

Unbundling Urban Education: Which School Type, Traditional Public School or Charter School Are Most Effectively Educating Urban Students

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Introduction

Public education has been categorized as the perpetrator for everything from high crime rates to teen pregnancies. The American public has been tricked into believing the school system is a failure [1]. In fact, urban public-school systems have a dismal reputation in many cities across the United States because of lowered standardized test performance and increased school violence. Noted it was not schools that were the culprit for underachieving urban students, but poverty and segregation [2]. As explained by despite continually increasing graduation rates, over one million high school students dropped out of school each year. Stakeholders deliberate about how to improve education for urban students, and the introduction of charter schools came about as a solution to the many issues facing urban public education [3]. Implementation of charter schools could cause traditional public schools to become more effective. Junge concluded, "If a school is not working, let's end it [4]. That's how we'll improve public education for all". "End it", is precisely what the city of Philadelphia did, in 2013, 30 schools in Philadelphia were closed, displacing over 15,000 students. The state and mayoral - appointed School Reform Commission engendered substantial political pushback. Philadelphia's city council voted 14 to two passing a resolution calling for a halt of additional school closures [5]. Additionally, community groups filed civil rights complaints with the US Department of Education [6]. City wide planning meetings attracted upwards of 1000 students and parents [7]. Protests leading up to the decision drew thousands, leading to 19 arrests, including the head of the national teacher's union.

Despite the efforts of the protestors the school closures in Philadelphia occurred amid a financial crisis, headlined by the School District of Philadelphia's \$1.3 billion deficit [8]. Philadelphia charter schools play a significant role in the financial challenges of the district. Consultants analyzing the district's budget reported the public-school system's costs increase by an average of \$7000 for each new charter school enrollee. This is due to two factors.

First, one third of charter school students come from outside of district schools, creating a new cost for the district. Second, while a student transferring from a traditional public school to a charter school reduces some of the district's burden, some fixed costs at a student's former school such as school administration, facilities cost, and central office services remain (Boston Consulting Group. Additionally, Philadelphia's school choice policy consumes a significant portion of the school system's long-term budget projections. Charter growth in Philadelphia is assumed to increase by \$220 million over the next five years. If realized at a total of \$811 million charter schools would be the single largest expense for the School District of Philadelphia [9].

Recent estimates confirm there are approximately three million students in the US currently attending charter schools [10]. More specifically, in 2015, 33% of school aged students in Philadelphia attended charter schools [11]. However, research indicates that charter schools did not consistently outperform traditional public schools. "Comparable findings were reported by strong charter advocates, and a report focusing on New York City schools found no difference between public schools and charters". Both high achieving charters and traditional public schools exist, just as there are low performing schools from both groups. Researchers found mixed results as to whether charter performance was better or worse than traditional public schools. Argued charter school students performed on par with or below students at the local traditional public school. Furthermore, researchers concluded inconsistent findings and cited the disparity in the quality, size, and funding of charter schools for the inconsistency. Explained that many charter school success stories contained elements of dishonesty. Many charter schools enrolled fewer English language learners and special education students, as opposed to accepting all students like their traditional counterparts. Although transferring urban students from traditional public schools to charter schools is growing in popularity, these inconsistent findings have led some researchers to wonder why parents are choosing to educate their children in

charter schools and how their educational decision impacts urban education.

Research Questions

RQ1: How does academic achievement differ in urban charter schools compared to urban public schools? Are there differences between how each entity is held accountable for measuring and communicating student success?

RQ2: How has the creation of charter schools impacted public education financially? Is there financial equity between the two facets in regard to access of funds to provide an appropriate education, offer competitive wages to attract highly qualified teachers, and create safe environments for learning to happen?

RQ3: What is the satisfaction rate of parents who have transitioned their children from public schools to charter schools in the following three aspects: school satisfaction, severity of problems, and school communication?

Background

History of Public Education

This history of public education in this country has a long ever-changing timeline but considerably still used today. Though many still may not understand the full discrepancy of how The United States of America has educated its citizens, the United States has somewhat evolved from what public education looks like today. Between the dates of 1775-1825 this country had no formal country-wide operating educational system. During this era, you could only find educational instruction for primarily white children through Church-supported schools, local school organized by towns or groups for parents, tuition schools set up by traveling schoolmasters, boarding schools for children of the well-to-do, private tutoring or homeschool. Saylor Academy reports that “schooling was not required in the colonies, and only about 10% of colonial children, usually just the wealthiest, went to school, although others became apprentices [12]. There were limited options for all children to be educated with a finite amount of funding. With this disastrous type of school for its citizens, American begin to realize what a lack of education could mean for its citizens.

