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Bringing Education Back Home: Rethinking the Charter School Expansion in Nashville Public Schools

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The purpose of this research is to examine the extensive expansion of charter schools in the Metropolitan Nashville Area and best project whether the Metro Nashville Public School Board's charter school policies are the best option for Nashville students, teachers, and taxpayers. This paper analyzes existing research on charter schools, particularly in regions most easily comparable to Nashville, TN and compares the research to the current state of the Nashville public schools system. The data suggest that, while a limited number of small charter schools can enhance student performance, the more charter programs expand into Nashville, the less effective they are.

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Introduction

Nashville, Tennessee, is a leading hub of culture and commerce in the southeastern United States. However, like many other urban areas, Nashville's public schools are underperforming (Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools, 2014).

To address this problem, school choice has vastly expanded over the past decade, adding an array of elementary and secondary education charter schools to the already diverse blend of magnet and board-run programs. Charter schools remain one of the most volatile contemporary education policy debates, and while they have been proven successful in cities such as New York, Boston, and Chicago — where student population can exceed one million — there is much to say about the ability of Nashville to successfully manage its student population of 83,000 without major outsourcing. Several charter programs currently operating in Nashville have shown to be successful. While LEAD Academy, for example, has yielded a one hundred percent college acceptance rate since its inception in 2007 (Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools, 2014) many charter schools have not performed better than existing Metro Nashville Public Schools.

The issue is that the MNPS Board continues to interview charter programs to expand at an average of two per year in Nashville without need or substantiated evidence to show that Davidson County children will do better in charter programs. It is imperative for both the financial and educational success of Metro Nashville Public Schools to stop leaving students and teachers behind by expanding charter programs, and instead reinvest in existing schools — both board-run, magnet, and charter. It is necessary that this expansion of charter program stops because a majority of charter schools do not represent the best interests of students, teachers, or taxpayers.

A Bad Deal for Students

School districts comparable to Nashville in size and student composition in which comprehensive studies on the effects of charter programs have been performed suggest that Nashville will see virtually no benefit from expansion. An analysis of Milwaukee, WI — where charter schools have for a long time been a substantial portion of the education system — show no significant improvements in student achievement overall compared to board-run public schools (D'Entremont, C., & Gulosino, C., 2008). When improvements do happen, they occur primarily in highly autonomous environments.

These non-instrumentality charter schools — or programs with a high level of autonomy — in Wisconsin likely enhance student achievement by offering more instructional time (both by lengthening the school year and facilitating after-school academic programs) and investing in more progressive curriculum that otherwise would not have been selected by the school board. In order to provide these additions, cost must be cut somewhere. Charters with high autonomy typically offset these costs by hiring lower-paid instructors without formal certification or collective bargaining ability (Nisar, H, 2012). However, the ability of charters to use these money-saving tactics (and thus be considered "high autonomy") is dependent on government regulation, which varies by state. In Tennessee, teachers at charter schools retain the right to collective bargaining, are subject to the same certification requirements of board-run and magnet schools, and obtain tenure status in MNPS after three years of instruction (the same as board-run or magnet) as a result of the Tennessee Public Charter Schools Act of 2002. With current regulation in place, Nashville charter schools would be unable to cut costs by lowering teacher salaries and as a result be unable to provide services that would improve student performance.

Another attribute of non-instrumentality charter schools that would have a significant effect on student performance is the size of the school itself. Most programs with a high level of autonomy are start ups, meaning they were not converted from an existing public school. Because of this, program enrollment tends to stay small and expand slowly, resulting in small class sizes and

high student-to-faculty ratios (Levin, 2012). One of Nashville's successful charter schools, LEAD Academy, is a start-up, only enrolling 260 students at the high school level with a 11:1 student/faculty ratio.

Since it can be insinuated that government regulation is holding Nashville charter schools back from their potential success, would Davidson County students be better off if charter schools followed a more "free market" approach to governing? The answer appears to be no. A thorough examination of Arizona charter schools, which are considered the most autonomous in the country, yields that while parental satisfaction is substantially higher than in public schools, students are less advantaged in Arizona (particularly from a standpoint of welfare). Arizona's "hands-off" approach to regulation, or lack thereof, of charter programs has exacerbated racial and socio-economic segregation and incentives discrimination against special needs children (Chemsak, 2008). To begin with, a cornerstone of public education is affordability — that cost should not be a factor in parents sending their child to a school of their choice. That is not the case in Arizona. While charters are, by definition of a public school option, tuition-free, they are set up to segregate based on class. Since charter programs are not subject to zoning requirements, high performing charters tend to surround affluent areas. While charters must still accept applicants regardless of socio-economic status, costs of transportation bar poor — and often minority — students from attending the states highest performing schools (Koedel, Betts, Rice, & Zau, 2010). Though charters are required to comply in full with the Individuals With Disabilities Act, children with disabilities also do not benefit from a lack of regulation (Miron, Urschel, & Saxton, 2011). Because children with special needs typically are more expensive to accommodate and underperform on standardized tests, Chemsak (2008) argues that charters are incentivized to accept as few as possible. While this practice constitutes a blatant violation of the law, an alarming amount of cases in which students with disabilities faced discrimination have arisen in Arizona related to charter schools — including purposefully not accommodating all the needs of special education students and dismissing students for illegitimate reasons (Chemsak, 2008).

