



DOCUMENT REVIEWED: “Connecticut’s Charter School Law and Race to the Top”

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Summary of Review

The issue brief entitled “Connecticut’s Charter School Law & Race to the Top” by the Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now (ConnCAN) recommends changes to the state’s charter school law that it argues would improve funding equity and are essential to closing the state’s achievement gaps. The brief’s specific proposals deserve careful attention, particularly its recommendation to tie charter school funding levels to student needs. The brief, however, offers no evidence for the claim that expanding charter schools would raise the achievement of low-income students, and it presents one-sided arguments for its policy positions that ignore important considerations. The brief does not provide the thoughtful discussion of the state’s educational goals and how charter schools might further these goals needed to improve charter school policy.

Review

I. INTRODUCTION

The Obama administration's Race to the Top grant competition pushes states to adopt policies that encourage the development of high-quality charter schools. This push has forced state policymakers to reexamine their charter school laws. An issue brief recently released by the Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now (ConnCan), titled *Connecticut's Charter School Law and Race to the Top* and authored by Tori Tuscheit, illustrates the type of issues that are being considered.¹

This review briefly summarizes the recommendations made in the ConnCan brief and considers critically the rationales offered to support them. I do not offer, and indeed do not have, a position on whether or not Connecticut ought to adopt the proposed policy changes. Rather, the purpose of the review is to highlight the claims made, assess the quality of evidence used to support those claims, and raise considerations not adequately discussed in the brief.

II. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS OF THE REPORT

The brief asserts that Connecticut's "charter schools have demonstrated sustained success, especially among low-income students" (p. 6), and it suggests that they are "an essential part of closing Connecticut's achievement gap" (p. 11). It identifies aspects of Connecticut's current charter school law that it argues have restricted the growth of charter schools in the state, created funding inequities, and wasted resources. It recommends lifting the current cap that limits charter schools to 300 students and instituting a "money follows students" funding me-

chanism whereby districts would send charter schools an amount equal to the district's per-pupil expenditure for each resident student that the charter school enrolls. These changes, the brief suggests, would help to close achievement gaps between high- and low-income students, improve school funding equity, eliminate waste, and make Connecticut more competitive for federal Race to the Top grant dollars.

III. THE REPORT'S RATIONALE FOR ITS FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

To support the claim that charter schools have demonstrated sustained success among low-income students, the brief relies primarily on the percentage of African American students in a school achieving "at or above goal" on statewide tests as its measure of success.² Specifically, it highlights that the percentage of African Americans in charter middle schools who meet this standard is above the statewide average, and that three of the top 10 middle schools in the state on this measure are charter schools. The brief also points to the fact that one charter school saw a larger increase in the percentage of students scoring at or above goal between 2008 and 2009 than any other school (p. 6).³

The argument that the recommended changes to the state's charter school law will help to close achievement gaps relies heavily on the claim that charter schools are especially effective at improving the achievement of low-income students. Specifically, the brief argues that eliminating the cap on the size of charter schools will allow more low-income students to attend high-performing schools. It also argues that because charter school funding depends on an annual appropriation by the state legislature,

the current law creates uncertainty that discourages the opening of new charter schools—schools that presumably would help the state’s neediest students.

In addition to the criticism of funding charter schools through an annual line-item appropriation, the brief takes issue with two other aspects of Connecticut’s charter school funding system. According to the report, charter schools receive only 75% as much funding per pupil as the districts where they are located. Part of the reason for the discrepancy is that charter school funding is pegged to statewide averages, and is not adjusted for fact that many charter schools serve disproportionate numbers of low-income students, which the report argues is inequitable. Also, the state is currently responsible for all charter school funding, and charter school enrollments do not necessarily result in reduced state aid payments for district schools, which the report argues amounts to a wasteful, double-funding of charter school students. Under the funding system recommended in the brief, the district where the student resides would send charter schools an amount equal to its own average per-pupil expenditure, which would have two purported benefits: improve funding equity and eliminate the double funding of charter school students.

Finally, the report argues that these changes to its charter school law would make Connecticut more competitive for the federal Race to the Top grant program, which awards points for ensuring favorable conditions for high-performing charter schools.

