutory cap of 200, charter management is lobbying vigorously for the cap to be lifted without any changes in the law governing their operations. New York State United Teachers, which represents teachers in both charter and regular public schools, is steadfast in saying that any lifting of the cap must be accompanied by needed reforms to the law — reforms that would more fairly fund both charters and regular public schools; require charter management to more fully disclose finances and eliminate conflicts of interest; and require charter management to be fair and transparent about student enrollment and testing.

NYSUT believes that charter schools can have an important place in public education — including the vital, but as-yet-unrealized mission of partnering with regular public schools in identifying what works and what can be replicated to advance learning for students at risk. Far too many charter operators have eroded the promise of charter schools by under-serving students most in need. In some cases, charter operators have put profits, their personal financial interests or their business interests ahead of student learning and public transparency.

Now, more than 10 years into New York's charter experiment, there are more questions than answers about this seismic shift in public education.

This report identifies some of the questions that must be answered, and some of the changes needed in the law, before the charter cap can be lifted. It relies on public records, many obtained through Freedom of Information requests, to identify important questions about current practices at a number of New York State's charter schools.

Problems closing poor performing charter schools

http://articles.mcall.com/2012-04-22/news/mc-allentown-charter-school-oversight-20120421_1_vitalistic-officials-charter-school-appeal-board-president-robert-e-smith

The Allentown School Board was hoping not to go down this path. But the facts, rattled off in measured tones by district administrators at a meeting this month, forced its hand:

Children have not been receiving speech therapy and soon might lose physical and occupational therapy. Federal education dollars were used to pay the electricity bill. Some children were misdiagnosed. None is getting the required number of classroom hours.

It's time to revoke the charter, school board President Robert E. Smith Jr. said at the April 12 Education Committee meeting, because there's no moral, ethical or common-sense reason Vitalistic Therapeutic Charter School of the Lehigh Valley should stay open.

The board is expected to take the first step in that process Thursday by voting to send Vitalistic notice that it has 90 days to fix its financial and special education problems or be shut down.

Close it? Not without a fight, Vitalistic Principal Ron DeIaco has vowed.

"We will certainly appeal," he said after the committee meeting. And taxpayers will lose.

Charter school revocation hearings are costly, rare and time-consuming in Pennsylvania, which has 167 charter schools. Only eight charters have been revoked and those decisions were appealed to the state Charter School Appeal Board, state Department of Education records show.

The most recent case is in its fifth year and involves Pocono Mountain School District and Pocono Mountain Charter School. It has cost taxpayers more than \$700,000.

Conflicts of Interests

http://www.azcentral.com/news/articles/20121117charter-snapshots.html?nclick_check=1

\$42.3 million for curriculum

Primavera Technical Learning Center

City: Chandler | Grades: 6-12 | 2011 enrollment: 3,160

Number of schools: 2 | Year opened: 2001

Payments: Damien Creamer and Vanessa Baviera Rudilla run one of the largest online schools in Arizona, and the non-profit school contracts with a for-profit company, American Virtual Academy, for its curriculum and software. Creamer and Rudilla are officers of the non-profit and earn salaries. American Virtual Academy also is owned by Creamer and Rudilla. From fiscal 2007 to 2011, the non-profit paid \$42.3 million to American Virtual Academy. The non-profit is exempt from state purchasing laws. Damien Creamer said when the school started it purchased software and curriculum from a number of vendors. The curriculum was mediocre and the software burdensome and unwieldy, he said. As American Virtual Academy's products developed, the school began using its services. Because the company is the only one to offer such an online platform, getting price quotes from other vendors is not an option, he said. Creamer said he makes sure the non-profit school and his for-profit company operate at arm's length.

Charter school attempts to bribe state evaluator

http://www.nola.com/education/index.ssf/2011/07/state_shuts_down_abramson_char.html

Inci Akpinar, the vice president of a company called Atlas Texas Construction & Trading, sat down with an official from the Louisiana Department of Education a little more than a year ago and made him an offer.

As the state official, Folwell Dunbar, recalled in a memo to department colleagues, Akpinar flattered him with "a number of compliments" before getting to the point: "I have twenty-five thousand dollars to fix this problem: twenty thousand for you and five for me."

