



# Lawmakers should 'charter' a flight to better education

By Jim Waters

I wonder if strident critics of school choice pay attention to the success of charter schools throughout the nation.

If they do, I suspect they choose to ignore it or dismiss it as some kind of fad – a bad experiment gone good.

But the facts tell us otherwise.

U.S. News & World Report ranked 11 charter schools among the nation's 100 best high schools. You can find all of the rankings on the magazine's Web site at: <http://www.usnews.com/sections/education/high-schools>.

The No. 2 ranking in the survey went to Pacific Collegiate Charter School in Santa Cruz, Calif.

Charter schools use public money but run more like private schools. Their principals and teachers escape the suffocating rules and regulations rampant in traditional public schools.

Much to the chagrin of teachers unions, charter-school principals have much more flexibility in hiring staff than in traditional, government-run schools. The teachers unions want “years served” in the system as the driver for hiring and pay. But charter-school principals can sign up the best teachers for a school's academic needs — even if a teacher lacks the longest tenure.

In return for this freedom, these schools must achieve a certain level of performance outlined in their “charters,” ostensibly a contract with those who use them.

Part of the reason why charters succeed stems from lifting the heavy hand of regulation and letting parents choose to use them instead of traditional public schools. Meanwhile, principals and teachers in charter schools get to exercise innovation. They can choose their emphasis. Some emphasize math and science, and others focus on the arts. They choose a curriculum, dress codes and disciplinary standards.

Depending on how a state writes its law, a group of teachers or parents, universities or nonprofits can create charters. State entities start some charter schools, but such an approach is only effective the extent that charters can remain free from school-district controls.

One approach that works great involves charter schools started on university campuses.

For example, Preuss (pronounced like “choice”) School, housed on the University of California, San Diego campus became so successful that parents must win a lottery to get their children in.

School-choice opponents argue that only well-to-do parents want school choice. They say that enacting school-choice laws in Kentucky would skim the “cream of the crop” from the student body in failing public schools, leaving behind riff-raff.

Not so at Preuss. All applicants to attend must be eligible for “Title I” or “Free or Reduced Lunch” programs, the subsidies for students from low-income families. That means 100 percent of the kids at Preuss fall into the low-income household category.

These aren’t wealthy, white suburban students that critics claim hold the only interest in choice. Every one of the students comes from a low-income home, and 94 percent are Hispanic or black. Oh, yeah, the school ranked No. 10 in the U.S. News lineup.

One of the greatest aspects of charters is that they allow parents access to quality education choices who don’t have the financial wherewithal to move to a better school district or pay tuition at a private school. Public money gets used, but if a parent chooses, those dollars go to a charter school that may provide their student with a better education.

If lawmakers in Frankfort want to take on a winning political issue, they should propose a charter-school bill that at least offers a way out for students from low-income homes who are trapped in failing schools.

State universities could start schools on their campuses, such as the UC San Diego and others have. And the law should allow private entities to form neighborhood charter schools.

Even if they don’t like the idea, lawmakers should consider the political capital it bears. Some 49 percent of Kentucky’s public-school students come from low-income households.

That’s a lot of votes.

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