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EXPANDING CHARTER SCHOOLING IN MISSOURI

By Emily Runge

The Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) is one of the most successful charter networks in the country and enrolled over 80,000 students this year nationwide. Currently, five KIPP schools operate in Missouri—one in Kansas City and four in Saint Louis—and they enrolled almost 1,700 students this year. Later this year KIPP is opening its first high school in Saint Louis.

For students who live in high-poverty areas with low-performing public schools, KIPP schools and other charter schools offer the opportunity for a better education—an opportunity that far too few Missouri students have. With some key

changes to government policy, charter school expansion could transform the lives of thousands of students across the state who want access to quality schools.

In this essay, I first look at how charter schools in Missouri are performing compared to traditional public schools. A growing body of evidence suggests that overall, charters perform as well or better than public schools when side-by-side comparisons are possible. Next, I explain some of the educational challenges facing parents and students—namely, that there are not enough charter schools and that charter operators are deterred from

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operating in many of the areas that need them most. Finally, I explore policy changes that could create a better charter school market in Missouri: In particular, allowing non-district sponsors to operate in areas beyond Kansas City and Saint Louis, along with making capital funds available to charter operators, could dramatically increase the number of Missouri students able to benefit from the innovation taking place in the charter school sector.

CHARTER SCHOOLS IN MISSOURI

Within the Kansas City and Saint Louis school districts, 39 independent local education agencies (LEAs) operate charter schools in 72 buildings. In these cities, charter schools are growing quickly in part due to years of poor performance by traditional public schools. At the beginning of the 2016–2017 school year, Kansas City charters enrolled 11,938 students and Saint Louis charters enrolled 11,120—an overall increase of 11 percent in charter school enrollment from 2015 to 2016.

But how well are these charter schools performing? Every year, the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) publishes an Annual Performance Review (APR) giving each school district a score on a percentage scale. The state then determines accreditation status for each district based on its scores over several years. The requirements for each accreditation designation are as follows:

- 70% or above: full accreditation
- 50% to 69.9%: provisional accreditation
- Below 50%: unaccredited

The APR system measures student proficiency on the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) tests, attendance rates, college and high school readiness, and other factors to assess the overall performance of school districts. There are reasons to be skeptical of these measures, which I will explore later in this essay, but for now the latest APR scores confirm what charter advocates already know: some charter schools perform better than traditional public schools and some perform worse.

Summary of Kansas City Charters' APR Scores¹:

- The Kansas City Public School District (KCPS) scored exactly 70%
- 12 charter LEAs outperformed KCPS while 8 charter LEAs fell under 70%
- Two charter schools, Ewing Marion Kauffman School and University Academy, scored 100%

Summary of Saint Louis Charters' APR Scores²:

- The Saint Louis Public School District (SLPS) scored 74.6%
- 7 charter LEAs outperformed SLPS while 9 charter LEAs fell under 70%
- North Side Community School scored 100%
- The two worst performing schools, Jamaa Learning Center and Better Learning Community Academy, were shut down by their authorizers.³

School-to-district comparisons can be problematic. For example, during the 2015–16 school year the state administered a new version of the MAP test. This not only makes comparison with the previous year's results difficult, but also raises the question of whether observed differences between schools result from some schools being better adapted to the new test rather than actually being more effective at instruction. Also, individual schools operate differently than whole school systems; they have different compositions of students, thus the school's APR score can be more sensitive to small changes in students' test scores. As a result, it is necessary to look beyond the APR system to accurately assess charter school performance.

In November 2016, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) published their annual report, "A Growing Movement: America's Largest Charter Public School Communities and Their Impact on Student Outcomes."⁴ In this study, the NAPCS compared charter schools' share of enrollment, share of all students who took the MAP test, and share of all students who scored proficient or above on the MAP test. They found:

In Kansas City, 40 percent of public school students were enrolled in charter schools in 2015-2016 and charter school students represented 47 percent of all test takers in 2014-2015. However, of the students who scored proficient or above, more than half (56 percent) were charter school students—a positive differential of 9 percentage points.

This pattern held true for Saint Louis, where charter schools enrolled 30 percent of all public school students, represented 32 percent of test takers, and accounted for 37 percent of test takers who scored proficient or above.

