



The Problem with Charter Schools In North Carolina

By Christine Kushner
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I spent 11 years on the Wake County Board of Education, and as a recovering School Board member, I admit that I am unabashedly biased and supportive of public education. I also admit to spending about 11 years criticizing charter schools and their effects on public schooling.

Why? Because, after decades of work, the main charter school movement has failed to achieve its purpose of improving public education, and those failures became crystal clear from my seat on a public school board. Charter schools have become part of the privatization movement. That hurts children, and it undermines the interests of taxpayers and undermines public education.

Charter schools were established in the 1990s for the expressed mission of bringing innovation in instruction along with the promise to share any ideas learned from their innovation to improve public education. That original intent is no longer evident—charter schools have long viewed themselves as competitors to public schools, not collaborators. And few are innovative, except for their pursuit of funding. In the long run, charters mostly have failed, in North Carolina and nationally, to achieve their original intent. Some examples:

- Decades of research and trends show that charter schools are increasing racial segregation in schools, and they make it harder for public school systems to promote integration.

- Charter schools are publicly funded but largely privately run, resulting in numerous scandals, misappropriation of tax dollars, and claims of discrimination and exclusion.
- For-profit charters are the fastest growing segment of the charter school movement, resulting in tax dollars being siphoned for short-term gains for shareholders instead of long-term investments in education for current and future generations.
- Despite their marketing, charter schools are not better—research shows that public schools in North Carolina out-perform charter schools in academic growth, a key indicator of student success; yet charters promote a false narrative that they are more successful than public schools.
- In 2021-22, one-third of charter schools in NC were either low-performing or continually low-performing.

Charter schools have not lived up to their purpose, and I am not here to advocate for their demise—I am here to advocate for better policy that helps charters fulfill their mission, which is to bring innovation and improvements to public education.

Policies and state laws must change in order to help our children receive fair public education—here are necessary changes:

- Prohibit for-profit charters as a means of protecting taxpayer dollars
- Place moratorium on charter expansions and place cap on the number of charters allowed in the state while conducting an analysis of the impacts of charters on public schools and public funds
- Increase fiscal responsibility and reporting to prevent waste of tax dollars
- Monitor special education to ensure students receive appropriate services
- Require planning and coordination with local school districts to protect taxpayer investments for the long-term
- Require diversity in student body, which is clearly stated in original NC charter school enabling legislation
- Encourage and fund school choice through magnet programs, within unified public school systems; magnet programs offer choice while retaining accountability, reducing segregation, and promoting innovation
- Place charter schools under control of elected school boards to give public accountability over public tax dollars

Taxpayers who do not have school aged children—about 70 percent of taxpayers—deserve accountability for their investments in public education. Those taxpayers cannot pick and choose which schools they want to invest their money in—the “winners and losers” dynamic that charters create. Traditional public schools operate as a unified, accountable system that gives taxpayers full transparency on how their tax dollars are being spent and how the students are performing academically. Tax payers have the right to vote in school board elections and select board members they feel use our fiscal resources appropriately and govern our public schools in the community’s best interest, not the narrow interests of select families or shareholders of for-profit companies. Charter school boards often operate independently with no taxpayer input. All taxpayers deserve to know that their investments are being used appropriately to educate children for their best futures.

Public schools provide equitable benefits to all children, not just a select few who enter charter or voucher schools. Public schools provide benefits for all, work to ensure basic amenities, and provide access for all students.

Public schooling is critical to the future opportunities of children, and so it is especially important that they are governed fairly and with equity. The culture wars are attacking this very idea of equity, with extremist right-wing parents pushing back on inclusion for black, immigrant, LGBTQ, and other marginalized students in their own school communities.

Carl Sandburg once said that the ugliest word in the English language is “exclusive.” As a society we need to embrace “inclusive” policies as a nation, especially for our children.

Charters are increasingly becoming “exclusive” enclaves; they resegregate school populations and create financial inefficiencies that are no longer sustainable. If earnest adults in the charter school movement want to have positive impacts on children, as they claim they do, they must lead and advocate for change.

Charters who want to be truly in the public’s interest must recognize the failures of the charter movement, which is now about profits, privatization, and exclusion. Public schools need real allies to reach and serve all children.

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Public Schools First NC

publicschoolsfirstnc.org * info@publicschoolsfirstnc.org

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