



Does Washington's cash mean charter schools for Kentucky?

By Jim Waters

Money talks.

You know what walks.

When the Obama administration made it clear that states hostile to charter schools – publicly funded, independently managed schools – stood to lose out on education stimulus money, the screeching U-turns occurring in statehouses throughout the country would rival any of Deputy Enos Strate's moves in an episode of "The Dukes of Hazzard."

All of a sudden, the kink in the flow of school choice legislation – caused by teacher unions in cahoots with enabling politicians – became as straight as the face of a lawmaker telling voters, "I work for you."

What's happened south of Kentucky's border serves as a preview of the coming tussle within its borders.

The Glass Menagerie put in place by the Tennessee teachers union – an ardent school-choice opponent – got smashed to smithereens after Education Secretary Arne Duncan told lawmakers that the Volunteer State's stifling restriction of charter schools could cost it a chance for a significant piece of the \$4.35 billion "[Race to the Top](#)" stimulus fund.

As quick as you can sing "Rocky Top," Tennessee lawmakers passed a bill greatly expanding the number of charter schools and students eligible to attend them and Democratic Gov. Phil Bredesen signed it.

With progress being made toward expanding Tennessee's charter-school program, that state's teachers union mounted an all-out propaganda campaign to create the equivalent of a jury's reasonable doubt about charter school effectiveness. Using faulty data, the union's April "Legislative Report" claimed: "The 'jury is still out' on the effectiveness of charter schools."

We can expect the same kind of intellectual dishonesty here in Kentucky, but don't be confused. The record shows a much different verdict.

A [new study](#) by Caroline Hoxby, a highly acclaimed Stanford economics professor, represents one of the most rigorous ever done on charter schools. It compared the performance of 41,000 students – including 93 percent of New York City's charter school students in grades three through 12 – whose parents won in a charter-school lottery against the group of students who lost in the lotteries and had to remain in regular public schools.

Hoxby found:

- Charter school students score 30 points higher in math by the time they reach the end of the eighth grade.

- Students who attend charter schools from kindergarten through eighth grade close 86 percent of the achievement gap in math and 66 percent of the gap in English.
- Charter high-school students for all four years have a 28-percent greater chance of graduating with a full “Regents” diploma.

The response of anti-choice zealots is typical and predictable. They claim [charter schools](#) secure higher test scores by “creaming the crop.”

But Hoxby’s study represents a true apples-to-apples comparison. Because more parents consistently want to enroll students in charter schools than those schools have seats available, charter schools often turn to lotteries. Hoxby’s study compared the performance of those students who won the lottery with those who did not. These successful students often come from the same neighborhoods, walk past the same drug dealers and face the same disadvantages – but they escape the failing schools.

If charters cream, “they sure go about it in an odd way, locating in neighborhoods that are dramatically poorer, less-educated and more full of single-parent households than other public schools,” said Nelson Smith, president and CEO of National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

Teacher-union backed lawmakers opposing school choice don’t seem interested in talking about the plight of more than 10,000 Kentucky students trapped in [Tier 5 failing schools](#) – many from poor, black households.

But show those same politicians money from Washington? Now we’re talking.

Correction: A recent column should have said the gasoline-tax increase approved during this year’s legislative session cost drivers pumping 15 gallons weekly an additional \$31.20 a year.

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