In addition, the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) publishes an annual report to measure charter school performance in urban areas over time. Although the CREDO study does not examine Kansas City, it found that when Saint Louis charter schools were compared to similar traditional public schools, charter schools performed about the same. Charter school performance was almost equal in math while charter school student growth was equivalent to almost 7 additional days of learning in English.⁵

It is also worth noting that Saint Louis charter schools have been improving over time. In 2007, charter schools underperformed traditional public schools in both reading and math. By 2011, however, CREDO research indicated that charter schools were beginning to outperform traditional public schools in both categories.⁶

Moreover, CREDO data shows that students in Saint Louis may fall behind in their first year enrolled in a charter school, but they make significant gains in their second, third, and fourth years of enrollment.⁷

As data about charter school performance have accumulated over time, it has become apparent that they perform, on average, as well or better than traditional public schools when compared side-by-side as in the CREDO study.

THE PROBLEMS

The trouble with charter schools in Missouri is not their performance—it is that there are not enough seats for the students who want to attend. Under current laws, it is unlikely charters will open in many places throughout the state where children are trapped in poor-performing schools.

Supply Doesn't Meet Demand

Even though the number of charter schools is increasing and enrollment is expanding, hundreds of students are still on wait lists. University Academy in Kansas City alone has a wait list of 700 children while enrolling over 1,000 students.⁸ Other schools receive more applications than there are seats:

- Allen Village in Kansas City has a wait list of 81 children with current enrollment of about 670 students.
- Citizens of the World, Kansas City's newest charter school, enrolled only 126 of its 223 applicants.
- Eagle College Prep, opened in Saint Louis in 2013, received 535 applications in 2015, which increased to 755 applications in 2016. Current enrollment is about 480 students with a waitlist of 92 children.
- KIPP Saint Louis received 1,696 applications for the 2016–2017 school year compared to 1,415 applications the previous year. Their wait list also increased from 284 children for the 2015–2016 school year to 414 students currently.

Because there is no uniform data collection on charter school waitlists and students often apply to more than one school, it is difficult to quantify precisely the demand for charter schools in Kansas City and Saint Louis. Nevertheless, it is clear from the wait list data that parents are looking for quality alternatives for their children, as enrollment in both the Kansas City (KCPS) and Saint Louis (SLPS) districts has declined by over 10% since 2010.

Restrictive Laws

Currently, Missouri laws create challenges for charter schools. Outside of Kansas City and Saint Louis, charter schools may only be authorized by the state board of education in provisionally accredited districts and by the local school board in accredited districts. Even though Missouri has a state-run authorizing agency, the Missouri Charter Public School Commission (MCPSC), the agency does not have the authority to approve charters outside of Kansas City, Saint Louis, and unaccredited districts.⁹ Based

Table 1: Funding By School Type

	Traditional Per-Pupil Funding	Charter Per-Pupil Funding	Difference in Dollars	Percent Difference
Kansas City	\$17,897	\$13,507	\$4,391	-24.5
Saint Louis	\$18,249	\$13,273	\$4,975	-27.3

Source: Batdorff M; University of Arkansas Department of Education Reform. "Charter School Funding: Inequity Expands: Missouri." Available at: <http://www.uaedreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/charter-funding-inequity-expands-mo.pdf>.

on the latest accreditation classifications from DESE, the Riverview Gardens school district was awarded provisional accreditation, thus reducing the options of potential sponsors to only the state board of education.¹⁰

In the Normandy school district—currently the state’s only unaccredited district—three charter organizations sent applications to the MCPSC to open schools. One application was denied; the two others received “no invitation” for sponsorship from the commission.¹¹ While the rejections of these specific charter schools may have been valid, the chances that charter schools will be authorized by the local school districts outside of Kansas City and Saint Louis are slim without multiple authorizers available.

Another obstacle to charter school expansion is the unequal access to public funds. For FY2011, the University of Arkansas Department of Education Reform reported the difference in per pupil funding for traditional public school and charter school students (Table 1).¹²

According to this study, the disparity in funding stems from several factors: less access to local tax revenue (which funds capital costs), the way in which the state applies the weighted average daily attendance to the funding formula, and the hold-harmless funding provisions (which only apply to traditional school districts). The relative lack of access to capital funds that could be used to purchase buildings is especially prohibitive for charter organizations looking to open new schools.

Where Charters Are Needed

As of 2016, all Missouri school districts are provisionally or fully accredited except Normandy. While it is good that these districts are improving, their accreditation statuses limit the choices of the students living in these districts.

If a school district is unaccredited, state law allows students to transfer to another school district at the expense of their local district. Now that all but one district are at least provisionally accredited, students will lose this option in the future and will have to return to their own districts. Table 2 lists details about the seven lowest-performing districts based on 2016 APR scores¹³:

Although these districts have attained scores above the unaccredited range this year, a look at the proficiency scores of their students raises serious concerns. For example, in *none* of the seven districts listed did even half of the students score “proficient” or better on the MAP test in math. This highlights the difficulty in determining a school’s accreditation status using a scoring system like that used in the APR. Instead of the locations of charter schools being limited by an arbitrary accreditation system, new schools should be allowed to expand based the demand of students and parents whose local schools are falling short.

