

The TRUTH about CHARTER SCHOOLS

In recent years, the nation's so-called education "reform" movement has fixated on charter schools as the cure-all for public education.

In Montana, some critics even claim our public school system is somehow "failing" because we don't have charter schools. But the facts tell a very different story.

What is a charter school? Charter schools are taxpayer-funded elementary or secondary schools that are exempt from some of the rules and statutes that apply to other public schools in a state.



The charter school movement has grown in the past couple of decades based on the promise that, if exempted from regulations, charters would outperform traditional public schools because they have more flexibility to meet student needs. But it hasn't worked out that way.

Nationally, charters have a dismal track record: A 2009 study from Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes found that nationally:

- Almost half of charter schools (46%) were no better than neighboring public schools.
- Over a third (37%) were significantly worse.
- Only 17% were better than the local public schools. This is true even though many charters weed out the hardest-to-teach students.

Poor accountability: In charter schools, lack of accountability has often led to misuse of public funds. In Florida, Texas, Ohio, Michigan, Missouri, Washington, and elsewhere, you can find numerous references to charter school operators who have been investigated and indicted for fraud and mismanagement of millions of dollars in tax money.

By contrast, a great deal of transparency accompanies tax dollars that go to Montana's public schools. For example, both the Office of Public Instruction and individual schools have detailed web sites where citizens can learn about the qualifications of the teachers, administration, and staff; academic goals; test scores; facilities; extracurricular programs; and even what's on the lunch menu.

The profit motive: In many states, "charter schools have become a parallel school system unto themselves, a system controlled largely by for-profit management companies and private landlords — one and the same, in many cases — and rife with insider deals and potential conflicts of interest." ("Florida Charter Schools: Big Money, Little Oversight," Scott Hiaasen & Kathleen McGrory, *Miami Herald*, 12/10/11)

Scams, scandal, and fraud: A 2014 report released by Integrity in Education and the Center for Popular Democracy revealed, "Fraudulent charter operators in 15 states are responsible for losing, misusing, or wasting over \$100 million in taxpayer money."

The report, "Charter School Vulnerabilities to Waste, Fraud And Abuse," found "hundreds of cases of charter school operators embezzling funds, using tax dollars to illegally support other, non-ed-

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educational businesses, taking public dollars for services they didn't provide, inflating their enrollment numbers to boost revenues, and putting children in potential danger by forgoing safety regulations or withholding services." ("Exposing the Charter School Lie," Salon, 1/1/15, Jeff Bryant)

Charter schools drain public tax dollars from already-underfunded public schools to benefit the few. *All* students need access to quality public education. Charter schools are not the answer.

Change of heart: Many education experts like Diane Ravitch have changed their minds about charter schools. Ravitch, former assistant secretary of education under George H.W. Bush, once championed charter schools. After seeing "how these ideas were working out in reality," she wrote in *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, she now speaks out publicly *against* charter schools.

Why mess with Montana's success? By all measures, Montana's public schools provide a top-quality education. We consistently score in the top 10 states for student achievement in reading, math, and science. We have one of the highest graduation rates in the nation (86%).

Montana already allows charter schools. Chapter 55, ARM accreditation standards 10.55.604 spells out how charter schools may be created in Montana. Montana's rule on charter schools wisely avoids many of the pitfalls other states have encountered by requiring that charter schools meet or exceed the requirements of the Montana Constitution, state law, and school accreditation standards.

Also, charters in Montana must be administered by a locally elected board of trustees in an existing school district. They must guarantee unrestricted student access (they can't weed out students with special needs, as many charter schools in other states do). They must comply with all health and safety laws. Teachers must be licensed and endorsed according to state law and school accreditation standards. And school employees must be given collective bargaining rights.

Yet there are only a couple of charter schools in Montana. There's no need. Innovation and choice already abound in our public schools. Montana parents and students have many alternative educational opportunities to pursue within the public school system. A few examples:

- The Montessori program in the Helena public schools;
- Alternative high schools such as Laser Alternative School in Kalispell, Willard in Missoula, Bridger in Bozeman; Health Sciences Academy in Kalispell;
- Billings Career Center in Billings, Hawthorne School for the Arts in Bozeman.

In any other state, these would be called "charter schools." But in Montana, these programs operate within the local public school districts. They must follow the same transparency and accountability requirements as regular public schools. We don't have any of the graft and corruption that comes with giving tax dollars to private operators posing as nonprofits.

And there's more: The Montana Digital Academy, open school district and school enrollment almost everywhere in our state, dual enrollment in high school and college curriculum, easy private school student access to public school education opportunities such as Explore School in Helena — all are samples of public school innovation in Montana.

Let's focus on what does work. Taking scarce tax dollars away from public schools won't improve education in Montana. Here's what will: Smaller class sizes; more parental involvement; up-to-date textbooks and technology; early childhood education; better teacher preparation, mentoring, and evaluation. These solutions put children, not profits, at the center of school improvement.