

The Honorable Robert P. Casey Jr.
United State Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Casey,

I am a Pennsylvania citizen and student deeply concerned with the proposed federal budget for the Department of Education. Specifically, the funding set aside for charter schools and private school voucher programs. As a graduate of a Pennsylvania public school now enrolled in the Schreyer Honors College, I can attest that these schools are just as capable of providing a sound, well-rounded education as any charter or private school. I also believe that they are an institution worth investing more in, not less. By not only giving a greater portion of the funds to non-public schools, but cutting into the overall budget as well, those most at need will suffer. Public schools serve poor, rural, and special needs students in ways that cannot be matched by charter or private schools. In fact, charter and private schools come with their own set of disadvantages that far outweighs what benefits might lie in a non-traditional education.

Attached to this letter is an issue brief containing my research on the subject. In the past you have voted for greater funding towards Education and opposed legislation in favor of private school vouchers. I hope that you continue your support for this cause and vote against the proposed federal budget, and work to tailor it to the needs of our children.

Sincerely,

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CHARTER SCHOOL AND
PRIVATE SCHOOL
VOUCHER FUNDING

AMANDA MICHAEL

The Issue in Depth

In the currently proposed federal budget, approximately \$1.4 billion will go towards the funding of charter schools and the subsidizing of private school vouchers.¹ These programs saw a 32% increase in the last fiscal year, and under the budgetary plan will receive even more taxpayer dollars, with a 50% increase in available cash specifically for charter schools.² At the same time, the leftover budget for public schools will be slashed by \$9 billion, a decision in reverse of years of increased federal spending on education.³ This is a disturbing metric for anyone interested in the welfare of public schools, especially those in rural or poor environments. While schools in wealthier areas receive more money from local property taxes, poor communities with less valuable land rely on the federal government to help make up the difference.⁴ Even so, experts acknowledge that current levels of federal funding do not do enough to bridge the gap.⁵ To take away what money is provided would be a blow to students facing a disadvantage from the start. Instead, a more realistic picture of charter and private schools must be realized, and other methods of bettering public school performance must be considered.

Main Points

- Charter and private schools are quickly becoming unionized, and gaining the many of the problems as public schools without the same levels of accountability to the government.
- Private and charter schools offer fewer opportunities for extracurriculars like sports teams, art and music programs, and theater.
- Private and charter schools are not required by law to enroll special needs children, or accommodate their needs once they are enrolled.
- Reducing the amount of funding available to public schools inordinately impacts rural and poor school districts. Where wealthier schools can rely on income from property taxes, the less fortunate are dependent on government funding, which is already in short supply.

Background

In recent years the concept of “school choice”--the option for parents to pick which school their children attend, often outside the normal public school district, has gained a great deal of popularity with parents and politicians alike. The U.S. Government Accountability Office reports that “participation in voucher and educational savings account programs, which fund private school tuition and other educational expenses, has more than doubled in the past five years.”⁶ The switch to supporting charter schools and private school vouchers was not made lightly. There are serious problems rooted within the public school system that are difficult to circumvent.

- **Unions:** While teachers’ unions do serve a purpose, fighting for fair wages and fair treatment, they are more often than not a barrier to progress. Tracey Bailey, former National Teacher of the Year Award winner, says that teachers’ unions “special interests protecting the status quo” and work to uphold “a system that too often rewards mediocrity and incompetence.”⁷ Contracts are known to keep teachers employed who do the bare minimum for their students, or who are outright incompetent.⁸
- **Tenure:** Closely related to the problems with unions, this job protection provision lets ill-suited teachers stay on the job, and does not foster a drive to keep improving teaching techniques.⁹ According to public school teacher Mike Johnston, teachers on tenure are no longer held accountable for the performance of their students, and there is no incentive to help students reach their greatest potential.¹⁰
- **High Stakes Testing:** The abundance of standardized tests that students are subjected to creates a toxic environment for learning. While these tests are well-intentioned and designed to hold schools accountable for student performance, they also breed a culture of reward and punishment instead of growth. In the words of the National Education Association, “as experts in educational practice, we know that the current system of standardized tests does not provide educators or students with the feedback or accountability any of us need to promote the success and learning of students.”¹¹