Table 2: Achievement Results, Selected School Districts 2016

School District	APR Score	Enrollment	Graduation Rate	MAP Proficiency (Math)	MAP Proficiency (English)	Proportional Attendance Rate
Missouri—Statewide			88.9%	48.6%	62.9%	89.7%
Normandy	54.6%	3,145	79.6%	16.0%	32.9%	74.3%
Pemiscot Co.	59.4%	132	*	24.1%	41.8%	89.4%
Ripley Co. R-IV	63.8%	119	*	15.5%	52.1%	96.9%
Hayti	65.0%	692	92.5%	30.0%	48.5%	85.9%
Calhoun	66.7%	124	44.4%	42.4%	51.5%	86.3%
Hickman Mills	67.9%	5,807	79.9%	25.0%	38.3%	83.4%
Senath-Hornersville	69.6%	786	91.9%	30.5%	50.6%	86.5%

*Data not reported.

Source: Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. “District and School Information.” Available at: <https://mcde.se.mo.gov/quickfacts/SitePages/DistrictInfo.aspx>.

SOLUTIONS

Two aspects of Missouri charter school policy in particular need improvement: removing barriers to establishing new schools and helping the charter school market function better.

Expanding Charter Schools

The NAPCS provides a list of “Essential Components of a Strong Charter Public School Law” and then ranks every state’s charter laws. Based on these 20 components, Missouri ranks 30th out of the 42 states and the District of Columbia that currently have charter school legislation.¹⁴

While Missouri scores high in areas like allowing a variety of charter schools, exemptions from collective bargaining,

fiscal and legal autonomy, and comprehensive data collection, the state laws fall short in other important aspects. NAPCS states:

Potential areas for improvement include beefing up the requirements for charter application, review, and decisionmaking processes, providing multiple authorizing options in all districts, and ensuring equitable operational funding and equitable access to capital funding and facilities.¹⁵

The NAPCS also surveyed top charter management organizations (CMOs) from around the nation to learn about the decision-making process that led to the opening of a school in a new area. Equitable funding, financial support for facilities, high-quality teachers in the area, and a transparent authorization process are some of the

major factors that the CMOs considered.¹⁶ Fortunately, the presence of active Teach for America programs in Kansas City and Saint Louis is attractive to CMOs, as is the fact that charter schools and traditional public schools receive equal per-pupil funding. The lack of capital funds and the limited number of authorizers, however, restrict charter growth throughout the state.

Allowing non-district authorizers beyond the KCPS and SLPS would create more favorable conditions for charter schools. In these two districts, universities have authorized all but two charters. KCPS and the MCPSC have only authorized one school each—both of which opened in the fall of 2016. Despite the MCPSC being established in 2012, it has only authorized one school while three applications are currently pending for 2017 and 2018 openings.¹⁷ For most districts outside of KCPS and SLPS—where only the local school board can authorize charters—the lack of alternative authorizers deters CMOs from opening schools in these areas. It is unlikely that CMOs will pursue opening schools in areas where local school board politics dictate authorization of charter applications. If universities and the MCPSC were allowed to authorize charter schools regardless of a district's accreditation status, and if charter schools had access to more equitable capital funding, two of the most significant barriers to charter school operation would be removed.

Not only would these changes help attract more CMOs to Kansas City and Saint Louis, but they would facilitate charter expansion in other struggling districts. Low-performing districts such as Raytown and Hickman Mills outside of Kansas City and Riverview Gardens, Normandy, and University City outside of Saint Louis are a few districts that could benefit greatly from introducing charter schools.

Outside of the KCPS and SLPS districts, families who are unable to afford private school tuition have no options when their public schools fail them. The Riverview Gardens school district offers an example of the consequences of the restrictions facing CMOs. The district has one middle school and one high school. Despite low MAP proficiency rates—25% in English and 14% in math—Riverview Gardens is now provisionally accredited, meaning that students there cannot transfer to other school districts at their home district's expense.¹⁸ If charter schools could serve students across the Kansas City and Saint Louis

metropolitan areas, CMOs would be able to open schools in the areas with the highest needs and not be bound by district lines.

