

TALKING POINTS: MARYLAND CHARTER SCHOOL STUDY

Although some of the recommendations in the Maryland Charter School Study would help to clarify and improve the state's charter school law, a disappointing number of recommendations are based on faulty data and logic. Many of these recommendations would weaken Maryland's law and open the state up to the kinds of conflict between local communities and charter school operators and underperforming charter schools seen in states with weak charter school laws. We need to protect Maryland's strong charter school law to ensure that all students, whether they're in a charter or traditional public school, receive a high quality education.

Report flaws

The report does not fully recognize or appreciate the flexibility that Maryland's charter school law has for operators to negotiate special arrangements with their employees as an addendum to the district's collective bargaining agreements. These special arrangements are intended to provide charter schools with the flexibility to meet their objectives and performance goals. In fact, collective bargaining is broadly supported by the charter operators surveyed in the report.

The report uses admittedly questionable data to draw sweeping conclusions about outcomes for African American students and students in poverty. The data used by the report depends on demographic indicators rather than individual student data, as other researchers have used. Gaps in the demographic data of charter schools further challenges the validity of the report's conclusions in this regard.

Many of the funding numbers used by the report are inaccurate or rely on research regarded as poor quality and questionable, such as the University of Arkansas study which used incorrect funding figures for Maryland. These flaws are highly problematic and challenge the validity of many of the study's arguments and assumptions.

Recommendations that MSEA supports

Further specifying the role of charters within school districts may help ease tensions between charter operators and districts as well as foster greater cooperation in replicating best practices between charters and traditional public schools.

Encouraging the improved sharing of best practices between and among charter and traditional public schools, as well as publishing research about innovative practices in schools, is both worthwhile and unlikely to require legislation.

Recommendations that MSEA opposes

MSDE is already required by law to provide technical assistance for new charter school applicants; publically funding an identically tasked private organization is both redundant and costly.

We are strongly opposed to creating an independent chartering board, which would remove decision-making power from local communities and place it in the hands of a highly politicized board. In other states, independent boards have created deep conflict between charter school operators and local communities. Local communities understand the needs of their schools and students best, not a far-off board which is more likely to divide communities than to be familiar with the needs of its students.

We strongly oppose providing an additional per pupil allotment for charter school students based on the inaccurate assumption that charter schools relieve facilities expenses in traditional public schools. This recommendation assumes savings that simply never materialize, ignores the fact that many charter schools in Baltimore City are already located in traditional public school buildings, and makes it more challenging to address the real and pervasive school construction and improvement needs in Baltimore City and across the state.

(The unfootnoted statement that Baltimore City receives \$1,000 per pupil in capital spending is not accurate.)

Recommendations that need further clarification

Adjusting the lottery system needs further clarification. For example, while ensuring that charters are admitting a proportionate number of children with disabilities would be a good improvement, we must be cautious that any changes do not result in student bodies that are segregated by race or income as we have seen in charter schools in other states. Lottery and applications processes cannot become a school selection process where the school chooses its student body and "creams" high-performing students out of their public school and to the charter school.

While systematizing the statewide collection, storage, and analysis of charter school-related information has some value, the cost is unclear, as is the need for this to be legislated. Such a systematization should occur under the control of MSDE.

The faulty data used throughout the report lead to questionable assumptions and conclusions regarding funding. Further and more accurate study of the data is needed.

GENERAL TALKING POINTS: CHARTER SCHOOLS

Key argument:

- Maryland struck the right balance more than a decade ago in the development of a charter school law that supports the autonomy of charter schools within the framework of our world-class public school system.
- The success of our law is based on the buy-in of local school boards and a fair staffing process through the collective bargaining process.
- Charter schools can help meet a specific need or test different concepts that can and should be applied more broadly when there is appropriate need, local support, and strong leadership.
- But charter schools are not a silver bullet to meeting all challenges in our schools today. In fact, research has repeatedly found that the majority of charter schools perform on par, or even slightly worse, than comparable traditional schools.

Specific asks:

- Our top-ranked schools depend on keeping our standards high and our charter school law strong.

- Reject efforts to overhaul the charter school law, with specific opposition to the creation of an independent chartering authority and independent hiring of employees.

What THEY say:

1. Maryland has the weakest charter school law in the country and it limits our ability to push innovation in public schools and meet the needs of minority students who are being left behind in traditional schools.
2. To have the innovation charter schools need, the law must be changed to allow for direct hiring and recruiting of staff outside of the confines of the district's collective bargaining agreement.
3. Local school boards don't have the expertise necessary to help charter schools flourish and present unnecessary roadblocks to the charter process. That is why the state needs an independent chartering organization to help with best practices and provide charter-specific support for these innovative schools.

What WE say:

1. Maryland's charter school law is far from weak. It is a successful law that strikes the right balance between local control, school accountability, and innovative instruction. The strength and stability of our law stands in stark contrast to lax charter laws in other states that have led to financial mismanagement, low standards, poor performance, and unreliable learning environments.
2. Efforts to change the staffing process for charter schools are a thinly veiled attempt to circumvent collective bargaining. The law already allows the charter to hire its employees although it may have to interview internal applicants that seek a transfer to the charter. Current employees seeking a transfer apply only if his/her vision aligns with that of the charter school. Many successful charter schools in the state have negotiated changes to the collective bargaining agreements to meet the needs of the school and remain fair to employees.
3. Local school boards have the appropriate expertise and vision for the district to understand the needs and opportunities of a charter application. Any charter that is opened should be done with the idea that the learnings from that school can be applied district-wide. Having the school as a part of, and fully supported by, the district is the best way to ensure that scaling takes place.