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SpeakOut: Should States Lift the Caps on Charter Schools?

With Race to the Top, the public school landscape may change. BY JACQUELINE HEINZE



lift the cap is a tiered level of funding. There should be a prorated amount that remains with the host district that's used to sustain programs that the school district is required to provide by law. Any lifting of the cap should be done with an eye toward what it truly costs to educate students in the charter environment and what it truly costs to educate students in the traditional host district."



"Instead of increasing charter schools, let's learn from what they do well,"

says Bernard Pierorazio, superintendent of Yonkers Public Schools in New York. "What is the attraction of charter schools for parents? Why is the federal government bullying states into increasing the charter school cap in the recent Race to the Top legislation? The attraction is a rigorous core curriculum that challenges all students; a support staff that cares about children; an extended daily learning schedule and a year-round program; smaller class size; parental involvement; dynamic school leaders who use data and have empathy for children; and, most importantly, an instructional staff that disaggregates data, individualizes learning, and consistently evaluates student progress through formative assessments.

"Urban school superintendents across this nation struggle to implement the same goals as charter schools on a daily basis but are thwarted time and again by the well-negotiated but adult-centered rules imposed by organized labor, as well as state and city governmental financial constraints that cause an annual disruption to education. Unions must become cognizant of the big picture. Teacher evaluation based on student

"There's got to be some consideration given to those left in the host district,"

says Dr. Bernard Taylor, superintendent of Grand Rapids Public Schools in Michigan. "I have no problem with choice and I have no problem with charters, but we need to think about the district as a whole. Who's left in the host school district? How are those children going to be educated? If the charter cap is lifted, it has to be done in such a way that does not erode the ability of the traditional public school system to meet the needs of all of the rest of the students.

"We are in a financial crisis in Michigan. In our school district, fully 85 percent of our students are eligible for free and reduced lunch, and roughly half of our 19,000-student population is designated special ed, ELL, or both. Districts like mine are faced with edu-

cating the children who have the most pressing needs, and we have declining resources to meet those needs at the same time. We have a middle class in Grand Rapids, but our school district itself is deplete of any semblance of a middle class. Those students go to private school, parochial school, charter school, and our district loses those resources.

"If you look at our population relative to those populations in charter schools, they are significantly different. And charter laws state that every student is treated the same without consideration of educational need. A charter school is not obligated to the same degree that a traditional public school system is. So if the cap is lifted, are new charter schools going to be targeted to meet the needs of students with special needs? Because I have yet to see that happen. I have yet to see a charter school specifically open to meet the needs of special ed students. We can't look at this like we're able to fund everyone in the same exact way. So what I'm hoping you'll see if they

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success must be woven into every contractual agreement. Tenure rules must be reexamined to enable retraining and dismissal of continuously unsatisfactory teachers. Commensurate salaries and recognition of master teachers must also be part of every negotiated agreement. In addition, a longer school day and an elongated school year, including a robust early childhood program, must be part of every large urban district. This is how we make our public schools system strong and keep our students in it."



"Lift the charter cap, but keep the laws rigorous,"

says Carol Comeau, superintendent of Anchorage School

District. "In Alaska, the only charter schools that are allowed are those that are approved by a local school board, and then approved by the state board of education. But if the local school board doesn't approve them, then the state board cannot overrule that decision. Also, there is no outside entity that can approve charter schools. So because of that, I would have no objection whatsoever to lifting the cap.

"Anchorage has a large number of public school choices and has since the early 1970s. For example, we have a Montessori public school and language-immersion public schools built into our regular system. Also, charter schools are an integral part of any school district in the state of Alaska. So we still have those students; they are included in our count.

"We go through a very rigorous evaluation of each charter school proposal. Our school board has approved a lot of proposals, but they have also not approved some because the proposals were weak. In some cases, the proposals returned to us much stronger, and in some cases they just didn't come back. If the proposal passes, that charter school has the real support of the district.

"In some ways, the charter schools have helped the district overall. We have two charters that are homeschooling-based and they are partner schools with us. So students who have been out of the system and receive most of their education through homeschooling now have the opportunity to take some classes in the public system. That has been a

very good partnership, and it has helped bring students into the system who were formerly out of the system.

"Alaska does have certain limitations. For example, we require parents to transport their students to their choice schools. This creates a concern about the equity of access. Also, there is a lack of facilities, which is a large impediment to charter school development. The operators of these schools need to go out and lease commercial space and then renovate it. That is a big chunk out of their operating budget. But I will say, in talking to superintendents around the country, I hear their stories about charter schools and how many students have been taken out of their system and the consequences of that. It makes me glad that we have the laws that we do."



"Charter schools are not a silver bullet for what ails education,"

says Dr. Alan J. Ingram, superintendent of Springfield Public Schools in Massachusetts. "Opponents often cite the loss of revenue and the adverse impact on fixed costs as challenges to supporting charter schools. In my view, the conversation underscores the fierce sense of urgency that underperforming public schools should feel to improve student proficiency in a meaningful and measurable way. The alternative is that we will continue to lose students and finances to charter schools. It is the reality facing Massachusetts and school districts nationwide.

"The question is not whether we should have charter schools or not. More importantly, we should seek answers to questions that speak to the autonomies that charter schools enjoy; the educational practices they use with evidence of success; and how regular public schools might replicate those best practices.

"The overarching challenge is to move beyond the debate on charter schools and provide the right incentives and pressures for transforming chronically underperforming schools, particularly those in urban districts. In the words of James Baldwin: "These are all our children. We will all profit by, or pay for, whatever they become." ■