The presence of more authorizers and funding for facilities would also make it feasible for charter schools to open in rural areas of Missouri. The Calhoun and Hayti school districts, located in the northern and southern edges of the state, are just two examples of rural districts that are currently performing very poorly—refer to Table 2 for key statistics. In Oregon, Idaho, Colorado and Kansas, charter schools have found innovative ways to serve rural students: examples include four-day school weeks to save on transportation costs, project-based learning to teach important life skills, and schools run by community members.

The National Charter School Resource Center published a report, “Harvesting Success: Charter Schools in Rural America,” detailing the obstacles to charter school expansion into rural areas and highlighting the success of the rural charters listed above. Lack of quality teachers, transportation costs, and limited facilities are the primary challenges.¹⁹ Fortunately, Missouri charter schools already have equal access to transportation funding. On the other hand, the remaining two obstacles mean that Missouri is missing out on unique educational opportunities in many parts of the state.

Improving the Marketplace

Missouri appears to have strong accountability expectations for its charter schools, and has consistently closed those that have underperformed. Since 2001, 21 charter LEAs have been closed and two more were closed just this year.²⁰ In addition, the Preclarus Mastery Academy is expected to close in June 2017 after the University of Missouri-St. Louis revoked its sponsorship of the school.²¹ While the causes for closure were not disclosed for all of these schools, the factors that were reported included financial problems, mismanagement, and poor academic performance. None of them reported closing due to lack of interest or under-enrollment. Moreover, according to available records of these school closings, the sponsors—not the state—were the first to hold the charter schools accountable.²²

While sponsors have been vigilant in their monitoring of charter schools and proactive in dealing with schools that

underperform, they could improve by keeping parents and the community better informed of the quality of the instruction that charters provide. Charter school sponsors in Missouri already have performance-based contracts and provide the schools with annual performance reports. The National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) also emphasizes the importance of sponsors publishing these reports annually in order to “reinforce central charter tenets, and dispel stubborn myths about funding, admission policies, or other issues of particular concern to your community.”²³ For example, the Georgia State Charter Schools Commission publishes an annual “Academic Accountability Update” that features value-added analysis (measuring student growth) and school-level profiles.²⁴ Publishing comprehensive reports and making this information accessible and easy to understand would help parents make informed decisions on which school is best for their child.

In Missouri, without a separate performance report published by charter sponsors, parents must rely on the APR scores to compare charter schools to their district. The Missouri Charter Public School Association notes, however, that charter schools must perform better academically for the same overall score, the APR compares single charter schools to whole districts, and the APR scores set a lower threshold than the charter school’s contracts do.²⁵

First, the APR score is out of 140 total points possible and is based on five different categories: Academic Achievement (56 points), Subgroup Achievement (14 points), College and Career Readiness/High School Readiness (30 points), Attendance (10 points), and Graduation Rate (30 points). K-5 and K-8 charter schools are only eligible for the Academic Achievement, Subgroup Achievement, Attendance Points, and sometimes High School Readiness. With the academic performance points comprising a greater portion of points than traditional public schools, charter schools do not have the opportunity that traditional public schools have to use high attendance and graduation rates to compensate for lower achievement-test scores in APR scoring.

Second, charter LEAs are scored individually and have a few different campuses at most. All but five charter LEAs in Missouri enroll fewer than 1000 students, so it is difficult to compare them to entire districts with multiple schools contributing to one APR score.

Third, while this APR-based accountability system is not legally binding for charter schools, there is no alternative system with which parents can gauge school performance. In Missouri, charters must abide by performance contracts and meet standards prescribed by their sponsors—which are often higher than state standards. Yet without independent performance reviews published by the sponsors, parents lack the resources to make informed decisions about where to send their children to school.

Allowing for multiple authorizers to operate throughout the state and providing more funding for school buildings would enable charter school expansion throughout the state. Pair this with active authorizers living up to their end of the charter school bargain and we can hope to see a vibrant charter school market throughout Missouri.

CONCLUSION

Too many Missouri families lack quality alternatives to traditional public schools. With academic performance lagging in traditional public schools across many parts of the state, additional options for students are sorely needed. Expanding access to charter schools is one way the state can provide such options.

While charter schools offer many potential benefits, they will not solve all of the state’s education problems, and there is no guarantee that charters will open in all of the areas where new options are needed. Nonetheless, changes to our charter laws could help empower parents and students through school choice. Making non-district authorizers and capital funds available to charter school operators in all parts of the state would enable new schools to open and serve communities with limited educational opportunities.

We have seen positive results from charter schools in Kansas City and Saint Louis. Rather than restrict these successes to two districts in the state, Missouri has the opportunity to create an environment that attracts high-quality charters to our state and gives families more control over their children’s education.

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ENDNOTES

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