- **Insufficient Funding:** The debate on whether more funding is the key to fixing public schools is a heated one, but insufficient funding is just as big a problem as inappropriate use of those funds. Here in Pennsylvania, the William Penn School District in Philadelphia cannot afford to build insulated classrooms.¹² Students rush to class to grab a blanket on cold winter days on a first-come-first serve basis.¹³ Clearly, this is not a conducive environment for learning. Increased funding to other schools in low-income areas does not always raise test scores, but it brings about immeasurable improvements in the student body, like better access to food and other basic health needs.¹⁴

While this paints a bleak picture for public schools, charter schools and private school vouchers do not solve all of these problems, and bring their own issues into the mix. Instead, methods of improving public schools, despite some of their inherent weaknesses, must be pursued. The root problem is not the public schools themselves, but the system within which they operate.

Why Not Charter and Private Schools?

Freedom from Unions?

Charter and private school teachers are less likely to be unionized, but this is rapidly changing. At this time, only about 7% of charter school teachers are unionized, and even fewer are able to achieve tenure.¹⁵ However, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) are encouraging more charter school teachers to unionize.¹⁶ These two organizations openly oppose charter school expansion, so the decision to support the teachers that work in them seems to be an odd choice. The answer lies in control. As it stands, non-unionized teachers in charter schools can be fired much more easily than traditional school teachers, receive lower pay, and have less say over their working conditions--the demands on their time and role within the school can change at any given time, and there is little most teachers can do about it.¹⁷ The incentive to unionize thus appeals to charter school teachers, giving them a greater say in their work, and allows large groups like the AFT and NEA to influence the direction of their contracts, and by extension the running of the schools.¹⁸ This could

lead to a future where more and more charter schools fall under the same influences of unions that hurt public schools now.

