



Educational Whack-A-Mole a losing game for Kentucky kids

By Jim Waters

It became obvious at this week's Interim Joint Education Committee meeting on charter schools in Frankfort that school-choice opponents hope to keep charter schools out of Kentucky by luring its supporters into a game of Educational Whack-A-Mole.

Charter supporters pop up and argue their case, using research that shows kids who stay in charters for at least three years usually do better than their peers in traditional schools. Opponents, led by the labor bosses of the state's teachers unions, whack the charter supporters back, disputing the data and deceptively claiming that [charter schools](#) will destroy public schools.

The noise from this arcade-style back and forth drowns out the most important reason for considering charters: Kentucky's failing schools need [competition](#).

Both sides argue about "research," but history isn't as fuzzy.

It's difficult, for instance, to rebuff the impact of Michigan charters on traditional public schools. Test results show that Michigan school districts losing more than 6 percent of their students to charter schools have responded to the competition by improving math and reading scores of their fourth- and seventh-graders. Comparable results also occur in other places.

Similar competition likely would offer a rising tide that lifts all Kentucky students' boats, especially the sinking vessels of at-risk kids most likely to drop out and end up on the streets, behind bars or worse.

Research matters, but results matter *more*.

Data can be disputed, but only anti-school choice ideologues can turn blind eyes and deaf ears to the reality of our current system's failure. According to the education department's Kentucky Core Content Test, a majority of our students are not academically successful.

Only 41 percent of all Kentucky public high-school students are proficient in math. More than 70 percent of high-schoolers who are minorities or come from low-income homes are failing in math, science, social studies and writing.

Having more than one educational vehicle might not bring all of these children to success, but other states' results indicate that kids with two strikes against them would get a chance to at least stay in the game.

Imagine a world with only one kind of car. Folks would argue about the paint job, and what kind of brakes, tires or engine parts it should have — and use "data" and "research" to bolster their points.

Having lots of cars to choose from gets rid of the bickering. Buyers can choose whatever kind, color and make of car with whatever type of engine they want. In the same way, when Kentucky parents have true freedom, bickering over the incidentals disappears.

Charter supporters must stay focused on the bigger issue of improving our schools and the education of all children through competition. Otherwise: Whack! The good ideas get beat down and the bad ideas pop up — again and again.

Examples?

Just when it looked like a Washington-mandated, government-run health care fiasco was “dead,” it popped up again and became law.

Just when it looked like the idea of removing the secret-ballot option for workers to use when considering whether to organize a union was “dead,” it popped up again. (The Arizona Supreme Court recently ruled that Proposition 108, which sought to protect the right to vote by secret ballot in union elections, is unconstitutional.)

Whack!

Sometimes bad policy gets a revival because engaged policy warriors get so focused on hitting the moles with their rubber mallets that they don’t see the sledgehammer wielded by big-government gangsters furiously headed straight toward them.

Whack-A-Mole players like the sound of Whack! But those desperate for a better education for their children like the sound of “Pomp and Circumstance” and the 21st century version of cash registers ringing in the future much better.

— *Jim Waters is vice president of policy and communications for the Bluegrass Institute, Kentucky’s free-market think tank. Reach him at jwaters@freedomkentucky.com. Read previously published columns at www.bipps.org.*