



# TESTIMONY

January 27, 2020

## SENATE BILL 603 AND THE EXPANSION OF ACCESS TO CHARTER SCHOOLS FOR MISSOURI STUDENTS

*By Susan Pendergrass*

Testimony Before the Missouri Senate Government Reform 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 the need for more charter school access in Missouri.

There are currently nearly 3.2 million charter school students<sup>1</sup> attending over 7,300 public charter schools in the United States, and demand continues to grow. Since 2005, total charter school enrollment has tripled, with 44 states plus the District of Columbia making charter schools

available to families.<sup>2</sup> And charter schools are not just an urban trend. In the 2017–18 school year, 56 percent of charter schools were in urban areas, 27 percent were in suburban areas, and 18 percent were in small towns and rural communities.<sup>3</sup> This means there are almost 1,300 charter schools available to parents in small communities.

Support for charter schools is consistently high in surveys of both parents<sup>4</sup> and voters,<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> Most national polls<sup>7–9</sup> find that about one in six parents lists a charter school as their number one education choice for their child.

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## 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 research<sup>10</sup> 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 peeled back the onion quite a bit 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 had a positive impact on student academic achievement.<sup>11</sup> 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 are composites of multiple students who attend non-charter public schools and who are matched to their charter school counterpart on demographics, socioeconomic status, and prior performance. A 2013 CREDO study<sup>12</sup> 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 were found to have a statistically significant improvement in learning gains over their non-charter school twins. 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<sup>13</sup> 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. 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.<sup>14</sup> 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. The current law targets unaccredited districts, which has translated to only Kansas City and St. Louis thus far. In these two cities, those who are interested in putting their ideas and energy into practice, 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 current 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, unsurprisingly, 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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

The proposed legislation would make it slightly easier for charter schools to open in a limited number of districts other than St. Louis and Kansas City. In counties governed by a charter (St. Charles County, St. Louis County, Jefferson County, or Jackson County) and in the twenty Missouri cities with populations of more than 30,000, charter applicants would have an additional option. Denial of a charter application 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, the application would be approved.

This legislation would allow more opportunities for charter schools in the state of Missouri. Currently, 23,000 students, 2 percent of students, are served in 71 charter schools in St. Louis City and Kansas City. But the supply has not kept up with the demand for charters.

This legislation would allow students in St. Louis county, for example, who are attending school in public school districts with rates of English/Language Arts and Math proficiency below 20 percent, such as Ferguson-Florissant or Hazelwood, to have another option. Entrepreneurial teachers in those districts would be able to apply for the opportunity to build an innovative educational program.

The opening of a charter school does not have to be a punitive action but could instead be an option for students in search of 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, and parents and students who want a charter should not be denied the option.

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## NOTES

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