



***Op Ed: Charter Schools -- A Single Strand in NJ's Tapestry of Great Public Schools***

*Charter schools are just one of many ways to avoid the one-size-fits-all approach to education*

by Acting Commissioner Chris Cerf

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This week, the Department of Education will announce which charter schools will open in September, along with additional strategies to hold all charter schools accountable for results. Since charter schools have been in New Jersey for 15 years, it makes sense to go beyond the frequent misrepresentations to have an honest conversation about what charter schools are and why they are important to New Jersey.

Let me be clear from the start -- I support great public schools, whether they are district, charter, magnet, or vocational. A child in a classroom does not care about the governance structure of a school; what matters to children and families is whether they have an effective teacher that brings out the best in them and whether they are succeeding. We should all have only one priority -- making sure every student is in a great school that meets his needs and is preparing him for success in college and career.

As one way to create great schools, the legislature authorized charter schools in New Jersey in 1995. Charter schools, although not part of the local district, are public schools, with public school students and public school teachers, funded with public dollars. Like district-run public schools, they are open to all students and, unlike many magnet and vocational schools, they are legally prohibited from using admissions criteria. Charter schools receive additional autonomy from state and district regulations in exchange for a higher degree of accountability, meaning they can be closed by the state at any time if they fail to get results for children or are poorly managed.

In New Jersey, charter schools serve less than two percent of students, but they disproportionately serve our highest-need students. More than 61 percent of charter school students are African American, compared to the state average of 16 percent, and more than 70 percent of charter school students are low income, compared to 32 percent in the state.

What have we learned about charter schools in New Jersey over the past 15 years?

First, it is often forgotten that one of the first advocates for public charter schools was Albert Shanker, the former New York City teachers' union leader, who supported charter schools as a way to empower public school educators to innovate. While certainly charter schools are not the only schools that innovate, because of freedoms offered by the charter model a number of them have found new solutions ranging from new ways to use time, to incorporate technology, and to address the "summer learning loss" that affects all students. We as educators should be learning from these best practices, regardless of whether they come from charter or district schools, to help improve outcomes for every child.

Second, we need to recognize that a one-size-fits-all school approach does not work for every student. Any teacher will tell you that every child is unique and learns in his or her own way, and so we should encourage a range of options to meet those needs. The best way to do this is to empower all parents, regardless of zip code, with choices for their children.

Third, put simply, many public charter schools are getting results for their students. This is certainly not true of every charter school, just as it's not true of every district school. In fact, in the past two years, I have closed five charter schools that have had academic or operational issues. But thousands of students are thriving in charter schools, especially in our cities. At TEAM Academy in Newark, for example, nearly 95 percent of students graduated in four years last year, the highest rate for any non-selective school in the city.

Opponents of charter schools have made careers out of maligning them. They claim that charter schools are an effort to privatize public education. They are not -- charter schools are public schools. Opponents claim that charter schools are "undemocratic" because citizens do not vote to open them. In fact, charter schools are the most democratic schools we have because if parents do not choose to enroll their child in a charter school, that school will close.

Lastly, opponents claim that when a student goes to a charter school, the district "loses" funds they previously had when that student attended the district. That is true, but misleading for two reasons. First, when a student leaves a district, the district also has fewer costs. Second, in New Jersey, money follows the student, whether a student transfers to a charter or a different school district altogether. So, we are left to wonder whether charter opponents would also block parents from moving to another town because it would leave their district with one less student and therefore less funding.

Education is not a zero sum game. We as a state need to move beyond the belief that if one child has a better

option, another will be worse off. Charter schools are not the only solution for New Jersey students, but they are one solution as part of a comprehensive education reform agenda that Gov. Christie and I are pursuing to invest in and improve all public schools in New Jersey. If we are serious about putting the needs of children first, we should continue to ensure that every child has a school that is a good fit for them, regardless of any other adult interest.