

## Charter Schools: More Choice, Better Results

A legislative floor debate took an interesting turn last week as a discussion over teacher pension plans turned into a debate on charter schools and educational choice. While debating LB553, Sen. Scott Lautenbaugh noted there are more options for improving schools beyond simply increasing funding, singling out charter schools as an idea whose time has come.<sup>[1]</sup> Although Lautenbaugh's own bill to allow charter schools to improve educational outcomes in Omaha was killed in committee earlier this year,<sup>[2]</sup> the resurrection of the topic in public debate shows the appeal educational choice options continue to have.

Nebraska is one of only nine states that does not allow charter schools,<sup>[3]</sup> which are defined by the federal Department of Education as "publicly funded school[s] that [are] typically governed by a group or organization under a legislative contract or charter with the state or jurisdiction."<sup>[4]</sup> Charter schools introduce a level of entrepreneurship into education; by not having a default constituency from which to draw students, their survival is predicated upon the ability to attract students, which they can do only by showing positive educational outcomes. To achieve that goal, charters are often allowed a certain amount of freedom from district regulations, allowing them to innovate and try new methods of improving student achievement. In exchange, charters are held to higher accountability standards and can be closed for not meeting their goals or charter standards. As a result, charter schools operate under pressure to ensure students succeed so they can continue to operate, a pressure failing public schools do not face.<sup>[5]</sup>

The success of charter schools in other states is well-documented. A 2009 Harvard and MIT study comparing Boston's charter and public schools found that the students in charter schools significantly outperformed their public school counterparts, particularly in English, math, and writing.<sup>[6]</sup> Similarly, a recent Florida Department of Education study found charter schools tended to outperform public schools in three major areas: proficiency, achievement gaps, and learning gains.<sup>[7]</sup> A Stanford study of New Jersey public and charter schools also found that, on average, charter students from third grade to eighth grade gained an additional two months of learning per year in reading and an additional three months in math when compared to their public school contemporaries.<sup>[8]</sup>

Some charter school programs targeted at underprivileged areas have also proved to be

very effective in raising student achievement. The best examples are the Knowledge Is Power Programs (KIPP). KIPP is a national network of charter schools located in 20 states and the District of Columbia serving over 30,000 students. Notable examples of KIPP's success are the three schools located in New York City's Harlem neighborhood: KIPP STAR College Prep, KIPP Infinity, and KIPP Academy. In an examination of New York State School accumulative scores, KIPP students tended to score at or above the state median in nearly all categories.<sup>[9]</sup> Chicago KIPP schools saw similar positive results: 90 percent of KIPP's Chicago students are eligible for free or reduced lunch program, yet despite socioeconomic disadvantages, 91 percent of KIPP's all minority student body graduated from high school and 87 percent of those matriculated to college. Chicago Public Schools had a graduation rate of 55 percent overall.<sup>[10]</sup>

Charter schools in Nebraska would likely experience similar improved outcomes for Nebraska students, even if they are focused-as LB593 planned to do- only in Omaha. Omaha Public Schools (OPS) have performed dismally in their task to educate Omaha's youth. In fact, OPS' performance has been so bad that the Unicameral passed a bill to shrink the OPS board and force new elections right away to try and reform the administration.<sup>[11]</sup>

On the 2012 Nebraska State Accountability (NESA) scores, OPS schools-with a few notable exceptions-performed well below the state average in all categories. Among OPS 8<sup>th</sup> graders, 50 percent failed state reading standards, 68 percent failed the math standards, and 60 percent failed the science standards. The results were similarly dismal for OPS 11<sup>th</sup> graders, with 56 percent failing state reading standards, 70 percent failing the math standards, 59 percent failing state science standards, and 55 percent failing the writing standards.<sup>[12]</sup> An example of Omaha's failing system is Benson High School, which has consistently scored among the lowest of OPS' seven high schools and now sees roughly two-thirds of its home area students seeking to attend other schools across the city.<sup>[13]</sup>

The innovative nature of charter schools has proved that they are a viable option for students to escape failing schools and receive the education they deserve. Providing for charter schools in Nebraska would not only provide the opportunity for a good education to all students, but also give parents more choice in how and where to educate their children. There is no reason why Nebraska should not have charter schools, and now is the time to open the door for them.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Grant Schulte, "Nebraska lawmakers launch floor debate on Omaha charter-schools bill killed in committee," *The Republic*, May 7, 2013. Accessed May 10, 2013, <http://www.therepublic.com/view/story/ee3e06f39b3c461390d69899c93381ee/NE-XGR--Charter-Schools-Nebraska>.

