

Arizona’s most successful charter schools are those that, like Benchmark, abandoned traditional classroom practices in order to meet student needs.

***Policy Recommendations:
Keep Arizona Charter Schools Independent from
Traditional School Districts***

by Jonathan Butcher, Education Analyst, Goldwater Institute

Jen enrolled her son, Maxwell, in a charter school because she knew a traditional public school classroom was not a good fit for his learning style or his personality. Maxwell excelled in certain subjects but struggled in other areas, and she found a charter school that grouped students in the same class by their ability level.

“None of [the students] feel excluded, and they can learn at their own pace,” Jen says of her son’s school, Benchmark Preschool and Elementary School. “A superior product comes out of it for all of the groups,” she says.

Until recently, the Arizona State Charter School Board authorized nearly all of Arizona’s charter schools, independent public schools that can be closed if they do not meet the terms of their contract, or charter. Now, however, traditional public school districts are converting their local schools to charter schools. Investigative reporter Emily Gersema’s special report finds scant evidence that school district conversions will give parents like Jen more choices for their child’s education.

The conversions will force taxpayers to dig deeper to pay for Arizona public schools. This increased pressure on taxpayers comes at a time when the state auditor general finds that schools are using less of their funding in the classroom than ever before in Arizona history. Paradise Valley Unified School District even declares on their Web site that converting 11 of their schools to charter schools will “allow the district to access higher levels of funding” and the conversions “will not affect operations at these schools.”

Those promises are a far cry from “cultivating world-class thinkers,” the district’s motto.

Arizona’s most successful charter schools are those that, like Benchmark, abandoned traditional classroom practices in order to meet student needs. In other instances, charter schools are challenging students to compete with the highest performing schools in the world. The BASIS schools, two of which are ranked in the top 5 highest-achieving high schools in the U.S. according to U.S. News & World Report, offer such ambitious course material that the closest comparison can only be found overseas in


countries like Korea and China, where students have long outperformed U.S. students on international assessments.

Charter schools' flexibility to provide unique course offerings and develop unique mission statements has met parent and student demand for options outside of traditional classrooms. What charter schools recognized nearly two decades ago, that every child is different and learns differently, traditional schools ignored at their peril. Parents knew this all along, and now 1 out of every 8 public school students in Arizona attends a charter school.

Lawmakers should take steps to make sure that traditional schools converting to charter schools are focused on student success and creating more options in education, not dollar signs:

- Require that converted district schools elect independent governing boards separate from district leadership. Converted schools should determine their own day-to-day operations and short- and long-term goals;
- Converted schools should be exempt from any district contracts with teachers unions;
- District authorizers should review converted schools' success at complying with their charter after the first 5 years, just like charter schools authorized by the Arizona State Board for Charter Schools, and these schools should be closed if they have not met the terms of the contract, including student achievement objectives. The Arizona State Board for Charter Schools should provide an independent review (or designate a reviewer) of a converted schools' results to make sure school districts are holding converted schools to the terms of their charter;
- And converted district schools should be funded at the same level as local charter schools authorized by the state charter board. School districts should not receive additional funding simply for converting one of their schools.

Charter schools give students more educational options and are the first public schools to operate under the condition that the schools will be closed if performance goals are not met. To give all students great opportunities, districts that convert traditional schools to charter schools should concentrate on educational innovation and student success, not more taxpayer money.



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