



Time to rejuvenate NJ charter school law: Opinion

NEWARK-charters-consolidate.JPG

Students raise their hand in math class at Visions Academy High School in Newark in this 2010 file photo. Visions was given permission to merge with the Marion P. Thomas Charter School. *(File Photo)*

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A public charter school pupil receives significantly less funding support than one in a traditional public school.

By Carlos Perez

Charter schools were created on the premise that educators would be given the freedom to innovate in exchange for greater accountability, a heightened expectation of student achievement and the testing of ideas that could be incorporated into traditional public schools.

Since the New Jersey Legislature first created charter schools in 1995, they have met and often exceeded expectations for their academic performance, as well as student demand. Public charter schools serve more than 30,000 students in 87 schools.

According to state data, public charter schools are graduating nearly 94 percent of their students from high schools compared with the state's overall high school graduation rate of 84 percent. Charter schools are succeeding in the toughest districts with the hardest-to-reach populations, and they are providing evidence that the achievement gap can be closed. The data on results speak volumes, but the 20,000 children on wait-lists speak even louder.

But 1995 was a long time ago. Much has changed, and the law that created public charter schools is no longer sufficient. New Jersey and the nation have learned a great deal in 17 years about how to serve and support the tens of thousands of children and their families who rely on a public charter school education. Now is the time to update New Jersey's charter school law.

The real challenge is finding the right balance between accountability and innovation. Meaningful freedom to innovate will unleash the power of public charter schools as educational laboratories that not only improve educational outcomes for charter school students, but also create new models for use throughout public education. And we must do this cognizant that charter schools are a part of the wonderful public school mosaic that should be celebrated, not demonized.

Charter school reform comes down to a few key policy principles geared around accountability, innovation, teaching and results based on research on what is working across the country.

First, multiple entities should be empowered to authorize charter schools, including an independent authorizer. Having independent authorizers, focused solely on chartering, will yield higher-quality schools and ensure an objective process insulated from the political. Seventy percent of states that allow charter schools utilize multiple authorizers. The absence of multiple authorizers has contributed to New Jersey's loss of millions of dollars in federal aid.

Second, charter schools must have flexibility to innovate. Charter schools are subject to greater scrutiny than any other public school entity and **can be, and are, shut down because of poor student performance**. In exchange for this level of accountability, they are supposed to be given greater autonomy. This has not occurred. Instead of requiring charter schools to adhere to every single state mandate and regulation, hold them accountable based on student outcomes, not regulatory compliance.

Third, a child attending a public charter school receives significantly less funding support than their counterpart in a traditional public school. The law requires charter schools receive 90 percent of per-pupil funding. However, on average, charter students receive 73 percent of the funding they would have received in a traditional public school — a \$6,000 difference. The reality is that many forms of state aid don't flow to public charter school students at all. Similarly, public charter schools receive no additional facilities funding, so they are forced to utilize their limited per-pupil funding to maintain their buildings.

The promise of charters is to improve student outcomes through innovation and accountability and that is happening throughout New Jersey. High-performing public charter schools are proving that, no matter the race or socioeconomic status of a student, they all can and do achieve academically.

Unfortunately, the full promise of public charter schools has yet to be realized. Funding inequities and limitations on innovation hurt the ability of public charter schools to further improve student outcomes. The polarized political climate, which too often views charter schools as an enemy instead of a successful part of the public school community, makes collaboration between charters and traditional public schools very difficult.

Charter school reform is an opportunity to not only fulfil the promise of a charter school as a laboratory of innovation, but also to make clear that public charter schools and the families they serve are a welcome part of the public school family.

Carlos Perez is president and CEO of the New Jersey Charter School Association.

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