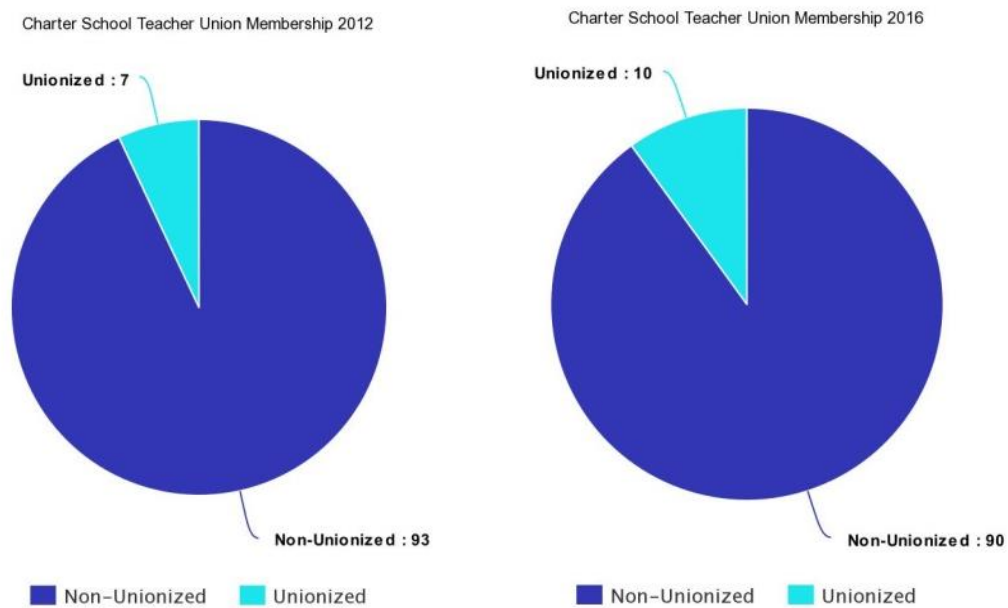


Figure 1: Charter School Unionization 2012-2016¹⁹

Accountability

Charter and private schools alike are also unable to offer the same level of accountability for student performance. Pennsylvania is a particularly terrible example of this--in fact, Pennsylvania Auditor General Eugene DePasquale says that this state is the “worst in the nation” in terms of regulating the quality of charter schools.²⁰ He specifically states that Pennsylvania has little control over eliminating poorly performing charter schools and making sure that high-performance ones serve an equitable distribution of children. The state charter law has not been updated in nearly 20 years, and it leaves children and their parents at risk of being fooled into attending a school that can’t live up to its promises.²¹ DePasquale blames the lack of change on special interest lobbying that stands to gain from the status quo.²² Private schools are no better, and in fact are required less accountability to the state government. This does have a purpose for religious schools, who do not want to become entangled of issues of the separation of church and state. But in the state of Pennsylvania, this allows private schools of any sort to open with no approval process and optional accreditation.²³

Extracurricular Activities

Attending a private or charter school limits a student's extracurricular activities. The National Charter School Resource Center admits that there are fewer opportunities for students to play sports in charter schools, and if there are teams, there is little competition.²⁴ At the same time, state laws continue to change to mandate that students in charter or private schools, as well as homeschooled students, be allowed to take advantage of the local school district's after-school programs and sports activities.²⁵ This includes school clubs, theater, art, and music programs that are smaller or nonexistent, depending on the charter or private school. If public schools receive less and less from the federal government, then experience shows that extracurriculars and the arts are the first programs to be cut, limiting the access of both public and non-public school students.²⁶ But to give credit where credit is due, there are certainly charter and private schools with above average music, art, and theater curricula, and some schools that were founded specifically for the purpose of fostering students' skills in these subjects.²⁷ However, these schools do not represent the average, who have fewer options for their students.

Special Needs Education

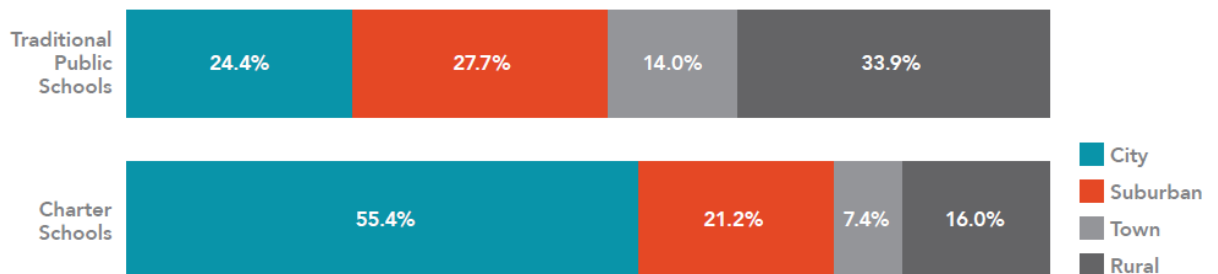
Private and charter schools also fall short in a key program: special needs education. By law, public schools are required to admit any student, regardless of any physical, mental, or learning disabilities.²⁸ Private and charter schools are not bound by the same law, and can reject these students. This also means that they do not have to possess special needs programs for the disabled students they do admit.²⁹ Taking government money away from the public schools providing these services and giving it non-traditional schools hurts the children benefitting from these in-school programs. Special needs students in poor and rural areas face the greatest impact. A study produced by the American Council on Rural Special Education stated that these children are the most likely to remain in the cycle of poverty if their needs are not addressed, and that their families' often cannot take care of their needs alone.³⁰ Public schools are essential to getting these children the help they deserve, and preparing them for the most successful future possible.

Funding for Rural Schools

Providing more money for private and charter schools and less for public ones will inordinately affect the schools most in need. Rural schools are often vastly underfunded, even with the addition of federal money, and still manage to be the largest employer in their community.³¹ According to the National Education Association, rural schools also serve as a social, recreational, and cultural center for local families.³² Cutting into the already limited supply of cash creates a ripple effect into the community at large, one that expanded school choice cannot rectify. While being hurt the most from education funding cuts, these regions are also the least likely to benefit from charter and private schools. Nine Rees, head of National Alliance of Public Charter Schools said that “It is actually quite hard to expand charter schools in a lot of rural communities because there’s no political base of support for those kinds of changes.”³³ This is something greater charter school funding or more private school vouchers is unlikely to change--if there is no base of support in the community, then these kinds of schools cannot flourish.

