



The Research Bureau

Can Charter Schools Close the Education Gap?

In a recent *Wall Street Journal* opinion column addressed to President-elect Barack Obama, Joel Klein, Chancellor to the New York City Department of Education and Reverend Al Sharpton, president of the National Action Network,¹ called attention to the plight of minority students in today's public schools:

In the afterglow of your election, Americans today run the risk of forgetting that the nation still faces one last great civil-rights battle: closing the insidious achievement gap between minority and white students. Public education is supposed to be the great equalizer in America. Yet today the average 12th grade black or Hispanic student has the reading, writing and math skills of an eighth grade white student.

Klein and Sharpton reminded the new President of his campaign statements that “school reformers must demonstrate an unflinching commitment to what actually works to dramatically boost academic achievement - rather than clinging to reforms that we wish would work.”

Now, thanks to the Boston Foundation, Massachusetts educators have fresh evidence of what actually works. The Foundation's recently-released study, “Informing the Debate: Comparing Boston's Charter, Pilot, and Traditional Schools,”² prepared by researchers from Harvard and M.I.T. found that students in charter schools are doing significantly better in English and math than students in traditional public schools. (Charter schools are public schools organized by an independent board of trustees responsible for the school's financial and personnel management, curriculum, professional development, and organizational structure, which usually includes an extended school day and school year.) In some grades, the study found dramatic differences. For middle-school students in Boston, the impact of attending a good charter school meant moving from the 50th to the 69th percentile on the MCAS math test, which is roughly half the black-white achievement gap. In other words, those students who had won a spot in the student-selection lotteries used by oversubscribed charter schools “on average were scoring very close to the Brookline public school average performance in math,” according to the

¹ <http://sec.online.wsj.com/article/SB123172121959472377.html?mod=article-outset-box#>

² <http://www.bostonfoundation.org/UtilityNavigation/MultimediaLibrary/ReportsDetail.aspx?id=9488&parentId=354>

study leader Thomas Kane, professor of education and economics at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. “But the lottery losers, who mostly went back to the traditional public schools in Boston, were still only slightly above the Boston Public school average” (the same place they were several years before).

It is important to note that because the study compared the achievement of charter school students in Boston with those who applied to those schools but failed to win a seat, it answered the contention of some charter school opponents that charter-school results surpass those of the regular public schools only by “skimming” the best students, that is, those who come from education-minded families that were motivated to seek out charter schools: in this study, the comparison group’s parents had displayed the same commitment to pursuing educational options for their children as the parents of those admitted to the charter schools.

Unfortunately, the study findings have not yet induced Governor Patrick to lift the statewide cap on charter schools even though many districts such as Boston (with 7,000 applicants on waiting lists), North Adams, Somerville, Cambridge, Chelsea, Holyoke, and Lowell are at or near the allowable capacity for their districts. (Worcester’s two existing Charter schools have a combined waiting list of nearly 1,200.) In fact, Mitchell Chester, the Commonwealth’s Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education, is even working on a proposal to delay the opening of new charter schools that would fall within the limits of the current cap, ostensibly because of fiscal constraints. However, Paul Grogan, president of the Boston Foundation, was forthright in criticizing the limits on charter schools: “There is no justification for keeping a Charter cap in place that is denying urban, mostly black and brown children the opportunity for a demonstrably better result.”

The achievement gap in our public schools is more than a minority issue or a civil rights issue. It affects the well being of all Americans, since our advancing economy stands in greater need than ever of an educated work force, and American democracy, as Thomas Jefferson attested, requires an educated citizenry. Thus the stakes involved in education reform are too high for us to leave the decisions to educators alone – or to political leaders who are beholden to teachers’ unions that insist on maintaining the status quo. By virtue of their practical experience and concerns, business leaders are well aware of the importance of this issue, and should be encouraged to express their views on workforce education.

Let’s hope that President Obama, who in the past has expressed support for charter schools, and his new education secretary, who as CEO of the Chicago school system, embraced such schools, will take the lead in encouraging their expansion, so as to help win the last civil-rights battle and truly leave “no child behind.”

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