IV. THE REPORT’S USE OF RESEARCH LITERATURE

The brief does not make use of existing research on charter school performance or charter school funding. There are no refer-

ences to peer-reviewed research, even though ample research is relevant, including a large literature that addresses charter school performance and several studies that discuss the difficult issues raised by efforts to compare charter school and traditional public school funding.⁴

V. REVIEW OF THE VALIDITY OF THE FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The percentage of African-American students in charter schools achieving “at goal” does not tell us anything about how successful Connecticut charter schools have been at improving the performance of low-income students or even African American students; nor does the fact that a particular charter school saw an unusually large change in the percent of students achieving “at goal.” The reason is simple. The percentage of charter school students scoring at some level tells us nothing about what those students would have achieved in traditional public schools, and thus does not tell us whether charter schools “have made impressive progress in increasing achievement among the state’s neediest students” (p. 9). Examining changes in the percentage of students who are scoring above some standard is not any more useful. Because most charter schools are substantially smaller than traditional public schools, they are much more likely to see large, year-to-year changes in the percentage of students in any category simply due to random variation.⁵

Having a large percentage of students scoring at or above goal is certainly not a bad thing. It just does not tell us anything about how effective charter schools are at improving the performance of low-income students. Studies that have made serious attempts to answer this question provide little reason to believe that charter schools are consistently more effective than traditional public

schools or that expansion of the number of charter schools will do much to decrease achievement gaps between low-income and high-income students.⁶

Of course, just as some traditional public schools are particularly effective at improving the achievement of low-income students, it is likely that some charter schools will be similarly effective. The brief is correct that limiting enrollments at such charter schools may prevent some needy students from accessing a high-quality education. The Connecticut charter school law, however, specifically allows schools with demonstrated records of student achievement to expand beyond the statutory limit of 300 students, and a quick look at the school profiles produced by the Connecticut State Department of Education indicates that at least 5 of the 17 charter schools in the state have been allowed to exceed the 300-student cap.⁷ There may be good reasons to remove the enrollment cap on other charter schools. The point here is that if the goal is to improve the achievement of low-income students for the least cost, it makes some sense to target additional classroom seats, and the attendant resources, to those charter schools that have demonstrated high levels of achievement—the current state policy.

Comparing resource levels in charter and traditional public schools is fraught with challenges. Traditional public school districts often provide in-kind services to charter schools or their students, and charter schools may not be responsible for providing the full range of services provided by traditional public school districts. The brief provides no indication of how it was determined that charter schools end up with only 75% of per-pupil funding that districts receive, or how, if at all, this comparison accounts for in-kind services or differences in service responsibilities. Policymakers should

not draw strong conclusions from such simplistic comparisons.

Nevertheless, if a state is going to allow students to enroll in charter schools, it should ensure that those schools have sufficient funding to provide educational programming commensurate with student needs. Thus, the argument that charter schools that serve disproportionate shares of low-income students should receive high levels of funding has merit. Tying charter school funding levels to the average per-pupil funding in the sending district, however, may not achieve this goal. Due to local fiscal constraints, some districts might spend less than other districts with similar student populations or less than is needed to raise student achievement to acceptable standards. In this case, the proposed funding policy would merely pass inequities in the system for funding traditional public schools along to charter schools. Also, the level of need among students in a charter school might not match the average level of need in the districts where the charter school students reside. In fact, tying charter school funding levels to the district average might provide charter schools incentives to serve relatively low-need students. Thus, although the funding proposal recommended in this brief might well represent an improvement in the current charter school law, it may not go far enough towards tying funding levels to student needs.

If the primary goal of a charter school law is to create competition between charter schools and traditional public school districts, then the proposal to shift responsibility for making charter school payments to districts may make sense. Such a policy change, however, could create significant revenue losses for districts, and studies of how such revenue losses might influence service delivery are needed to understand the full implications of such a change. Just

as importantly, fostering competition between schools is only one of several alternative rationales for charter school programs. For instance, some advocate for charter school programs on the grounds that they allow educators to experiment with new practices and foster innovation. The benefits of such experimentation, however, accrue statewide, which suggests the burdens of financing charter schools should be shared statewide. Or, if the state wants to encourage cooperation among charter schools and traditional public school districts, it might want to limit the fiscal impacts of charter school enrollments on traditional public schools. Thus, the wisdom of a “money follows the child” funding mechanism depends on the purposes a charter school law is trying to achieve.