[2] Nebraska Legislature, "LB593-Adopt the Charter Schools Act," January 23, 2013. Accessed May 10, 2013, [http://nebraskalegislature.gov/bills/view\\_bill.php?DocumentID=18021](http://nebraskalegislature.gov/bills/view_bill.php?DocumentID=18021). The bill was indefinitely postponed on March 14, 2013.

[3] Alison Consoletti, "Charter School Laws Across the States 2012," Center for Educational Reform, 2012, pg 86. Accessed March 15, 2013, [http://www.edreform.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/CER\\_2012\\_Charter\\_Laws.pdf](http://www.edreform.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/CER_2012_Charter_Laws.pdf).

[4] National Center for Educational Statistics, "Fast Facts: Charter schools," United States Department of Education, 2012. Accessed May 10, 2013, <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=30>.

[5] Center for Education Reform, "Charter Schools,' Policy Update June 2012. Accessed May 10, 2013, <http://www.edreform.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/CharterSchoolsToday2012-Updated-Charter-Primer.pdf>.

[6] Harvard Graduate School of Education, "New Study of Boston Charter and Pilot Schools Finds Charter Schools Have Positive Effects on Student Achievement," January 6, 2009. Accessed May 10, 2013, <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/news-impact/2009/01/new-study-of-boston-charter-and-pilot-schools-finds-charter-schools-have-positive-effects-on-student/>.

[7] *Apalachicol & Carrabelle Times*, "State report: Charter schools outperforming traditional schools," May 10, 2013. Accessed March 17, 2013, <http://www.apalachtimes.com/editorial/columns/state-report-charter-schools-outperforming-traditional-schools-1.110058>.

[8] Dan Hardy, "Stanford study upbeat on N.J. charter schools," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 28, 2012. Accessed May 10, 2013, [http://articles.philly.com/2012-11-28/news/35412854\\_1\\_charter-schools-comparable-students-credo-study](http://articles.philly.com/2012-11-28/news/35412854_1_charter-schools-comparable-students-credo-study).

[9] *New York Times*, "New York School Test Scores," July 20, 2012. Accessed May 10, 2013, the specific scores for each of the three schools can be seen as follows:  
KIPP Academy: <http://projects.nytimes.com/new-york-schools-test-scores/counties/bronx/districts/new-york-city-district-7/schools/kipp-academy-charter-school>

KIPP Infinity: <http://projects.nytimes.com/new-york-schools-test-scores/counties/new-york/districts/new-york-city-district-5/schools/kipp-infinity-charter-school>

KIPP STAR College Prep: <http://projects.nytimes.com/new-york-schools-test-scores/counties/new-york/districts/new-york-city-district-5/schools/kipp-star-college-prep-chrt>

[10] KIPP Chicago, "Our Results." Accessed May 10,

2013,<http://kippchicago.org/schools/our-results>.

[11] KMTV, "Nebraska Bill Shrinks OPS School Board," February 11, 2013. Accessed March 17, 2013, <http://www.kmtv.com/news/local/190717011.html>.

[12] Nebraska Department of Education, "State Accountability (NeSA) District Report of School Performance Spring 2012: Omaha Public Schools," August 16, 2012, accessed March 17, 2013. OPS scores for reading, math, and science may be viewed at

[http://www.education.ne.gov/nesainitial/docs/28-0001000\\_NESA\\_SCHOOL\\_PERFORMANCE\\_DISTRICT.PDF](http://www.education.ne.gov/nesainitial/docs/28-0001000_NESA_SCHOOL_PERFORMANCE_DISTRICT.PDF)

the writing scores may be viewed separately at

[http://www.education.ne.gov/nesainitial/docs/28-0001-000\\_NESAW\\_SCHOOL\\_PERFORMANCE\\_DISTRICT.PDF](http://www.education.ne.gov/nesainitial/docs/28-0001-000_NESAW_SCHOOL_PERFORMANCE_DISTRICT.PDF).

[13] Jonathan Braden and Paul Goodsell, "OPS policies hurt high schools like Benson that are struggling to attract students," *Omaha World Herald*, May 7, 2013. Accessed May 10, 2013, <http://www.omaha.com/article/20130508/NEWS/705089866>.

