

Education Watch: Are Charter Schools Public? Two parallel and unfair systems



Charter schools were originally developed as laboratories of educational innovation, designed to find solutions to longstanding challenges in the public education system and export those ideas far and wide. But since they were originally developed, charters have far exceeded the vision of limited experimental institutions and have been successfully marketed as a panacea for all that ails our public schools. That experiment, unfortunately, has failed.

The Great Experiment

In 2011, the North Carolina General Assembly voted to allow an unlimited number of charter schools in the state. However, the basic laws regarding how such schools operate while they were regarded as an “experiment” were not changed. This resulted in an entire class of schools which received public money but were not governed by the local Board of Education. Instead, they were allowed to form an independent board, and the charters are only beholden to that board. The composition of the board is up to the charter.

Who is Steering the Ship?

Since charter schools in North Carolina do not answer to a local Board of Education, they get to set their own rules. Why does that matter? Because these charter boards do not always have the best interest of the students at heart, since many charters are managed by out-of-state, for-profit companies. Charters are not required to have all licensed teachers, have no restrictions on class size, have no curriculum requirements, are not required to provide transportation to and from class, and are even exempt from providing free and reduced lunches for low-income students.

But Charters Are Better for Students, Right?

The whole point to the experiment of charter schools was to find better methods of teaching, and therefore provide a better education to students. Unfortunately, it has not worked out that way. In a study conducted over 16 states by Stanford University in 2009, 83% of charter school students performed at the same level, or worse, than their traditional public school peers. In North Carolina last year, more than 1/3 of charters failed to meet their measurable objectives.

The Money Drain

As local school districts lose students to charter schools, they lose funding for those students. A measurable loss of funds poses significant challenges for traditional public schools, which are often forced to reduce staff, programs, and other basic expenditures. The quality of traditional public school education is further threatened by the depletion of resources prompted by the growing number of loosely-regulated charter schools. Charters have become drains on traditional public schools, rather than serving as labs of innovation that benefit teachers and students.

Action NC is a non-profit grassroots community organization that empowers low to moderate-income communities to take action and win victories on issues of concern to our members. For more information, visit us at www.actionnc.org.