Before education became a trending topic amongst the founding fathers, America was fighting for independence from Great Britain. While America was fighting for independence, most states had little to no educational foundations, especially for blacks. The American Constitution was written in 1787 but before the constitution, the U.S. ran under confederate power. As stated on the Bill of Rights Institute the this allowed for “Each state retains its sovereignty, freedom, and independence, and every power, jurisdiction, and right, which is not by this Confederation expressly delegated to the United States, in Congress assembled [13]”. After the war ended in 1789, approaching the mid 1800s, the conversation around education began to be recurrent. The founding fathers thus began the preservation of the American democracy. “They believed strongly that preserving democracy would require an educated population that could understand political and social issues and would participate in civic life, vote wisely, protect their rights and freedoms. And resist tyrants and demagogues [14]”. Thus, the

creation of early public education in America.

The Common School 1840-1860

Education for all was a common goal amongst some leaders. Aligning goals with the founding fathers, a Massachusetts legislator named Horace Mann took action and began to advocate for the creation of public schools. Deeptha Thattai also reported that reformers who wanted all children to gain benefits of education opposed this. Mann, known as the founder of Common schools, was a firm believer in creating good knowledgeable citizens and uniting society [15]. Mann’s belief in social stability led him to the creation of the common schools. Though many didn’t know, Mann’s ideology possibly stems from the environment in which he was educated. Mann believed that the common schools (in other words public schools) were the center of good leadership. The Public Broadcasting Service states, “Mann believed that public schooling was central to good citizenship, democratic participation and societal well-being” and that “a republican form of government, without intelligence in the people, must be, on a vast scale, what a mad-house, without superintendent or keepers, would be on a small one (Public Broadcasting Service, n.d.)”

The common Schools were created to benefit all citizens, regardless of race or ethnicity. This movement provoked two major principles: “the schools should be supported by taxation, and that those schools should be under state supervision [16]”, Even with common school setting the foundation for early education during these times, the number of black children being educated were still substantially low. Altenbaugh stated in the Historical dictionary of American Education that “Few southern African Americans saw the inside of a school, while many urban working children experienced truncated schooling” The Common School Movement had a substantial impact on the way the United States of America chose to educate their citizens. With the help of Mann, this foundation deemed it necessary for states to educate their citizens.

The Spread of Public Education

The 19th century was a powerful time for public education in America. Many states began to adapt the mindset of education for all but were still operating under its own law. Consequently, it wasn’t until around 1954 when social scientists began to look into the high numbers of African Americans that still have not been fully included in the offering of free public education. As stated before, black people were excluded from all things during the slavery period, especially education. Because of “Jim Crow” laws, even though public education began to spread across the country, African Americans were still underserved or educated separately. When “Negroes” were finally placed in schools they were academically lower than their counterparts which put them at a major disadvantage. Before emancipation, African Americans were denied any type of education. An African American learning to read was a threat to the proclaimed slavery era. According to the US. Department of Interior, “Learning to read therefore became a symbol of freedom for African Americans in the former slave-holding states”. Learning how to read and write was a sign of freedom for slaves and also for slave owners. Most African American who did know how to read and write learned amongst family members or the small percentage of slave masters who taught their slaves to read. In cases where slave masters did teach their slaves

to read, the goal was to strictly convert them to Christianity. “Although some masters did teach their slaves to read as a way to Christianize them, most slave owners believed that teaching such skills was useless, if not dangerous. They assumed that slaves had no use for reading in their daily lives, and that literacy would make them more difficult to control, and more likely to run away”. This also meant that if you were caught teaching a slave how to read you would suffer consequences, such as being sentenced to prison time, fined, or even whipped [17]. During this time period, freedom, intellectually and physically became a desire for all African Americans in slave-holding states.

