

Issue: PA Education

Talking Points for Pennsylvania Charter Schools: Funding, Outcomes, and Accountability

Charter Schools in Pennsylvania are taxpayer-funded public schools that are privately operated. About eight percent of children in Pennsylvania attend charter schools and a quarter of those students attend cyber charters. The state does not limit the number of charters nor the number of students enrolled in a particular school.

Charter School Funding

School districts receive funds from local property taxes, the state and federal governments. In turn, school districts supply charters with the vast majority of their funding in the form of "tuition" payments. Whenever a student enrolls in a charter school, the charter school receives "tuition" from the student's home district. Hence, the tuition the charter receives is based on how much it costs to educate that student in the student's home district. Since the 2007-2008 school year, charter school tuition payments have increased by 139.3% in a period during which enrollment has increased 97.4%.

The cost to educate a student at a cyber charter is much less than at a brick-and-mortar school. However, the tuition received by those schools does not reflect the much lower costs they incur; it has been estimated that \$290 million in unneeded funding is received by charters every year. Charter schools also receive more funding than necessary for their special education students. In 2012-2013, charter schools received over \$350 million but only spent about \$156 million on special education.

Lack of Accountability of Charters

Pennsylvania is notorious for lack of charter school accountability and financial oversight. Auditor General, Eugene DePasquale, said in 2016, "Our charter school law is simply the worst charter school law in the United States." Charter schools can be run by management organizations, which can be for-profit entities which do not have to abide by the Pennsylvania charter school law. Basic oversight of traditional public schools comes from an elected school board. Charters have boards of trustees, but these are appointed, not elected.

Educational Outcomes of Charters

Charter schools as a rule do not outperform traditional public schools. A Stanford University study found that "the typical charter school student in Pennsylvania makes similar progress in reading and weaker growth in math compared to the educational gains that the students would have had in a traditional public school." Cyber charter schools have especially poor outcomes.

Conclusion

Governor Wolf has numerous recommendations for reforming charter schools. Among them are increased accountability, limiting enrollment at poorly performing charters, and making funding more fair. Republicans do not seem to be interested in accountability, as they recently sponsored two bills would lead to *less* transparency.