

Union's Retrograde Report Earns Failing Grade: A Response to the NEA's Policy Statement on Charter Schools

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As 21st century school systems continue to emerge, low-income parents will continue to regard public charter schools as the means through which their children have equal access to quality education.

Last week, the National Education Association (NEA) voted to adopt a new policy statement¹ on public charter schools. Ignoring mounting evidence that the best charter systems are finally giving urban children a shot at a decent education, the NEA calls for a moratorium on the creation and expansion of public charter schools.

The NEA says it based this new statement on yearlong research conducted by its Charter Taskforce. Unfortunately, the taskforce report² is a shoddy piece of work that echoes the same old falsehoods about public charter schools, including that the schools “counsel out” the worst students and that they increase segregation. The former has been heavily refuted³. The latter is also unproven. Charter schools’ demographics are not significantly different than their neighborhood public schools⁴ (They do, however, produce significantly better academic results with a similar student composition⁵).

And, of course, the NEA beats its favorite drum, claiming that public charter schools drain resources from public schools—which is impossible, since charters *are* public schools.

The report concludes that charter schools are a “failed and damaging experiment.”

This is fear mongering worthy of a prize. But it's the NEA that's actually afraid – for its future. The NEA no doubt fears that a growing charter sector means a shrinking teachers' union. That need not be the case, however, if the union evolves to fit into 21st century school systems rather than block the progress of charter schools with policy statements and moratoriums.

The statement makes the following questionable assertions:

1. Only locally elected public school boards should have the power to authorize charters.

Locally elected school boards have proven problematic as charter authorizers because the employees in their districts hold school board members politically captive.

Elected school board members who vote to replace failing public schools with charters, or to open new charter schools, are often punished by union members at the next election. Remember, turnout in school board elections is often only 10 or 15 percent, and most school staff vote. Hence few elected board members take the risk of offending the unions, and their school districts improve very, very slowly, if at all.

Restricting charter authorization to locally elected school boards would severely limit the expansion of charters. That won't help disadvantaged kids trapped in low-performing district schools.

The NEA wants you to believe that the growth of charter schools has resulted in "separate and unequal education systems" that "are disproportionately located in, and harm, students and communities of color by depriving both of the high quality public education systems that should be their right." They claim these "separate systems of charters are inherently unequal."

They *are* unequal, because charters are much more effective. Well-authorized charter sectors – such as those in D.C., New Orleans, Denver, Newark, and Boston – are much better for impoverished students and those of color⁶. That's why low-income parents turn out in force to protest when political elites try to take away their right to choose a charter rather than be assigned to their neighborhood school.

The NEA's statement seeks to block any charters run by high-performing networks such as KIPP, Achievement First, and Uncommon Schools, despite the overwhelming evidence⁷ that these "no excuses" charter schools produce the greatest results for high-poverty, high minority communities.

2. All charters must be subjected to the same labor laws, collective bargaining contracts, accountability measures, and employment regulations as district schools.

For instance, the statement says, "When a charter is authorized in a public school district that has an existing collective bargaining agreement with its employees, the authorizer will ensure that the employees will be covered by a collective bargaining agreement."

Most charter schools are not unionized, because the ability to make autonomous decisions about staffing – to hire, fire, promote, and reward employees based on the needs of their students – is crucial to their success.

Subjecting charters to the same employment regulations as traditional public schools would of course eliminate that autonomy. Union contracts in most traditional public schools prohibit performance pay, termination of failing

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teachers, and promotion of teachers on the basis of performance rather than seniority. They require lockstep pay systems based on seniority. Effectively, the NEA will only accept charters that function like traditional public schools. The union fears that if teachers continue to have a choice, they will opt to forgo the collective bargaining agreement and union membership to work in public charter schools that treat them like professionals and give them a say in running the schools.

The industrial union model is the antithesis of professional status. Most charter school leaders believe that industrial unionism, with its labor vs. management paradigm, is a poor fit for education. They prefer to view teachers as professionals, giving many of them decision-making roles.

3. Charters, on average, do no better than traditional public schools in terms of student learning, growth, or development.

Of the hundreds of studies of charter school effectiveness, the vast majority find that charters perform better than traditional public schools. For instance, studies by Stanford University’s Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (CREDO) show that students who spend four or more years in charter schools gain an additional two months of learning in reading and more than two months in math *every year*, compared to similar students in traditional public schools.

