

Charter Schools

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Committee to Defend Public Education

P.O. Box 25716, Chicago, Illinois 60625
www.teacherschalkboard.org

Charter Schools

Across the country the government is pushing charter schools at the expense of our public education system.

Charter schools are created by turning public schools over to private "contractors," both non-profit and for-profit entities. These schools are funded through monies taken from the public school treasury but instead of being run by public authorities they are run by private corporations.

Charter schools drain vitally needed funds out of the public school treasury, enable the government to wash its hands of the responsibility for the state of public education and privatize a large number of our public schools.

Charter schools got their first big boost under the Clinton administration. Clinton's "Goals 2000: Educate America Act" submitted to Congress in 1993, earmarked millions of federal tax monies for "promoting public magnet schools, public 'charter schools' and other mechanisms for increasing choice among public schools." During the Clinton years, the number of charter schools grew from 1 to 1,700.

The Bush administration continued and accelerated Clinton's creation of charter schools with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). This legislation authorized \$300 million from the federal government to "help fund charter schools." Bush's 2006 budget included \$219 million in the form of grants for 1,200 new and existing charter schools.

Much of the initiative for charter schools comes from state and local governments. By 1995, nineteen states had passed laws authorizing charter schools. By 2003 that number had increased to 40 states. Currently, more than 3,600 charter schools are operating in 40 states and the District of Columbia. More than one million students attend these schools.

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Drain on Public Funding

Typically charter schools receive a per pupil stipend for students based on the average per pupil spending in their school district. This drains funds from the school district's treasury leaving the remaining public schools even more underfunded. For example, Kansas City district officials estimated that charter schools deprived the regular public schools of \$214 million from 1999 to 2004. Ohio Federation of Teachers reported that in 2005 charter schools cost the Cleveland school district \$59 million, the Cincinnati district \$38 million, the Dayton district \$34 million and the Toledo district \$31 million.

Charter schools not only drain their funds from the public school district but also leave the public schools with an even higher proportion of students with special needs. In many districts, charter schools are allowed to "cherry-pick" their students, choosing those with the highest test scores and weeding out students with disabilities who require additional staff. For instance, in Chicago the average limited English proficient population in charters is 3.3 percent, much lower than the district's 15 percent. Milwaukee's official policy is that charter schools should not have to bear the "burden" of making special education services available to students with disabilities. Again, public schools are taking the financial "hit."

In addition to their per-pupil stipend, charter schools receive additional funds. These include start-up capital, administrative expenses, funds for buildings, supplies, equipment, etc. In 2002 the federal government authorized \$150 million for "charter school construction and infrastructure needs." In Illinois, a "school building is provided by the district at no charge" for each new charter school. This law takes vital public assets (i.e. school buildings), created over generations through the taxes of the working people, and simply *gives these assets away* to private "entrepreneurs." In Illinois, charter school companies also receive start-up funds for classroom computers, printers, projectors, office and classroom furniture, supplies, books and cafeteria ser-

vices.

These public funds and public assets are being turned into a source of profit for private educational "entrepreneurs." Title Five of the NCLB Act encourages businesses to take an active role in "helping to plan or design a new school, developing curriculum and assessment strategies, serving on governing boards, participating in the day-to-day management of charter schools, establishing partnerships with charter schools, and even creating work-site charter schools."

In 2001, Edison, Inc., a nation-wide, for-private educational corporation, grabbed \$375.8 million in operating expenses from its network of charter and contract schools in 25 states. In the last five years, the number of schools operated by for-profit companies, like Edison, has tripled. Six companies in Michigan, including Edison, Inc., responsible for teaching 17,000 students take in about \$123 million in tax dollars every year.

Even with all of this – the extra funds, cherry-picking students, "freedom" from many regulations, etc. – charter schools still perform worse than public schools.

A recent book published by the Economic Policy Institute found that multiple state and federal studies consistently show that charter schools have lower student achievement and a higher student turnover rate. (Facts and Figures, Charter School Dust Up: Examining the Evidence on Enrollment and Achievement, 2005).

