

Why Parents Will Love Charter Schools

by Liv Finne | October 2012

Many parents hope voters will pass Initiative 1240, the ballot measure to allow charter schools in Washington. This is especially true of parents whose children are trapped in failing inner-city schools. Earlier this year Representative Eric Pettigrew, speaking for many low-income families in his South Seattle district, put it this way.

“...every year in our district for the last 15, 20 years, maybe longer there’s been a gap – an achievement gap of the students, there’s been a drop-out rate that’s been just unacceptable as far as I’m concerned. And all I’m asking in this [charter school] legislation is an opportunity to move forward and move forward quickly.”

Today, in 41 states across the country, 2.1 million students attend public charter schools. This is a fraction of the 55 million students in the U.S., but their parents are glad to have this opportunity. Word is spreading fast among parents that charter schools create environments well suited to student learning. Waiting lists at charter schools have swollen from about 400,000 students just two years ago to 610,000 students today.

Defenders of the status quo fear charter schools because they see them as a threat to funding for conventional public schools, even ones that fail to educate students. Actually, charter schools take no money out of public education, for the simple reason that charter schools operate within the public education system. Charter schools do, however, offer a new choice for parents, a choice many of them enthusiastically embrace.

Charter schools offer innovative ways to deliver a public school education. Some charter schools offer the famous Montessori school program. Others use cutting-edge computer programs customized to each student’s strengths and weaknesses. Some charter schools specialize in science and math. Others help special needs students, like the new charter school in New Jersey for autistic children.

Charter schools are generally smaller than conventional public schools. On average, a charter school enrolls 372 students, about 22% fewer than most other public schools. This allows charter schools to provide more personal attention to students, and promotes a feeling of community and security within the school.

Many charter schools require student uniforms. Parents often

like charter schools for this reason alone. They know that putting on special clothes for school puts children in the right frame of mind for study and learning.

Charter schools often have stronger disciplinary policies. Many parents are concerned that conventional public schools expect too little from students in the way of behavior and self-control.

Charter schools set high expectations for learning because they must educate students or they risk losing their charter license. Many charter schools outperform neighboring conventional schools, like Massachusetts’ Commonwealth charters, the Knowledge is Power Program schools in Texas, or California’s Green Dot charters. These schools have either eliminated or significantly narrowed the academic achievement gap.

Charter schools set flexible schedules to meet the needs of students. The rigid rules in conventional schools continually distract students from important work in the classroom. Even simple schedule changes require lengthy union negotiations, and many parents wonder whether instruction time for children is being sacrificed to the priorities of adults.

Parents in a charter school have a real voice in their local school. They can talk to the school principal and to the members of the charter school board. These local school leaders know they must educate students in order to attract families, or face financial pressures to close the school.

The charter school structure provides a high level of accountability, to students, to parents, and to the community. In contrast, conventional elected school boards are often more responsive to powerful interest groups than to the concerns of parents.

Giving Rep. Pettigrew’s constituents a charter school option is not only the right thing to do, it is the smart thing to do. People in many Washington communities are happy with their schools and see no need to change. That’s fine, but if voters approve Initiative 1240 parents in districts that are allowing too many kids to fail will love charter schools.



Why Teachers Will Love Charter Schools

by Liv Finne | October 2012

Mr. Bob Dean is a public school teacher and a supporter of Initiative 1240, the ballot measure to allow public charter schools in Washington. He is the head of his school's Math Department, teaches Advanced Placement calculus and is a past member of the State Board of Education Math Advisory Panel. Mr. Dean describes what teachers must endure in traditional schools today:

"The public doesn't understand that today teachers are being told what to teach, how to teach, when to teach and now even how they will grade, and who they will pass or fail. They are forced to use unproven methods that fly in the face of their professional judgment and then blamed for the shoddy results."

Charter schools offer teachers an escape from the unfair burdens imposed on them by traditional school administrators. How do charter schools liberate teachers? Here are six ways.

First, teachers in charter schools have the freedom to design their own educational program and to choose the best curriculum for their students. Teachers in traditional schools have to follow orders from so-called "curriculum experts" sitting at desks in the central district, who often require teachers to use unproven teaching methods and curricula. For example, "curriculum experts" require Seattle teachers to use a "Reform Math" curriculum that does not work well in teaching children math.

Second, teachers in charter schools can offer real input into how the school's money is spent. Under Initiative 1240, charter school principals and teachers would be able to buy the materials, books and technology they need to help their students. Central district administrators, by contrast, make virtually all spending decisions for local schools and consume precious resources in the process, delivering to schools less than 80% of the funding they should receive.

Third, principals and teachers in charter schools can establish a daily schedule that best meets everyone's needs. One charter school in Arizona, Carpe Diem Charter School, uses technology to provide instruction during a longer school day, then allows students to take Fridays off, and still achieves better learning results for students. Teachers in traditional schools have no control over the daily school schedule.

Fourth, teachers in charter schools are evaluated on their performance on an individualized, humane basis by a high-quality principal who knows them well. Teachers in traditional schools in Washington state will soon be evaluated on a complex checklist of factors, reduced to a matrix of numbers, which cannot possibly capture a teacher's unique and quintessentially singular ability to motivate and inspire students to learn.



Fifth, teachers in charter schools benefit from the principal's ability to place an effective teacher in every classroom. Teachers in traditional schools often receive students in their classrooms who are behind because teachers in earlier grades failed to prepare students properly. Just one weak teacher in a school has a detrimental ripple effect on the many good teachers who receive that teacher's students in later grades.

Sixth, teachers in charter schools are generally happier as professionals because they are allowed to decide what to teach, how to teach and how to evaluate their own students' progress. Teachers in traditional schools have seen their authority eroded, as legislatures and district administrators force them to follow the latest education fads. Excellence in education cannot be standardized or mass-produced. Excellence can only be achieved when the principal and teachers work as a team and have the tools they need to deliver quality instruction.

Charter schools are an effective antidote to the growing standardization of traditional schools. Charter schools allow teachers the freedom to use their ingenuity, creativity and energy to individualize the education they offer students.

This freedom in the classroom is why charter school teachers in other states have been so successful at educating children, especially the most at-risk and disadvantaged kids. This freedom-to-teach is why, if voters approve Initiative 1240, teachers in our state will love charter schools.