Most charter schools are located in cities

Percent of charter and traditional public schools in different locales, 2011-12:



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, “Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey,” 1999–2000 through 2011–12.

Figure 2: Locations of Charter Schools Throughout the USA³⁴

What's Being Done and How We Can Improve:

Apollo 20 Program

Apollo 20 is a program providing a structure for re-vamping the way schools teach and the way students study developed by Harvard professor Richard Fryer. The basis of the program is that good schools have five qualities in common: qualified principals and teachers, more time spent in school, increased tutoring, data-driven instruction, and a culture with high expectations for student performance and college attendance.³⁵ Now these weren't the only variables studied--Dr. Fryer and his team observed and analyzed schools based on approximately 500 variables, but found that these five accounted for about 40% of the schools' successes.³⁶ While these factors seem like common sense qualities for a school, Dr. Fryer has found a shocking number

of schools without even these basic attributes. When implemented in failing or struggling middle schools and high schools, test score in reading and math have risen into the "meets" or "exceeds expectations" brackets for their state's standardized tests.³⁷ Since 2012 the Apollo 20 program has been implemented in 9 schools apiece in Houston and Denver, with plans to expand into about 100 other schools across the country.³⁸ It costs an additional \$2,000 per student to accommodate longer school days and pay for tutoring, which is significant but not insurmountable.³⁹ Nationally, the amount spent per student ranges from \$6,555 to \$19,818.⁴⁰

"Those five tenets were things that, if you paid attention, they could be implemented fairly easily and systematically across the network"

--Allen Smith, superintendent of
Denver Public Schools⁴¹

Canadian Model of Funding

Canada has a particularly interesting system of re-distributing money amongst schools that are struggling and schools that are succeeding. Canadian schools are funded based on their size and the needs of their students, with schools in wealthier areas receiving less from the government than schools in poor areas that experience more difficulty in keeping their heads above water.⁴² This is different from the American system of school funding, where the state and federal government does provide funding, but schools also get money from the property taxes in their district. Thus, rich schools

can keep raking in more cash while others are left behind. This is a contributing factor to the cycle of poverty, where the impoverished cannot raise enough money to lift themselves out of poverty, and are stuck in place.⁴³ Poor communities need more access to cash to help students who do not have parents who are willing or able to pay for extracurriculars, tutors, and other activities to help their children do well in school.⁴⁴ This shift towards a more Canadian style of funding would not cost anything extra, but only put money where it is most needed.

Cultural Integration in China

China approaches the problem of failing schools in a similar manner to Canada, where money is transferred to schools that need help with updating infrastructure, purchasing textbooks and computers for their students, and maintaining their facilities.⁴⁵ However, their next step is to incorporate these poor schools into wealthier ones, if the problem cannot be fixed otherwise.⁴⁶ This has been done in the United States as well, but typically involves schools with students of more similar backgrounds from similar places.⁴⁷ In China and especially near Shanghai, schools are merged to incorporate students from many diverse backgrounds. This not only exposes poorer students to the benefits of richer schools, but mixes groups of people who would otherwise have remained separate, breaking down social barriers and increasing the cultural awareness and empathy of the students.⁴⁸

In Summary:

Public schools are an important bastion of our nation, which provides services other types of schools cannot or will not supply. While the system in its current state is certainly not perfect, about 85% of children in the United States are currently and will continue to be enrolled in them.⁴⁹ Therefore, in an effort to improve the education of young Americans we should focus more on helping the public schools we have, and not putting resources into charter and private schools. Even though these schools have their advantages for some, they are simply not as accessible and do not give the results parents and politicians would hope. Instead, we should turn our attentions to models that are already working in our country, or turn to the practices of other countries who are succeeding in education. To accomplish this, we must propose legislation at the state and federal level that does not cut into the budget for public schools, and can reasonably improve student achievement. Greater funding to charter schools and private school

vouchers does not accomplish this end, and only hurts those most in need. Again, I urge you to vote no on the current federal budget, and to put your efforts into increasing opportunities for success in America's public schools.

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