Finally, the Race to the Top competition will indeed consider whether a state ensures successful conditions for high-performing charters. Whether the changes recommended in this brief will improve Connecticut’s chances in this competition depends on how federal guidelines are interpreted. For instance, will a policy that limits enrollment growth to charter schools that demonstrate high levels of achievement (the existing policy) be seen as inhibiting or encouraging the creation of high-performing charter schools? Only the federal officials charged with making those decisions can answer that question. More importantly, however, decisions about charter school policy should be based on judgments about how best to promote a state’s educational goals, and states should be wary about adopting policies solely for the purpose of winning this one grant competition.

VI. USEFULNESS OF THE REPORT FOR GUIDANCE OF POLICY AND PRACTICE

Charter school laws vary widely from state to state, and the details of a state’s law almost certainly influence the number and types of charter schools that emerge. Thus, the details deserve careful attention. This brief is to be commended for calling attention to some of these details, and for offering a set of viable policy recommendations. The specific proposals, particularly the proposal to link charter school funding to student needs, deserve serious attention.

Like far too many advocacy pieces, however, the brief is designed to promote a specific view of charter schools, and it does not help policymakers or the public think carefully about what a charter school program should be trying to achieve and how best to achieve it. A more useful brief would begin with the goals of a charter school program, or of school choice programs more generally; these might include the following: expanding choice and empowering parents, fostering innovation, promoting racial or economic integration, raising achievement, creating competition among schools for students and resources, increasing school efficiency, or establishing alternative forms of accountability. Next, it would discuss how the policy proposals offered here might promote certain of these objectives but perhaps undermine others, and would thereby clarify what is at stake in making decisions on these policy details. In comparison with that type of discussion, this brief provides a rather one-sided and incomplete analysis of the issues at stake.

Notes & References

- ¹ Truscheit, T. (2010, February). *Connecticut's Charter School Law and Race to the Top*. New Haven: Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now (ConnCAN). Retrieved March 2, 2010, from <http://www.conncan.org/learn/research/public-charter-schools/connecticuts-charter-school-law-race-top>.
- ² The “goal” standard is defined by the Connecticut State Department of Education as the knowledge, skills and critical thinking ability that are reasonable to expect of students within their grade level, and is a higher standard of achievement than the state’s “proficiency” standard. See Truscheit, T. (2010, January). *The state of Connecticut public education: A 2009-2010 report card for our state’s public schools and public policies*. New Haven: ConnCAN.
- ³ These facts are drawn from another ConnCan report, Truscheit, T. (2010, January). *The state of Connecticut public education: A 2009-2010 report card for our state’s public schools and public policies*. New Haven: ConnCAN.
- ⁴ For a review of these literatures see Bifulco, R. & Bulkley, K. (2008). Charter schools. In Ladd, H.F. and Fiske, E.B. (Eds.), *Handbook of Research in Education Finance and Policy* (pp. 425-446). New York, Routledge.
- For further discussion of the challenges involved in comparing resources in charter and traditional public schools see Belfield, C. (2008, March). *Funding formulas, school choice, and inherent incentives*. Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit. Retrieved March 1, 2010 from <http://epicpolicy.org/files/CHOICE-05-Belfield2.pdf>.
- ⁵ Kane, T. J. & Staiger, D.O. (2002, fall). The promise and pitfalls of using imprecise school accountability measures. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 16(4), 91-114.
- ⁶ For a recent review see Bifulco, R. & Bulkley, K. (2008). Charter schools. In Ladd, H.F. and Fiske, E.B. (Eds.), *Handbook of Research in Education Finance and Policy* (pp. 425-446). New York, Routledge.
- ⁷ School Profiles (n.d.) Connecticut State Department of Education. Retrieved March 2, 2010, from <http://www.csde.state.ct.us/public/cedar/profiles/index.htm>.

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