According to a 2004 report made by the American Federation of Teachers, charter school students performed a full semester behind regular public school student in grades 4 and 8. Eighth grade math students scored a full year behind students in regular public schools.

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Unaccountable

Charter schools are freed from a broad range of public regulations and accountability. In Illinois, for example, charters are granted an "automatic waiver from most state and district education laws, regulations and policies." Charters also face little or no oversight by elected school boards or other public institutions.

Charters are usually granted waivers in collective bargaining, control of curriculum and teacher certification. For example, Illinois law allows charter schools to operate with up to 50 percent uncertified teachers and exempts charters from the collective bargaining agreement and district work rules. Across the country, less than 9% of regular public school teachers lacked credentials in 2003 compared with 43% of charter school teachers. In addition, regular public school teachers have been in the classroom seven years longer on average (Charter Schools and Inequality, PACE, 2003).

Since charter schools operate as "private" entities, students, teachers and staff do not have the same safeguards and rights as in public schools. Management is free to determine the curriculum, without public input or oversight. Some charter schools, for example, are military academies in which public funds underwrite courses which preach militarism and racism. Today, same-sex charter schools are being opened, trampling underfoot the centuries long struggle for equality.

In short, charter schools are taking the vital issues of education (such issues as equal rights for all, the right to freedom of inquiry, the secular character of education and enlightenment) out of the public domain. On the one hand, the government uses charter schools to wash its hands of responsibility for the schools and, on the other hand, the public loses its right to determine and supervise the content and conduct of education.

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Attacks on Unions and Workers

The laws authorizing charter schools generally are designed to undermine the rights of educational workers and their unions. Some states, for example, insist that no unions are allowed in charter schools while nearly all districts encourage charters to operate without unions. In areas where there are already existing unions, this is union-busting pure and simple. By undermining the unions, the government is also trying to stifle the largest, organized voice in support of public education.

Already, charter schools are wiping out rights and guarantees teachers have built up over decades. Charter school teachers and other workers can expect less job security, lower pay, larger class sizes, heavier workloads, etc.

Whereas nearly all regular public school teachers receive salary increases commensurate with years of experience, charter school teachers have no such guarantees. Across the country they can expect a much lower rate of pay than their public school counterparts. In Colorado the average teacher salary was 30% less than the state average salary of \$40,659 in 2001-02. Michigan charter school teachers with 11 or more years teaching experience can expect to make \$20,000 less per year than public school teachers with similar experience.

Job security is also at a premium for charter school teachers. Nearly all charter school teachers work at-will for employers or under one year contracts. Today, the national average for teacher turnover in charter schools is 35% compared to 15% for public schools.

Charter schools are also slashing teachers' pensions and health care benefits. For example, teachers and school employees at charter and "contract" schools in Chicago are prohibited by law from participating in the teacher pension program.

If all this isn't enough, teachers in charter schools must contend with heavier workloads. Staffing ratios examined in 2003 show that charter school teachers serve 20 percent more students than already overworked teachers in our public schools. The workday and work-year are also significantly longer (PACE, 2003). Charter schools are leading to the destruction of the system of public education.

Charter schools drain vitally needed funds out of the public school treasuries. Through charters the funds earmarked for public schools (some \$400 billion/year) are being turned into sources of profit-making for capitalist "entrepreneurs." The educational infrastructure, built up over hundreds of years and financed by taxpayers, is being given away – privatized. Charters are used to break unions and undermine the rights and standards of teachers and other educational workers.

Charter schools are taking the question of education out of the hands of the public and turning it over to the private sector. This turns the clock back hundreds of years towards Medievalism, when education was reserved for a privileged few and inspired, not by enlightenment and the public good, but by the special interests of the rich and powerful. The promise of the right to equality in educational is again undermined.

The people must give a resounding: "NO!" to charter schools. We must stop the government from destroying our public school system and denying our right to education.

One of the great achievements of the American people is the creation of a nationwide system of guaranteed, universal, public education. Every generation of Americans has fought for the extension and further development of the public schools. We must not only turn back the charter school movement but also demand renewed investments and the further modernization of our public schools.

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