After several decades of setting the foundation for public education, America began to shift its legislation on who gets access to public education. *Brown v. Board of Education* was the beginning to the end of what was once “separate-but-equal.” States had the autonomy to legally separate black and white people, but after *Brown v Board of Education* that was no longer. As stated in *Brown v Board of Education* Article “*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* was a landmark 1954 Supreme Court case in which the justices ruled unanimously that racial segregation of children in public schools was unconstitutional [18]”. This case overturned the original supreme Court ruling of legally separating “colored” people from public facilities.

Fast forward to 1965, where President Lyndon B. Johnson officially passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). This is where public education turned its full focus of funding and educating children of low-income families. ESEA officially states under title I funding for financial assistance to local educational agencies for the children of low-income families and extension of public law 874, eight-first congress (Sec. 1 PL 89-10). After many reauthorizations of the ESEA over several years, elementary and secondary education increased accountability from schools and teachers. President Nixon signed the updated ESEA act in 1969, which included Title II funding for programs for refugee children and children living in low-rent public housing. After several years, the ESEA was finally reauthorized by President George W. Bush under the name No Child Left Behind Act. One main goal of this new administration was to require all public schools to bring every child up to state standard. No Child Left Behind Act placed pressure under school administration. As stated in *The Law and Special Education* book “It was a controversial law that placed educators under growing pressure to increase the achievement of all students” more specially in the public setting. It continues by stating “narrow the test scores the test score gaps between groups of students [19]”.

NCLB created a new notion of school choice. Administration under this law suffered many consequences. With many difficulties from school districts trying to implement the requirements of this act. Schools were faced with high yearly goals, such as Adequate Yearly Progress and trying to reach proficiency or higher on state testing. If a public school didn’t meet this yearly goal two consecutive years, students are given the option to choose another school to attend. Pushing low-income students into other high achieving public schools. This expansion of school choice created a notion to “enhance equality of educational opportunity; critics claim that school choice would reduce, rather than increase, educational op-

portunity for disadvantaged students [20]”.

Beginning of Charter Schools

Charter schools blossomed initially to give teachers, parents and students more suitable options than the typical public school. A teacher named Ray Budde wrote a paper that was later published with the title “Education by Charter.” In this book, Budde listed the option for teachers to “charter” a new approach to education. Giving them a different perception of educating children. Budde thought “charter school “were to focus on professional development and have a clear commitment to improving student achievement.” Introducing this perception caught the eye of several local activists and state representatives like Ember Reichgott, Minnesota State Senator. The governor then proposed the idea to expand opportunities and achievement for low-and middle-income students. Clascok also stated that because of Minnesota’s lack of opportunity for families to have choices, it was reported that 60 percent of Minnesota opposed public school choice while only 33 percent favored it (1997). Those results pushed Minnesota’s leaders to pass the first law allowing school districts the flexibility to “charter” schools organized by teachers [21]. In 1992, City Academy, located in St. Paul Minnesota, became the nation’s first publicly funded charter school [22].

Within the last decade Charter School has become known as a “new” way of school. In March 2018, the National Alliance for Public Charter schools released its estimated public Charter School enrollment for the 2017-18 school with sequential growth in charter school enrollment. California, Texas, Florida, Arizona and New York being reported as the largest number of charter openings within their states (NAPCS, 2018,). With percentages growing higher every year, charter school then takes it’s new perception of the “new” and “better” way of schooling.

Philadelphia is also one of the cities who are undergoing a numerous amount of school closings, both public and charter. “In September 2012, the district’s Chief Recovery Officer, Thomas Knudsen, released a five-year financial plan that included a recommendation to close approximately 40 schools at an expected annual savings of \$33 million. By April 2013, 24 schools were approved for closure by the School Reform Commission. These closures, along with grade reconfigurations and co-locations, are expected to eventually achieve \$24.5 million in annual savings.” With the notion of taking more accountability Philadelphia leaders decided to close down close to 40 schools with hopes to save money.

Purpose of Study

The No Child Left Behind legislation insisted all children in third through eighth grade complete an assessment in reading and math annually. These scores are tracked and reported levels of academic proficiency based on race, sex, SES, ELL, and disability classification. Since the inception of this law, urban schools have continuously failed to meet the proficiency mark set by this legislation. School districts and curriculum developers have become very innovative in trying to address the academic deficiencies of urban schools. These innovations have caused further changes in educational trends. For instance, teachers have moved from direct instruction to more exploratory learning. Administrators have

moved to the Danielson model to evaluate effective instruction and districts have moved from state standards to common core standards. Despite the transformation in public education, some parents have made the decision to remove their children from public school altogether to enroll them in charter schools.