At the time, Dunbar was investigating numerous complaints against Abramson Science & Technology Charter School in eastern New Orleans, which shares apparent ties to Akpinar's firm as well as charter schools in other states run by Turkish immigrants.

In fact, state auditors had already turned up startling deficiencies at Abramson. The records they kept of unannounced visits to the campus, as well as interviews with former teachers, paint a chaotic scene: classrooms without instructors for weeks and even months at a time, students who claimed their science fair projects had been done by teachers, a single special-needs instructor for a school of nearly 600.

Charter School Campaign Contributions

<http://charterschoolscandals.blogspot.com/2012/11/charter-school-companies-online.html>

"Charter school companies, online learning outfits try to wield influence in Tallahassee."

In the looming battle for public education dollars, Jon Hage has launched a pre-emptive strike.

His school management company, Charter Schools USA, has doled out more than \$205,000 in contributions to political candidates and organizations this election cycle, state records show. That's more than triple what the Fort Lauderdale-based company spent on political campaigns in 2010, and seven times what it spent in 2008.

"If we don't support our friends in Tallahassee, they are left out there to

take the enemy's bullet," Hage said.

For-profit education companies are becoming serious players in lobbying the Florida Legislature. In the current election cycle, charter school companies, school management firms, online learning outfits and for-profit colleges have lavished more than \$1.8 million to statehouse candidates, electioneering organizations and political parties, according to a Miami Herald review of Florida campaign finance data.

Charter school illegal enrollment practices

"IPS superintendent calls for state investigation into charter schools." FOX59 (IN), 10/24/2011

Indianapolis Public Schools Superintendent Eugene G. White called for a state investigation Monday. White called for the state to investigate what he calls an illegal charter schools practice that will cost his district \$500,000 in state aid this year.

In a letter to State Superintendent of Public Instruction Dr. Tony Bennett, White claims that charter schools are intentionally waiting until after the states average daily membership date to release special needs, homeless and other difficult to place students back to IPS, thereby keeping state aid for the students, while shouldering IPS with the responsibility to educate them...

White said 72 children have come back to IPS because they were homeless and could not be transported to charter schools or the charter school was unequipped to handle their special disabilities or they faced disciplinary expulsion...

White said IPS staff videotaped interviews with returning students and parents about their decisions to leave charter schools and those tapes will be made available to state officials and Mayor Greg Ballard, who sponsors the schools, and Ball State University, which oversees the system.

White said the practice violates state and federal laws and is asking for investigations of 10 charter schools in particular...

Lowering standards for charter schools

<http://dianeravitch.net/2013/01/21/john-whites-campaign-to-smash-public-education-in-louisiana-continues/>

This day, set aside to honor the egalitarian message and life of Dr. Martin Luther asking Jr., is an appropriate time to consider the efforts by Governor Bobby Jindal to dismantle public education in Louisiana and replace it with a free market of choices, one with for-profit schools and no unions.

The Jindal plan includes vouchers, charters, for-profit online schools, and for-profit vendors, as well as a teacher evaluation that assures that few teachers will get or keep tenure. They will never have the protection of academic freedom, a concept unknown to corporate reformers.

Jindal's state commissioner John White, who taught for two years as part of Teach for America and has never evaluated a teacher, says that the his standards will make it very difficult for teachers in Louisiana to win tenure.

In response to the new evaluation system, there is massive demoralization; the rate of teacher retirements has spiked by 25%. Superintendents say they are having a tough time replacing veteran teachers who are bailing out of White's dystopian state.

Meanwhile, John White has recommended a change in state board policy so that schools no longer will be "required" to have a librarian, a library or counselors. He wants the language to be changed to "recommended," so that principals have the autonomy to decide if they want to spend their diminishing funds on a librarian or something else. Will this improve education?

Here are the proposed changes:

*Teachers, parents, and students need to know the proposed changes
Superintendent John White is asking the BESE board to approve next
Tuesday.*

*Two large changes will result in the possible removal of all counselors,
librarians, and libraries.*

*Comprehensive Counseling (1125) no longer requires secondary schools
to have counselors, only that "It shall be recommended that ..." they have*

them. Libraries and Librarians (1705) have been reworded similarly: “It is recommended that each secondary school have [them] ...” (All italics are mine.) This will allow school systems to eliminate these highly valuable and necessary individuals.

