



Let charter schools flourish

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If public charter schools are really so bad, then why are tens of thousands of Texas students standing in line for admission?

The state of Texas, which prides itself on everything being bigger and better, does not have enough room for every student who wants to attend the public school of their choice. Last year, at least 16,810 Texas students were on a waiting list to attend a public charter school.

This large waiting list demonstrates a tremendous parental and student demand for educational options besides their government-assigned public school. Houston's regional waiting list was the largest, with 7,415 students waiting to get into a charter school last year. The Dallas/Fort Worth region had 5,896 students on a waiting list, while the Rio Grande Valley had 2,110 students on a waiting list.

Most Americans are unfamiliar with charter schools. In fact, only 20 percent of Americans can correctly identify a charter school as a public school, according to a Center for Education Reform national poll.

Charter schools, while subject to less government regulation, are public schools funded with public funds. Charter schools cannot charge tuition, teach religion, discriminate, or cherry-pick students.

Charter schools serve more students who are academically behind their peers than traditional schools, with many focusing on hard-to-serve students and students at risk of dropping out. As a result, charter schools serve a higher percentage of minority and low-income students than traditional schools. In Texas, 81 percent of students in charter schools are minorities, compared to 60 percent in traditional public schools.

When a charter school has more applicants than room for new students, the school holds a lottery to determine which students may attend. Imagine parents, whose child is trapped in a low-performing public school, crying for joy that their child is randomly selected to attend a school with a track record of serving at-risk students with innovative strategies.

With tens of thousands of students dropping out of Texas public schools each year, it is ridiculous that state policy prevents students from obtaining an education in a setting that best meets their needs.

Some education associations, policymakers, and reporters fixate on a few poorly run and mismanaged charter schools as a reason to cap enrollment or limit student choice. Abuse of public funds is unacceptable - whether by a public charter school or a public school district - and the Texas Education Agency should always investigate and pursue such misconduct wherever it occurs.

But depriving thousands of students more educational opportunities because of a few bad actors makes no sense. It is like saying an exemplary school district should have its enrollment capped or be prevented

from expanding because a different school district mismanages its finances and fails to teach its students.

Overall, charter schools are meeting the individual needs of many students in innovative ways with less government funding. Unfortunately, state lawmakers have capped the number of public (open-enrollment) charters to only 215. With 210 active charters, the cap may be reached this fall, leading to more students waiting to attend a charter school.

Texas charter school enrollment is a drop in the bucket compared with traditional public school enrollment with only 2 percent of the more than 4.6 million students in Texas public schools attending a charter school last year. The last thing that Texas needs to do is stifle competition in the area of public education. Each and every child's education is too important not to allow them the opportunity to attend a public charter school if they choose.

The Legislature should eliminate the cap preventing new public charters from opening and allow charters to operate in a free market. Ultimately, parents, not government, should decide where their child attends school. Until that day arrives, Texas has at least 16,810 students waiting for rescue.

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