When it comes to charter schools, however, “average” has little meaning, because the 43 states and the District of Columbia with charters all have different laws and practices. Any good idea can be done poorly, and some states have proven it with weak charter laws and lax oversight. One has to look beyond the averages to see the truth: In states and cities where charter authorizers close or replace failing schools—a central feature of the charter model charters vastly outperform traditional public schools, with students gaining as much as an extra year of learning every year.

4. Competition does not improve public schools.

The NEA claims that the rapid growth of charter schools has created a damaging competition for students and money. In reality, competition is good for schools: as in other industries, it forces them to improve, because if they don’t, they may shrink or even die.

Letting charter schools compete for students, and the money that follows them, forces traditional schools to pay more attention to what families need. Parents have much more leverage, because they can choose to send their children to another school.

Monopolies – whether in the public or private sector—are rarely a good thing. Traditional district schools, like monopolies, feel no urgency to make changes. Their funding isn’t going anywhere. They have no competition.

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5. Charter schools are not held accountable like traditional public schools.

Unlike the others, this assertion is true, but not in the sense that the NEA means. Traditional public schools are held accountable for following lots of rules, while charter schools are held accountable for their performance. Failing charter schools are at much greater risk of being shut down than other failing traditional schools. From the beginning, the charter concept was to give schools more autonomy while holding them accountable for performance. Under charter authorizers who do their jobs, no charter is allowed to fail its students year after year, as traditional public schools are often permitted to do.

In a traditional public school, teachers may know the students are failing, but turning that around – particularly with poor, inner city students – is very difficult, especially when centralized rules hamstring principals and teachers⁸. Maintaining the status quo is the easier option.

Independent charter authorizers have no reason to preserve the status quo. Their agenda is straightforward: if students aren't learning, the school will close.

In Conclusion

NEA leaders fear that the growth of charter schools threatens the health—and wealth—of their union. When they made their previous policy statement on charter schools, in 2001, there were fewer than 2,000 public charter schools. Today there are almost 7,000. The NEA's leaders know that when parents have a choice, they often pick charter schools.

Their union faces particularly tough times ahead. If the Supreme Court rules in favor of Mark Janus in the upcoming case *Janus v. AFSCME*, the NEA expects to lose 20,000 memberships in the 20 states where traditional public school teachers are required to pay union fees in order to keep their jobs.

It's disappointing to see the nation's largest teachers' union taking a retrograde stance against meaningful and positive education reform. The NEA should not hold back the overdue evolution of America's K-12 school system, but instead adapt to a changing environment. Low-income children have greatly benefited from the creation of charter schools, and the NEA should not sacrifice the futures of those children for the welfare of its members.

As 21st century school systems continue to emerge, low-income parents will continue to regard public charter schools as the means through which their children have equal access to quality education. It's time for the NEA and other teachers' unions to reconsider whether standing in the charter schoolhouse door and shouting "no" is the best way to serve America's children.

References

¹ “NEA Policy Statement on Charter Schools,” National Education Association website, <https://ra.nea.org/nea-policy-statement-charter-schools/>

² “Memorandum,” National Education Association website, https://ra.nea.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/NEA-Policy-Statement-on-Charter-Schools_Task-Force-Report_2017.pdf

³ Nat Malkus. *Differences on Balance: National Comparison of Charter and Traditional Public Schools* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, August 2016), pp. 7, 19.

⁴ Nat Malkus. *Differences on Balance: National Comparison of Charter and Traditional Public Schools* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, August 2016), pp. 6, 17.

⁵ Whitehurst, Reeves, and Rodrigue. *Segregation, Race, and Charter Schools: What Do We Know?* (Washington, D.C.: Center on Children and Families at Brookings, October 2016) pp. 6, 11, 51, 53.

⁶ *Urban Charter School Study Report on 41 Regions* (Stanford, Ca: Center for Research on Educational Outcomes, 2015).

⁷ Whitehurst, Reeves, and Rodrigue. *Segregation, Race, and Charter Schools: What Do We Know?* (Washington, D.C.: Center on Children and Families at Brookings, October 2016) pp. 6, 11, 51, 53.

⁸ See David Osborne and Emily Langhorne, “The Danger of Centralized School Discipline,” *US News and World Report*, July 2017, at <https://www.usnews.com/opinion/knowledge-bank/articles/2017-07-07/schools-should-choose-their-own-discipline-policies>

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