“Carnegie Unit and Credit Flexibility” (2314) allows students to earn credit in two ways. The traditional path involves passing a course with a 67 or greater. The new path is for students to demonstrate proficiency in one of three ways. 1) They can pass a nationally-recognized test, though no definition of such a test follows. 2) They can pass a locally developed test of proficiency, with, again, no definition following. 3) Lastly they can submit portfolios that meet a list of requirements to demonstrate proficiency. Students can now attend any amount of time they wish, because should they demonstrate proficiency, they can still earn the Carnegie credit.

This is only a sample of other changes.

- · *No school system is required to participate in a School Accreditation program (311) every five years and receive a classification.*
- · *The school will no longer be sited for having staff not holding a valid Louisiana teaching certificate or for having physical facilities that “do not conform to the current federal, state, and local building fire, safety, and health codes.”*
- · *One section (1103) states a high school student shall be in attendance a minimum of 167 days out of 182, but later Section 2314 says the minimum number of minutes required is 7,965, which can be achieved in 159.3 days in a 7-period day, and in 133 days in a 6-period day.*
- · *Section 2313 for Elementary Program of Studies (covering K-8) has been stripped of its suggested outline of content areas. Any school can design any curricula it deems appropriate.*
- · *The section on Summer Schools (2501 and 2503) have been gutted of most of their requirements, including minimum instructional hours and class size limits.*
- · *One person without a valid teaching certificate could teach hundreds of students in one class taught for one week if the school superintendent approves it.*
- · *Section 1703 also allows local educational agencies to use state money to purchase textbooks that BESE has not approved.*

No one could seriously believe those changes will improve education in Louisiana.

Charter school administrator's salaries

<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/features/education/o-s-charter-principal-500000-payout-20121024,0,1241443.full.story>

The principal of a failed Orange County charter school took home a check for more than \$500,000 as the school closed down in June and is still being paid thousands of dollars a month to wrap up the school's affairs.

The check for \$519,453.36 in taxpayer money was cut to Kelly Young, principal of NorthStar High School, two days after the Orange County School Board accepted the school's plan to close in lieu of being shut down for poor performance.

The payment, which was authorized by the charter school's independent board, appears to be legal...

Young's payout was based on a contract that called for her to be paid about \$305,000 per year through 2014, even though the school's contract was up for renewal in 2012. She was paid 85 percent of her remaining contract.

Her yearly pay and bonuses to run the school, which served about 180 largely at-risk students in east [Orange County](#), was higher than that of Barbara Jenkins, superintendent of the 181,000-student Orange County Public Schools...

Because charter schools do not have to report their principals' salaries in Florida, it is unclear how many might have contracts or salaries similar to Young's...

Billionaires Boys Club

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/05/23/bill-gates-selling-bad-advice-to-the-public-schools.html>

Diane Ravitch

Over the weekend, The New York Times published a startling expose of

Bill Gates' successful efforts to shape education policy in the United States.

As I showed in my recent book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, Gates is one of a small group of billionaires that is promoting privatization, de-professionalization, and high-stakes testing as fixes for American public schools. I called this group "the billionaire boys club," which includes Gates, the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, and the Walton Family Foundation.

The Times article documents how Gates has put almost everyone concerned with education policy in his debt: advocacy groups and think tanks of left and right, education journals, public television programs, leaders in academia, local school districts, and state education groups. In addition to what is reported in the Times, Gates has significantly influenced the policies of the U.S. Department of Education, especially its signature program "Race to the Top," which encourages more privately managed charter schools and recommends that states judge teacher quality by student test scores.

Gates appears to mean well, but he has obviously—and repeatedly—gotten bad advice. The main effect of Gates' policy has been to demoralize millions of teachers, who don't understand how they went from being respected members of the community to Public Enemy No. 1.