A Bad Deal for Teachers

Metro Nashville Public Schools do not simply have an obligation to provide the best possibly education to all of its constituency. It also has the responsibility to provide fair and adequate pay to the teachers in employs — the people who most powerfully and directly impact a student's life. Arizona's "hands off" approach to regulating charter programs extends to the treatment and qualifications of the teachers it employs. Arizona charter school teachers are required only to have a bachelor's degree in order to enter the profession — absent of any formal certification (Chemsak, 2008). While this practice may allow otherwise qualified people to become educators, it hinders their ability to engage in collective bargaining. This lack of regulation also allows instructors to be hired at-will, which is not complementary to an educational institutions need to develop and retain teachers in the long term (Ritter, Jensen, Kisida, & Bowen, 2012).

A study conducted within Nashville, at Vanderbilt University, closely examined the role of teachers in charter programs and found teachers at charter schools are 132% more likely to quit their profession than teachers at board-run Metro Nashville Public Schools (Struit & Smith, 2010). These teachers leaving are found to be either new teachers or teachers with the highest level of education (masters degree and above) (Booker, Sass, Gill, & Zimmer, 2008). While some of these teachers leaving can be attributed to forced attrition, the notable majority is voluntary. A variety of reasons can cause teachers to leave an institution — including transferring to another school or taking a high-paid job offer/promotion — but the vast majority of voluntary leaves are attributed to poor satisfaction with personnel policies (Struit et al., 2010).

These personnel policies, deemed "market-based," contribute to one thing in particular — teachers not being paid an adequate salary for the work they do. In addition to limits on

collective bargaining, the way in which teacher pay is determined is often received unfavorably by instructors. Most charter programs tie teacher pay to student performance. If his or her class is not doing well, then a teacher may see pay and benefits cut regardless of the time and effort put into instruction. In addition, 30% of charter programs do not equivocate teacher pay to experience. This means that a veteran teacher who encounters a rough year of test scores can experience a pay dock, and have to work back up a pay scale alongside a second-year teacher (Struit et al., 2010). Yet, teachers encountering problems with fairness in their salary may be considered lucky — because 48% of charter schools do not pay their teachers a salary at all, and rely on at-will hiring (and firing) (Struit et al., 2010).

The inconsistencies charters face in their instructional personnel directly deteriorate the programs ability to affectively teach. Continuously hiring new staff breaks the necessary continuity in instruction year-to-year charter schools need to thrive, and constantly having an array of inexperienced teachers mean students will inevitably get a bare-minimum education. This also creates a greater financial burden, as the school loses its investment of training new staff (Struit et al., 2010).

A Bad Deal for Taxpayers

Research suggests that charter schools are not a smart fiscal decision. Long-term studies on charter schools in New York have found that the aggressive expansion of charter schools has direct negative fiscal impacts on the community (Bifulco & Reback, 2011). The larger the collection of charter programs available, the bigger the burden the taxpayers face. This is because operating two consecutive public education systems (board-run/magnet and charter) essentially doubles the overhead costs of running the schools for which a given polity is responsible. These costs are onset by several factors. To begin with, charter schools usually attract a sizable population of students from private schools who will now be receiving their education at the full expense of the taxpayers (vouchers received by parents of private school attendees rarely cover the full cost of attendance of a public school) (Buddin, 2012). In order to accommodate this influx of students, additional faculty must be hired, more classrooms must be built, more curricula must be supplied, transportation and healthcare services must be rendered available, and in some cases additional administrators must be hired. When estimating the size of these influxes, districts usually err on the low end of the estimate — meaning that if more students than expected matriculate into charter schools, the student-to-faculty ratio will widen, students will receive less attention, and performance will in turn go down (Bifulco et al., 2011).

Beyond increased overhead costs, research suggests that charter schools also often fail to accomplish their primary goal — cut the cost of bureaucracy in order to put more money towards curriculum. One examination of the costs of administration and curriculum in Michigan charter schools found that, on average, Michigan charter schools actually spent less on instruction than board-run public schools and more on administration. In fact, the average Michigan charter school spent \$800 more per student per year on administration and overhead costs and \$1100 less per student per year on instruction and curriculum (Arsen & Ni, 2012). The main reason for less spending on instruction comes from attributes discussed earlier — paying experienced and certified teachers less than board-run schools — but the increased cost in administration is not so readily identified. The overall assumption of the research suggests that this disparity in administrative spending stems from a greater emphasis on facilities spending, additional services being provided that are not typical of a board-run school, and higher administrative salaries (Arsen et al., 2012).

Conclusion

It is in the best interest of Metro Nashville Public Schools to stop expanding charter school programs. A decision to do such will be for the betterment of the Davidson County students, teachers, and taxpayers. Revitalization of the MNPS depends on the revitalization of the existing schools, which does include retaining investments in successful, small-managed charter programs such as LEAD Academy. A better Nashville education system can be achieved without outsourcing, and it is the responsibility of the Metro Nashville Public School Board to act now.

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