



TESTIMONY

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HOUSE BILLS 1485, 1764, 1941: CHARTER SCHOOLS IN ST. LOUIS COUNTY, ST. CHARLES COUNTY, AND BOONE COUNTY

By Susan Pendergrass

Testimony before the Missouri House Special Committee
on Education Reform

TO THE HONORABLE MEMBERS OF THIS COMMITTEE

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Susan Pendergrass, Ph.D., and I am 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 are offered in consideration of proposals that will affect charter schools in Missouri.

Charter schools were first proposed in the late 1980s as a way for teachers to become education entrepreneurs. The idea was to give those with an innovative education idea a charter to run a school for a limited period of time while freeing them from many

state and local regulations. It was up to the operator and board of the chartered school to fill the seats and meet specified performance goals or face closure. Since the first charter school opened in 1992, this sector of the public education system has grown to nearly 7,850 schools serving 3.7 million students nationwide.

Charter schools are, by definition, unique. In a recent study about one-third were found to have a specialized curriculum, such as STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math), STEAM (STEM plus arts), classical learning, language immersion, or career and technical education.¹ Another third of charter schools were found to have a specialized approach to teaching and learning, such as personalized learning, a “no excuses” policy, project-based learning, or Montessori. A third type of charter school was identified as serving a

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specific student population, such as dropout recovery, single sex, or students with disabilities.

In every state other than Missouri, charter schools can be found in all community types. In the 2021–22 school year, there were over 2,000 suburban charter schools and over 1,400 charter schools in rural and small-town school districts.² A study of rural charter schools found that the number of schools grew by 22 percent in the decade between 2007 and 2017, while the number of students attending rural charters grew by 64 percent.³ Key factors for successful charter schools, according to this research, are strong ties to the local community, filling a gap in the education offered, and consistent school leadership.

When it comes to suburban charter schools, research has found that curriculum really matters to suburban parents, and suburban charter schools often offer curriculum that is more rigorous or open and creative than traditional public schools.⁴ As an example, BASIS Charter Schools offers a “STEM-infused, liberal arts curriculum.” All 11 of their high schools are nationally ranked, with 10 in the top 1 percent of high schools, according to US News & World Report 2022.⁵ Over 86 percent of BASIS high school students passed an Advanced Placement exam in 2021, compared to just 12 percent of all Missouri high school students, and they have a 100 percent college acceptance rate.

Because of their uniqueness, it can be difficult to determine if charter schools outperform traditional public schools. However, the Stanford Center on Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) has been studying this issue for over 15 years. Their approach is to create a “virtual twin” for each charter school student by matching their characteristics and academic achievement to several students from the traditional public school to which they are assigned. Differences in academic growth can then be attributed to the type of school attended. The most recent study found that, on average, charter school students gained an additional six days of learning in math and 16 days of learning in reading beyond what they would have if they had attended their assigned public school.⁶ This finding applies to the entire sector of charter schools, not just those in low-performing districts.

The results for Missouri’s charter schools in the CREDO study were even stronger than the nationwide average.

Missouri charter school students gained an incredible 39 additional days of learning in Reading in one year and 56 days in math—or nearly one-third of a school year. There is a caveat to the Missouri results, however. Because our law is designed to limit charter schools to our lowest performing districts, Missouri charter schools, by definition, serve very high levels of disadvantaged and challenging students. Nonetheless, we have some very high-flying charter schools in both Kansas City and St. Louis. But this restriction also means that there have been charter schools that, like the traditional public schools that surround them in both districts, have struggled to get students to grade level. Using these examples as rationale to restrict charter schools in suburban districts is an apples-to-oranges comparison.

In addition to benefiting the students who enroll in them, charter schools can have a positive impact on the students that remain in traditional public schools. A 2021 study of Florida conducted by researchers at Northwestern University found that opening a charter school significantly improved reading scores and decreased absenteeism in the traditional public schools in the same district.⁷

A second study on the competitive effects of charter schools found that once charter schools enroll 10 percent of a district’s students, math and reading scores in all schools, charter and traditional, improve—as do graduation rates.⁸ The authors of this study confirm that the opening of a charter school may lead to the closing of a traditional public school. Not surprisingly, it is most likely that low-performing schools will close, as those are the ones that students are most anxious to leave. Therefore, the opening of a charter school can replace a low-performing district school with a higher quality charter school, thereby raising the overall performance of a district.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR MISSOURI?

The law allowing charter schools in Missouri was passed in 1998 and focused on providing options for students in our lowest-performing districts beyond transferring to another district. The original law was amended in 2012 to allow charter schools to open in any district, provided that the local school board is the sponsor of any charter

school in districts that are fully accredited. Unfortunately, the first decade of charter schools in Missouri created a mindset that the purpose of charter schools is to punish low-performing schools and/or to provide an escape hatch for students. Twenty-five years later, it's time to drop that limited view and take advantage of the benefits and opportunities that charter schools provide to millions of public school students.

Ideally, this change in mindset would happen within the existing law by breaking the entrenched attitude toward district sponsorship. Imagine a suburban Missouri district that is slowly bleeding students, as most districts in the state are. Bringing in a high-quality charter operator with a proven track record, such as a classical school or a STEM school, could provide a whole-school setting, not just a program within a school, that attracts families to the community. A forward-thinking school board could seize the opportunity to be a leader in their region.

Surprisingly, this has not yet happened. Unfortunately, education entrepreneurs, including local parent groups, who want to open a charter school must ask their local school board to sponsor the school. While that is the most common arrangement nationwide, the early approach to charter schools in Missouri rendered this a non-starter. In the event that school boards can't, or won't, see the benefits of bringing a high-quality charter school to their families, charter school applicants should be able to appeal to the Missouri Public Charter School Commission for sponsorship. This would require a small change to the law's current language.

CONCLUSION

Charter schools offer a way to expand options within the public school system. They can be an addition to a district's offerings rather than a competitor. In many districts, charters share transportation, special education, and other services. The Missouri legislature can help change the perspective on charter schools by making it easier for applicants outside of the lowest-performing districts to obtain sponsorship. These bills that target specific districts are a step in the right direction towards that end.

NOTES

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