



Charter Schools: The Education Opportunity Hidden in Plain Sight

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By: Susan Pendergrass

By next week, the Missouri State Board of Education should be up and running again. They've got plenty of business to attend to, including replacing the [needlessly confusing](#) Missouri school accountability system known as MSIP 5 with a new version, MSIP 6. Is there any reason to expect that the new model will be any better than the old one? Meanwhile, there's growing support among parents for an education reform that actually works—charter schools—but that Missouri policymakers continue to fear.

As I [noted](#) in an earlier post, our scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), considered to be the Nation's Report Card, have been basically flat for over a decade. For all the changes made to standards and all the accountability efforts, including multiple iterations of MSIP, we've made little if any progress. The national scores don't look much better. In 12 years, American 8th-grade students gained just 5 points in reading and 3 points in math, despite huge bets on No Child Left Behind and the Every Student Succeeds Act.

But what about charter schools? This year, the Missouri House Committee on Elementary and Secondary Education went so far as to suggest that we need a two-year [task force](#) to study these new, exotic schools to see if they're working. No need. In [2005](#) there were fewer than 4,000 public charter schools serving about one million students. Now there are over 7,000 schools serving over 3 million students. And while traditional public schools in Missouri and across the U.S. were making no progress on the NAEP, the nation's charter schools were

making double-digit gains. This even though nearly one in three charter school students attends a school that has 75 percent or more low-income students, compared to less than one-quarter of students in traditional public schools. At this rate, charter schools will soon surpass the nation's traditional public schools.

Unfortunately, we can't see NAEP results for Missouri charter schools because here charters are used as punishment and are relegated to just two cities. What this means is that, unlike in most states, it's not possible to create a sample of charter school students in Missouri that can be compared to a representative group of students across the state.

The charter model gives participating schools the autonomy to innovate but demands that those schools either produce results or close down. Accordingly, we should expect to see continuous improvement, as low-performing charter schools are closed and what has been learned is used to open newer ones that are stronger. And it seems to be working—at least where it's allowed to.

Tags:

- [Charter Schools](#)

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Susan Pendergrass was Vice President of Research and Evaluation for the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools before joining the Show-Me Institute. Prior to coming to the National Alliance, Susan was a senior policy advisor at the U.S. Department of Education during the Bush administration and a senior research scientist at the National Center for Education Statistics during the Obama administration. She earned a Ph.D. in Public Policy from George Mason University.

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