

Assessing Chartered School Performance

By John Merrifield,
Professor of Economics
Director, Entrepreneurial Conservatism Institute
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The January 28 San Antonio *Express-News* contained a lengthy article on what should be done about supposedly low performing chartered schools. I say 'supposedly' because as the article made clear, many chartered schools specialize in children that have done poorly in their assigned traditional public school. Even with great improvement, their scores may still be below average. Therein lurks the terrible danger that proposed legislation to regulate chartered schools and close those with test scores deemed academically unacceptable will close popular, effective chartered schools because they enroll struggling students. Or worse than that, increased regulation, despite the best of intentions, will destroy chartered schools with the same malaise, and compliance-oriented focus that so severely hobbles traditional public schools.

Poor ideas and poor implementation are part of the free enterprise that underlies chartered school start-up, and virtually all of the other goods and services we consume. Some poor performing charters are to be expected. The rarely asked, critical question is why closure of supposedly low-performing chartered schools of choice is a public policy issue. In other words, how are supposedly low-performing schools of choice able to maintain enough enrolment to stay open? Why do parents send their children to a supposedly bad school? Again, the word 'supposedly' directly implies one potential answer. The school looks unacceptable because it specializes in struggling kids. Another possible answer is parental indifference to academic performance, at least the component measured by the state's standardized tests. General indifference is ridiculous. The tiny fraction of parents indifferent to their child's academic growth would not take the trouble to take a child out of the assigned public school. However, it is possible that a chartered school may offer something of importance (discipline, engaging subject for their child) that parents may value enough to accept the lower standardized test scores.

But sadly, given the performance record of traditional public schools, the best explanation of supposedly low-performing chartered schools' ability to sustain enrollment is that the alternative to the shabby chartered school – the traditional public school – is even worse. It would have to be worse by enough of a margin for that to be easily recognized by a large number of parents, and to overcome the costs, inconvenience, and uncertainties of a new school. **So, when the authorities close a popular chartered school – however ineffective it may seem – they force families to enroll their children in a schooling alternative the families believe is worse than the chartered school.**

The policy route to better chartered schools, and indeed a better school system in general, is increased competition. Give parents alternatives other than going back to the traditional public school, and the schools of choice that really are performing poorly will be closed by parents enrolling their children elsewhere. At the very least, that means eliminating the state cap on the number of charters. Better yet, really open it up to free enterprise. Create true school choice by ending the public finance discrimination against

users of private schools. Utah just took a big step in that direction by enacting a means-tested, universal voucher law. They left room for Texas to do even better.