Now, he has thrown his support behind the idea that America has too many bad teachers, and he is pouring billions into the hunt for bad teachers. As the Times article shows, he has bought the support of a wide range of organizations, from conservative to liberal. He has even thrown a few million to the teachers' unions to gain their assent. Unmentioned is that Gates has gotten the federal government to join him in his current belief that what matters most is creating teacher evaluation systems tied to student test scores.

Gates seems not to know or care that the leading testing experts in the nation agree that this is a fruitless and wrongheaded way to identify either good teachers or bad teachers. Student test scores depend on what students do, what effort they expend, how often they attend school, what support they have at home, and most especially on their socioeconomic status and family income. Test scores may go up or go down, in response to the composition of the class, without regard to teacher quality. Students are not randomly assigned to teachers. A teacher of gifted children, whose scores are already sky-high, may see little or no gains. A teacher of children with disabilities may be thrilled to see students respond to

instruction, even if their test scores don't go up. A teacher in a poor neighborhood may have high student turnover and poor attendance, and the scores will say nothing about his or her quality. But all will get low marks on state evaluation systems and may end up fired.

So far, the main effect of Gates' policy has been to demoralize millions of teachers, who don't understand how they went from being respected members of the community to Public Enemy No. 1.

As a nation we now have a toxic combination of a failed federal policy—No Child Left Behind—which made testing the be-all and end-all of schooling, and Bill Gates' misguided belief that teacher quality can be determined by student test scores. In the years ahead, American students will undergo more and more testing, the testing industry will fatten, and the quality of education will suffer. To save their necks, teachers will teach to bad tests, school districts will drop the arts, and shrink the time available for subjects like history, geography, civics, science, and foreign languages to make time for more testing. And there will be more cheating scandals as test scores determine the lives and careers of teachers and principals, and the survival of their schools.

Abrupt charter school closings

<http://www.miamiherald.com/2012/09/14/3002151/three-charter-schools-to-close.html>

Financial problems close three charter schools in Broward

Parents, students and teachers are unexpectedly scrambling to find a new school.

BY MICHAEL VASQUEZ

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The abrupt end was punctuated by locked doors and silence at one school, and with a chaotic gathering of parents and students at another.

But the story at three Broward charter schools was essentially the same on Friday: financial problems had led to closure, leaving parents and students to unexpectedly scramble to find a new place to enroll.

“We should have had way more time to look for other schools for our kids,” said Nicole Williams, whose son Alfonso was a 10th-grader at Eagle Charter Academy in Lauderdale Lakes, one of the three schools now closed. Also closing this week were the nearby SMART Charter School

(run by the same company as Eagle Charter), and Touchdowns4life Charter School in Tamarac, which was founded by former Miami Dolphins running back Terry Kirby.

Williams said the school sent her a notification letter on Wednesday.

Friday afternoon, Eagle Charter's main office was filled with parents requesting withdrawal documents and other assistance, but school administrators appeared at times overwhelmed.

"I've been in there for three-plus hours," said parent James Chester, who ultimately left without his son's withdrawal forms because he had to get to work. "Every parent yelling, screaming, they didn't have anything in order."

Switching schools after the academic year starts is a difficult process, and students are often shut out from the most-coveted schools as application deadlines have passed. The more than 400 students who attended these three schools are all eligible to attend the "home" public school in their neighborhood, but dissatisfaction with that home school is what led many families to pick a charter school in the first place.

http://www.twincities.com/localnews/ci_19668655

Financial woes force West St. Paul's Vessey Leadership Academy to close

By Christopher Magan
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Students from General John Vessey Jr. Leadership Academy are hunting for new schools after their 8-year-old charter high school abruptly closed over Christmas break after running out of money.

The mood was glum at the small West St. Paul school Tuesday, what should have been the first day back, as students hugged and said goodbye. It was their last chance to collect belongings before trying to find a new place to attend classes and finish out the school year.

"It sucks," said Mara Jafar of Richfield, who helped her son Cody clean out his locker Tuesday. "It is not exactly an easy transition in the middle of freshman year."

Jafar said she received a letter just a few days before, notifying her of the school's Dec. 23 decision to close.

School officials cited a combination of factors that forced the closure. Leadership and staffing turnover caused enrollment to fall from more than 100 students in 2007 to about 50 this school year.