



TESTIMONY

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SENATE BILL 292: CHARTER SCHOOL EXPANSION

By Susan Pendergrass

Testimony Before the Missouri Senate General Laws Committee

TO THE HONORABLE MEMBERS OF THIS COMMITTEE

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Susan Pendergrass, Ph.D., and I am the director of Research and Education Policy for the Show-Me Institute, a nonprofit, nonpartisan, Missouri-based think tank that advances sensible, well-researched, free-market solutions to state and local policy issues. The ideas presented here are my own and summarize research regarding how increasing charter school access can help students in Missouri.

There are currently nearly 3.2 million charter school students¹ attending over 7,000 public charter schools in the United States, and demand continues to grow. Since 2005, total charter school enrollment has tripled, with 42 states plus the District of Columbia making charter schools

available to families.² And charter schools are not just an urban trend. In the 2016–17 school year, 56 percent of charter schools were in urban areas, 26 percent were in suburban areas, and 18 percent were in small towns and rural communities.³ This means there are over 1,000 charter schools available to parents in small communities.

Support for charter schools is consistently high in surveys of both parents⁴ and voters,⁵ particularly when a clear definition of charter schools is provided. In fact, in a nationally representative survey of parents of school-aged children, 75 percent of parents who do not have access to a charter school would favor having one open in their community or neighborhood.⁶ Most national polls^{7–9} find that about one in six parents lists a charter school as their number one education choice for their child.

ADVANCING LIBERTY WITH RESPONSIBILITY
BY PROMOTING MARKET SOLUTIONS
FOR MISSOURI PUBLIC POLICY

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT CHARTER SCHOOL PERFORMANCE?

The original promise of charter schools was that they would be given substantial autonomy in exchange for meeting performance targets. Initial research¹⁰ on charter schools was generally characterized as “mixed” due to a lack of robust data and the challenge of comparing these unique public schools to their non-charter public school counterparts. However, more recent research has helped to reveal where and how charter schools are outperforming expectations. A 2011 meta-analysis, restricted to only the highest-quality research, found that in 15 of 16 studies charter schools were shown to have had a positive impact on student academic achievement.¹¹ The positive effects tended to be stronger for math and at the elementary school level.

A series of studies conducted by the Stanford Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) has broken new ground. These studies rely on creating “virtual twins” for each charter school student. The virtual twins, composites of several students who attend non-charter public schools, are matched to a charter school counterpart based on demographics, socioeconomic status, and prior performance. A 2013 CREDO study¹² found that, across sixteen states, charter schools had a significant impact on reading, but not in math. However, in that same study, Missouri charter school students showed statistically significant improvement in learning gains over their non-charter school twins in both reading and math. In fact, Missouri charter school students gained the equivalent of an additional 14 days of learning in reading each year and 22 days of learning in math each year. (If you assume that a student gains 180 days of learning in a 180-day school year, then charter school students in Missouri gained 194 days of learning in reading and 202 days of learning in math in a single year.)

A 2015 CREDO study of urban charter schools found that urban charter school students gain the equivalent of roughly 40 days of additional learning per year in math and 28 days in reading, as compared to the amount of learning gained by their matched twins in non-charter public schools.¹³ The findings were even stronger for low-income students and students of color.

An analysis of charter school enrollment data conducted by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools

found that, in both Kansas City and St. Louis, charter school students were more likely to score Proficient or above on state assessments than non-charter public school students.¹⁴ This analysis compared the share of total enrollment in charter schools in those districts to the share of students who scored Proficient or above and, in both cases, the share of Proficient seats in charter schools was higher than the share of total seats.

DO WE NEED MORE CHARTER SCHOOLS IN MISSOURI?

Currently in Missouri, charter schools can technically be opened anywhere. In unaccredited districts, which has translated to only Kansas City and St. Louis thus far, those who are interested in putting their ideas and energy into practice, accepting accountability in exchange for autonomy, can submit a charter school application to a number of approved sponsors, including a state charter school board and an array of higher education institutions. However, in fully accredited districts, of which there are 512 out of 518 total districts, the only option for opening a charter school is to ask the local school board to approve a charter application. So far, school board approval has proven to be a road block. Is this due to a lack of demand?

In a 2014 survey of registered voters in Missouri, nearly 60 percent responded that the public schools in Missouri are “fair” or “poor.” Fifty-five percent of respondents were also school parents.¹⁵ In that same survey, 15 percent of school parents indicated that, if they could select any type of school, including private schools, in order to obtain the best education for their child, they would choose a charter school. In other words, charter schools were the first choice for over 100,000 students in Missouri. However, only about 22,700 public school students in Missouri are attending a charter school this year due to limited access.¹⁶

HOW WOULD THE PROPOSED LEGISLATION IMPACT CHARTER SCHOOL EXPANSION IN MISSOURI?

The proposed legislation would make it slightly easier for charter schools to open throughout the state because the denial of a charter by a local school district could be appealed to the Missouri Charter Public School Commission. If the commission found it more likely than not that there is community support for the charter school and the charter school would be in a county governed by a

charter or in a city that has a population over 30,000, the application would be approved.

This legislation would allow more opportunities for charter schools in the state of Missouri. Currently, over 22,000 students, 2 percent of Missouri public school students, are served in 71 charter schools in St Louis City and Kansas City. But the supply of charter schools has not kept up with the demand.¹⁷

Missouri charter schools are only serving one fourth of the students who want to enroll in one. Across the state, students are looking for an education best fitted to their needs and academic goals, and charter schools could be catering to these students.

In addition to the survey results listed above, current charter school student applications provide evidence of demand for charters. University Academy, a top-performing charter school in Kansas City, had a waiting list of 700 students in the 2016-17 school year. That's already enough to open another K-12 school.

Outside of Missouri's two major metropolitan areas, smaller cities could also benefit from charter schools. Consider a community to our south—Helena, Arkansas, a town of fewer than 10,000 residents. In 2002, the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) opened a small (65 students) middle school in Helena—the KIPP Delta College Preparatory School—with 90 percent of their enrollment qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch. Since then, KIPP has opened two more schools in Helena, as well as schools in nearby Blytheville and Forest City.

CONCLUSION

The introduction of a charter school shouldn't happen only in response to the failure of the traditional public schools in the district. Families across the state want access to charter schools, and onerous requirements for the establishment of charters should not stand between Missouri's children and the education that best meets their needs and circumstances.

Charter schools do not have to be a punitive action, but a first-choice for students to find a public education best suited for their needs and circumstances. Students may be inspired by a unique college or career pathway, or other special programming to attend a charter school. There is community support for charter schools—so why are we parents and students being denied that option?

Susan Pendergrass is the director of research and education for the Show-Me Institute.

NOTES

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5297 Washington Place, Saint Louis, MO 63108—314-454-0647

3645 Troost Avenue, Kansas City, MO 64109—816-561-1777

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