

POLICY NOTE

Key Findings:

1. A *New York Times* article attacked Michigan's charter school families.
2. The article is biased and made numerous errors in logic, including:
 - a. Selection bias
 - b. Fallacy of composition
 - c. Post-hoc fallacy
 - d. Fallacy of false exclusion
 - e. Fallacy of authority
 - f. Fallacy of explanation
 - g. Using a double standard
3. The article promotes falsehoods by ignoring high-quality research showing students in urban districts learn more at charter schools than at their traditional schools.
4. Parents are not fooled by false reasoning and falsehoods.
5. Parents know most public charter schools are good schools.
6. Over the last ten years, enrollment in public charter schools has nearly tripled.
7. Today 6,900 public charter schools educate 3.1 million students in 43 states.
8. Most of Michigan's charter school students come from low-income, minority families.
9. The *New York Times* story is the latest in a series of ongoing attacks against vulnerable charter school families, the same families who have historically been underserved by their traditional public schools.

How *The New York Times* got it wrong in article attacking charter school families

By Liv Finne, Director, Center for Education
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Introduction

Recently *The New York Times Magazine* published an article; “Michigan Gambled on Charter Schools. Its Children Lost.”¹ I immediately recognized it as another unfair, ideological attack on charter school families.

Fortunately, parents are not easily fooled by these gross generalizations, no matter how long and wordy the article. Parents know most charter public schools are good schools. That is why families continue to choose them, and why most charter schools have long waiting lists.

After all, it is the voluntary decisions of millions of parents that explain why student enrollment in charter schools over the last ten years has nearly tripled, to 3.1 million students, bringing the total charter school number to 6,900 schools in 43 states. One million families are on charter school waitlists.

Bias in reporting

The bias of *The New York Times* is revealed by the fact that the paper showed little interest in investigating charter school performance when Democrat Arne Duncan, a strong charter school supporter, was U.S. Secretary of Education. His home state of Illinois has 148 charter schools (out of 3,735 total public schools), yet in eight years *The New York Times* showed little interest in critiquing them.

A Republican became Education Secretary – and suddenly her state's charters go under the journalistic microscope.

Sloppy and incomplete analysis

As an education researcher, I was struck by the sloppy and incomplete analysis in this *New York Times* article. Here are some of the analytical mistakes and logical fallacies the reporter included in his article:

- He uses selection bias; that is, he cites one low-performing charter school to suggest all charter schools are low-performing. No researcher of any integrity would fall into this error, but I see reporters do it all the time.

This is the fallacy of composition – believing that if some members of a group have a certain quality, then all members of the group have the same quality.

1 “Michigan Gambled on Charter Schools. Its Children Lost,” by Mark Binelli, *The New York Times Magazine*, September 5, 2017, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/05/magazine/michigan-gambled-on-charter-schools-its-children-lost.html?mcubz=3>.

- He claims that the growth of charter schools in Michigan have caused test scores in the state to drop since the year 2000. He says that in 2000 there were 184 charter schools in Michigan, and that in the intervening 17 years their number doubled to 368 charter schools, and that test scores have dropped over this period of time. He does not report the total number of traditional schools in Michigan. In this way he creates the false impression that the number of charter schools in Michigan is a larger proportion of the total than it actually is, to justify his claim that 368 charter schools with 146,000 students are responsible for pulling down the test scores of 3,000 traditional schools serving 1.4 million students.² This is false reasoning. The rise and fall of total state test scores could be the result of a host of other factors besides the minor factor of charter school growth.

This is the post-hoc fallacy – believing that because A (charter schools opening) happened before B (a drop in overall test scores), therefore A must have caused B.

- He ignores Stanford University studies showing charter schools in Detroit and in Michigan outperform traditional schools, instead citing biased studies by teacher union-funded groups.³

This is selection bias – ignoring data that may work against a pre-selected conclusion.

- He suggests that Michigan’s charter schools lack public oversight. In fact, charter schools in Michigan must account to public oversight bodies for their use of public funds, have short-term contracts subject to cancellation for non-performance, and are subject to other accountability measures traditional public schools are not required to meet.
- This is selection bias again.
- He does not reveal the financial troubles of the charter school he features, George Washington Carver Academy Charter School, are caused by the fact that charter schools receive thousands of dollars less in operating funds per student than traditional schools, and they receive no capital funding. By omitting this fact, the writer reveals his regressive bias against charter schools.
- Selection bias, compounded by the fallacy of false exclusion – leaving out evidence that contradicts the example.
- He ignores the reasons why Michigan families are voluntarily enrolling their children in the state’s charter schools.
- Selection bias, compounded by the fallacy of authority – in the reporter’s mind Michigan families are not an official or impressive source, so their views don’t count.
- He characterizes Michigan’s charter school model as “extreme” and “radical,” even though Michigan’s charter school law was passed by the elected representatives of the people of Michigan, the state legislature, and signed by the elected governor.

This is the fallacy of explanation – offering reasons that are not supported and do not increase understanding.

- He fails to report that low-performing charter schools are closed through public oversight every year, but that low-performing traditional schools never close.

2 “Fast Facts on Michigan Charters,” Michigan Association of Public School Academies (MAPSA), <http://www.charterschools.org/why>, accessed September 8, 2017.

3 “Charter School Performance in Michigan, Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), Stanford University, January 11, 2013, at https://credo.stanford.edu/pdfs/MI_report_2012_FINAL_1_11_2013_no_watermark.pdf. And “Charter Management Organizations, by James L. Woodworth, Ph.D., et al., Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), Stanford University, 2017, at <https://credo.stanford.edu/pdfs/CMO%20FINAL.pdf>.



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This is using a double standard – one group is held to a higher standard of performance than a similar group, instead of applying equal expectations to both.

Parents are not fooled by false reasoning

Parents represent the frontline of public education, and they are not easily duped by false reasoning and *The New York Times*. Parents want more school choice options, not fewer. Parents in Michigan are well aware that over the last twenty years Michigan's charter school model has delivered real excellence in education quality to its students.⁴

For example, on U.S. News and World Report's 2017 high school rankings, Michigan's top three high schools were charter schools: Wellspring Preparatory High School in Grand Rapids, Arbor Preparatory High School, Ypsilanti, and Black River Public School, Holland.⁵

The Times is targeting its criticism at some of the most vulnerable families in public education. Most of Michigan's charter school students, like most charter school students in other states, are low-income, minority students.⁶ These are the families who have historically been underserved by their traditional public schools.

Conclusion

The New York Times story is the latest in a series of ongoing attacks against charter school families. The same attacks are leveled against charter school families in Washington state, primarily by executives at the powerful WEA teachers union. These attacks, often founded on biased reporting and false reasoning, have been unavailing, and student interest in attending a charter public school continues to grow.

Michigan's expanding charter school sector gives families a choice and a way to escape failing public schools – as it does for families in Washington state – so that all children have a chance at learning and at achieving the American dream.

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- 4 "Column: Charter Schools are top schools," by Jared Burkhart, *The Detroit News*, May 16, 2017, at <http://www.detroitnews.com/story/opinion/2017/05/16/column-charter-schools-top-schools/101732272/>.
- 5 "Top Ranked Michigan Schools," High School Rankings, *U.S. News and World Report*, 2017, at <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/michigan>.
- 6 "Fast Facts on Michigan Charters," Michigan Association of Public School Academies (MAPSA), <http://www.charterschools.org/why>, accessed September 8, 2017.