

Why Not Free Choice?

By Melissa Rooney
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Two years ago, I began researching the differences between charter and 'traditional' public schools. I am still deciphering the complex relationship that divides an increasingly vocal public regarding whether charters are beneficial or detrimental to the public school system, at large.

Supporters firmly espouse the 'Free Choice' provided by charters. 'Parents Vote with their Feet,' and excessive withdrawals close the school. Concerning accusations that charters disproportionately withdraw upper-socioeconomic kids, whose parents can afford to be involved, supporters insist that, like DPS magnet schools, charters must accept "all who apply," and space limitations require a lottery. In addition, though charters receive both state and local funding, unlike other public schools capital costs are not included in charters' state/local student funding, meaning charters fund school construction/rental from their operating allocations and, thus, save taxpayers huge costs for school construction. Supporters further argue that Durham charters remove pressure on a school system that is already overcrowded.

Opponents argue that, because they aren't required to offer free/reduced lunches or transportation, charters can't help but exclude low-income families. They say that DPS must accommodate every child crossing the schoolyard gate, while charter schools can prevent overcrowding by limiting enrollment. And they quote a 2010-11 handout given to parents visiting a Durham charter school -- "The high expectations of Voyager Academy may not be suitable for those... who are struggling academically" -- interpreting it as "Please don't apply if you'll bring down our test scores." In addition, opponents insist the transfers of individual kids to charters do not decrease DPS's operating expenses but do greatly decrease operating *funds* (by transferring the respective student allotments outside DPS) -- you can't eliminate an Algebra teacher/class because a few kids transferred. Opponents further complain that charters expel difficult kids after the school year begins but retain those students' yearly allotments even though they moved to DPS. And if a charter 'returns a kid to DPS' at the academic year's end, their test scores are reported under DPS, not the charter.

Charter supporters complain that the public school system is broken and they have every right to seek other publicly funded options. I wholeheartedly agree with providing education choices, offering small school/class environments, and giving autonomy to schools, their principals/directors and teachers. (Every charter school is controlled by an individual board, rather than being micromanaged by the county school board or state/federal legislatures.)

But if the school system is broken, let's fix it, not undermine it by creating alternatives that compete on an unlevel playing field. If charters receive public funds, they should have the same requirements, for better or for worse, of other publicly funded schools. I've heard complaints that charters' intended innovative curriculums are hamstrung by NC testing requirements, described as curriculum based tests that do not measure student progress over time. If this and other requirements hamstring charters, why should we leave them in place at other public schools?

Charters should be required (and should receive equivalent funding) to provide transportation and free/reduced lunches so that lower-income families aren't discouraged from applying. I'm told that most Durham charter schools already have free/reduced

lunches and that the others have 'internal programs,' so I wouldn't expect any objections to making it an official requirement.

As requested by the North Carolina Association of Educators (NCAE), and rejected by the Senate Education Subcommittee (Senate Bill 8) this week, NC should require that: 1) charter schools hire licensed teachers (NCAE noted that teachers whose licenses were revoked by the state are now employed in charter schools); 2) student test data be reported under the charter school when a student transfers from a charter to a traditional public school within 45 school days prior to mandated (EOG or EOC) testing, and vice versa; 3) Charter school student demographics mirror those of the district; and 4) Best practices from charter schools be identified, disseminated, and correlated with student achievement, for possible replication in traditional and other charter schools.

In addition, like DPS schools, charters should have to pay personnel using the state salary schedule. The state/county must also ensure the money *really* follows the student, at the very least by reporting quarterly student numbers/year (it's currently biannual). ESL/EC ('English as a second language' and 'exceptional children') requirements must be consistent b/w Charters and DPS schools. And the flexibility permitted in charter schools' educational schedules should be extended to all public schools (education schedules are currently mandated for the latter).

Until these inequities are removed, charters will continue to undermine DPS rather than provide the healthy competition and choice they insist is their goal.

On February 16, the Senate Education Committee passed the 'Charters School Act of 2011.' Senator Graham offered an amendment to create a weighted lottery system to help charters reflect their community's diversity and to strengthen the possibility that charters provide transportation and lunch – it was voted down. Durham's Senator McKissick had 6 friendly amendments, but though his hand was raised during the entire 50 minutes' discussion, the chair never recognized him.

The bill now goes to the Senate floor, where it's expected to pass. Next will be the House, most likely to full committee. I hope you will join me in sharing concerns with the House Education Committee (http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/gascripts/Committees/Committees.asp?sAction=ViewCommittee&sActionDetails=House%20Standing_17) and Delegation and Governor Perdue (<http://www.governor.state.nc.us/forms/contact.aspx> or bev.perdue@nc.gov).