In fact, charter schools have been among one of the most controversial in educational reform efforts, dividing urban communities across the United States. Parents are in search of safe educational options for their children that offer higher expectations and an innovative college ready curriculum, for some parents' charter schools offer those options. This research examined the perceptions of parents and educators in Philadelphia by proposing the following questions:

RQ1: How does academic achievement differ in urban charter schools compared to urban public schools? Are there differences between how each entity is held accountable for measuring and communicating student success?

RQ2: How has the creation of charter schools impacted public education financially? Is there financial equity between the two facets in regard to access of funds to provide an appropriate education, offer competitive wages to attract highly qualified teachers, and create safe environments for learning to happen?

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Finally, educational reform efforts must consider the unique challenges that face schools in impoverished urban districts. Challenges of recruitment and retaining highly effective teachers. High poverty school districts not only report lower numbers of highly effective teachers, but these schools also experience high turnover rates, larger class size, lower accountability and academic expectation. Past reform efforts placed a greater emphasis on the output data which included test scores and meeting standards. A shift to a deeper focus on what needs to be inputted into the school should include teacher quality, school facilities, class environment and class size, parental involvement and teacher expectations are all pieces of the puzzle that were considered when examining the decision to educate students in charter schools. Meanwhile, charter schools often compensate their teachers at a higher rate; however, the responsibility and expectations placed on these teachers causes burn out, research finds that charter schools lose a quarter of their teachers every year.

Significance

This study produced essential information about the competition between public charter schools and traditional public education in Philadelphia. Charter schools were introduced to the American public as a method of educational reform by giving parents an alternative in public education. Although it was the parents' right to select the school of their choice, many researchers claimed choosing charter schools was not always beneficial for students. Concerns rose that student could become victims of stratification based on parental education, income, ethnicity or access to information

(Mead & Green, 2012). According to, parents used a variety of factors when choosing to enroll their child in a charter school or a traditional public school.

Although charter schools are held accountable and must be approved by local school districts, not all charter schools are created equal. Researchers agreed findings regarding charter school achievement was inconsistent. Great charter schools and great traditional public schools exist, just as there are underachieving schools from both settings. Parents may choose charters based on their popularity or the school's smaller size, but the charter school's academic performance may be suffering. This research explored the perceived differences among urban educators and parents on which school type, charter or traditional public school, most effectively educates urban students. It will evaluate the role or degree teacher; parent and administrator perception have on student achievement in both settings. It was especially important to examine why a parent would send their child to an unproven or underachieving charter school as opposed to the public school. Stated a charter school's alternative focus and principles...may not map simply into measured student achievement, and, as such, consumers with different preferences may well be making optimal choices based on private criteria—even if their charter schools do not exceed the regular public alternative in terms of math and reading performance.

School leaders and policymakers could find the results of this study useful in retaining students. Parents could benefit from this study by learning which deciding factors were used by other parents when selecting schools. Only a limited amount of research existed on charter school quality. It was hard to measure the quality of charter schools because charter schools varied greatly. Unlike traditional public schools, charter schools created their own curricula, making it difficult to compare, and therefore making it nearly impossible for parents to make an educated decision about which school was better [23-25].

Methods

In order to successfully conduct this research, the quantitative research method was pursued. Quantitative methods emphasize statistical data or numerical analysis of data collected through polls, questionnaires, and surveys. Research questions were successfully shared with various individuals who have experience with both the public and charter sectors. The surveys were collected and evaluated. To further explore the issue, past scores from standardized testing were examined. Scores were compared and contrasted between charter and public schools located solely in the city of Philadelphia. In quantitative research, first one must make observations about the question that will be explored. The foundation of this project was to examine whether charter schools were performing at a better rate than American public schools in testing. In continuing the method, the problem was investigated through various educational books, articles, professions, students and parents. Data was collected throughout the process. Using the data, it was made clear that charter schools do not drastically trump public schools in data for testing; Yet the effect of preparation and support that charter schools have received has in turn made public schools less appealing and financially incapable of obtaining resources to aid

the students and teachers in pursuing success. As mentioned, “I am not an anti-standardized test person,” said board President Joyce Wilkerson. “It’s not the testing per se. What’s problematic is the quality of preparation of children before they get to the test.”

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