



# Charter Schools' Accountability Is Their Strength

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By: *Emily Stahly*

The Nirvana fallacy often gets in the way of policymaking when, as Voltaire described, we let the perfect become the enemy of the good. It is easy to fall into this trap when discussing education because we want every child to have a world-class education. In Kansas City, however, this fallacy has led us to rejecting the good that charter schools can offer in exchange for empty platitudes about accountability, strategic plans, and prioritizing the children.

Charter schools are not the perfect solution—some fail to meet expectations and close—but they are the only thing that currently gives kids a chance to attend a better school within Kansas City. When the stakes are simply too high for students stuck in failing schools, charter schools must be part of the response to our public school woes.

While charter schools cannot magically transform public education for *all* students, they are already helping thousands of children in Kansas City by giving them alternatives to failing neighborhood schools. Even more students could have this opportunity if we allowed new charter schools to open, helped successful ones expand, and closed those that perform poorly. But for charters to reach their full potential, they need equitable funding for capital costs and access to empty school buildings in the city.

Judging by enrollment numbers and waiting lists, it appears that parents in the area are ready for more charter schools. While enrollment for Kansas City Public Schools continues to decline,

charter school enrollment in Kansas City grew 17 percent between the 2015–2016 and 2016–2017 school years. And that doesn't account for the students on waiting lists—at University Academy, the waiting list was 700 students long last year.

Unfortunately, there are major obstacles to charter school growth. When KIPP KC needed to buy its building, it had to raise the \$2.3 million privately. When Crossroads Academy sought to use the historic Attucks School in the Jazz District for a high school, the city instead sold the building to the Zhou Brothers to be opened as an art center. The district also has resisted efforts to reopen Southwest High School as charter or innovation school.

In a recent article, the editorial board of the *Kansas City Star* correctly pointed out that performance varies among charter schools—some scoring 100 percent and some less than 50 percent on the Annual Performance Report. What they fail to mention, however, is that charter schools shut down when they fail. The latest example is Benjamin Banneker Charter Academy, which will close unless it can find another sponsor. Closing unsuccessful schools is a strength of the charter school model, not a weakness.

Moreover, the variation in scores seen between individual charter schools is also seen in traditional public schools. Looking at 2016 scores, school performance ranges from 100 percent (at Lincoln College Prep, James Elementary, and Pitcher Elementary), to below 40 percent (at Longfellow, Benjamin Banneker, and Satchel Paige Elementary schools).

Charter schools are held accountable in two ways that traditional public schools are not: by their sponsors no longer authorizing them because of poor performance, and by unsatisfied parents choosing to leave. When the Kansas City School District closes schools, most of the time it is for low enrollment numbers, not performance. Many families have left the district, but many others who cannot afford to move are left behind. Should they be forced to keep their kids in failing schools?

If we are serious about making the needs of students our top priority, the answer should be no. We should not expect kids to sit tight in their desks—all while losing valuable days of learning—as their districts make modest, if any, gains each year. Far too many students in Kansas City have no other option than their failing neighborhood schools; they deserve the opportunities new charter schools can offer.

*A version of this op-ed appeared in the [Kansas City Star](#).*

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