

Statement on School Choice Initiatives

Central to the mission of the **Department of Theory and Practice in Teacher Education (TPTE)** at the University of Tennessee is developing research-based programs that result in strong teachers and strong schools. Consistent with this mission, TPTE relies on research to inform its practices and initiatives. This statement is one in a series designed to inform the public on what research says about critical issues in education.

Charter schools emerged as part of the educational landscape in the United States in the early 1990s as a reaction to the perception that the public school system was too large and ineffective to meet the needs of all learners. While charter schools are public, they operate with a “charter” or contract with local educational authorities. These charters may stipulate various differences from traditional public school mandates, policies, and expectations. They may also receive additional public or private funding to support their goals. Some charter schools operate independently, while others are part of larger charter school networks that manage dozens or even hundreds of schools across the nation. **While the research on charter school performance has been mixed, overall, they have failed to be the panacea that advocates promised.**

While advocates point to the successes of some high-visibility charter programs, critics are quick to challenge the reported outcomes of even the most successful programs, pointing out that:

- Charter programs often “skim” the cream of the crop when it comes to selecting students for admission, thus improving the appearance that they are accelerating academic success, while leaving those with less promise in the public schools to which the charters are compared.¹
- Attrition rates are higher in charter schools, meaning that students who are unable to keep up with the rigorous expectations of the charters are forced to leave (and return to public schools that must take all comers).²
- Charter schools expel and suspend students at a much higher rate than public schools because charter schools have the freedom to operate independently of the rules that govern public schools with regard to suspending and expelling students.³
- Charter schools enroll fewer students with disabilities, fewer English language learners, and fewer students who qualify for free and reduced lunch, giving such schools an unfair advantage when the performance of their students is used to demonstrate their superiority to traditional public schools that end up serving the students that charters reject.⁴ Expansion of charter schooling exacerbates inequities across schools and children because children are increasingly segregated by economic status, race, language, and disabilities. The charter schools serving the least needy populations have the greatest resource advantages.⁵
- Still, charters have not proven to be more effective than public schools; as one comprehensive Stanford University study showed, only 17% of charter schools had outcomes that bested traditional public schools; 37% were worse than comparison schools; and 46% showed no significant difference in academic performance.⁶
- Charter schools have negative financial effects on traditional public school districts. Charter schools serve fewer students with costly special needs, leaving proportionately more of these children in district schools. Further, charter competition directly decreases traditional public school districts’

revenues because of the loss of state resources due to lower enrollments and the structure of state and local taxation policies.^{7, 8}

Voucher programs are government-sponsored funding certificates that allow students to attend public or private schools of their choosing—using tax dollars to subsidize their tuition. Since their inception, there has been fierce debate over their purpose, viability, and even legality. The debate around these programs often focuses on the freedom parents and students should have to select schools they think will provide more opportunity for success versus the taxpayer subsidy that flows into private parochial schools, thereby potentially violating the principle of separation of church and state. Opponents further argue that the cost of pulling tax dollars from local public schools is harmful to communities and the children left in those schools. Proponents assert that providing funding for students to attend schools of their choice gives all students access to a quality education. **Research conducted thus far indicates that, overall, voucher programs do not result in significantly stronger academic achievement.**

Across numerous empirical studies of voucher plans implemented in a variety of places, there is no evidence of a clear advantage for students who attend schools using vouchers over those who attend regular public schools for which they are zoned. Evidence shows that:

- Overall, the academic performance of students in voucher schools and the schools they leave is statistically the same; and both groups continue to underperform in relation to students across the spectrum.⁹

- Even when there are apparently slight improvements of voucher students' performance, close analyses show that students with the largest academic needs are those likely to receive the least benefit from changing to a voucher school.¹⁰

- In addition, countries adopting voucher policies typically reveal pronounced and/or increasing levels of student sorting (e.g. based on family background, ability, immigrant status), at the same time that student achievement outcomes remain flat or decline.^{11, 12, 13}

The Purpose of Public Schools. John Dewey conceptualized the role of public schools as serving the goals of social harmony and individual growth.¹⁴ Dewey's famous phrase "Schools are the fundamental method of social progress and reform" is as true today as it was when he wrote these words in the 19th century. Voucher programs and charter schools, by their existence, affirm real problems in traditional public schools.¹⁵ But in the United States, unlike most other countries, we educate all children. Comparing U.S. schools with those in other countries misses this point and paints a falsely negative picture of the quality of schools in the U.S.¹⁶ Despite the challenges in traditional public schools, "school choice" fails to address the fundamental right to a high quality education that meets the standards of equity and individual dignity for all.

"There is a compact that exists between a community and its public school. It is a promise that the school will teach every child that passes through its doors—poor children, affluent children, children with disabilities and children who show great academic promise. The common public school is required to teach the easy to teach and the difficult to teach. The common public school is there for the student with strong parent advocates and for the child who is, for all practical purposes, alone.

Most important of all, it is where such children meet and sit side by side in classrooms, on bleachers and in cafeterias. They learn from each other as surely as they learn from their teacher. That social learning is also what gives rise to the promise of social progress and social reform" (Carol Burriss, NYC Principal South Side High, Retired)¹⁷

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