

Intellectual Prisoners of the Status Quo Ask the Wrong Questions

John Merrifield
February 12, 2014

“Chartery [sic] success is largely defined as A) getting higher test scores or greater test score growth; B) for less money; and C) with the “same” kids. Because this is the supposed definition of success, punditry around charter schooling – and research designed to endorse this punditry – makes every effort to validate A, while obfuscating or completely misrepresenting B and/or C.” Indeed, as [Bruce Baker](#) and [Anthony Cody](#) correctly note, that is a widespread definition of success. But they do not criticize it for being false, which it is. Instead, they criticize charter school advocates for not being true to it, which charter advocates struggle to do because it is false, and because chartered public school (CPS) advocates often over-hype symbolism-heavy, substance-lite policy reforms, including some states’ restriction-laden charter laws.

The right definition of success is that passage of the charter law improves the aggregate outcomes of the state’s school system. According to the false definition and the torturous statistical gymnastics necessary to establish that the evidence is credibly supportive, but never indisputable, charter law is a positive force only if chartered public schools are better at what traditional public schools aim to do, namely provide the one size that comes closest to fitting all. But there are other ways for chartered public schools to be a positive force, and thus improve the aggregate outcomes of school systems. Through choice, while it lasts (shortage because of pricelessness), charters admit students that were not doing well in their assigned school; outliers in terms of the traditional public school pedagogy. When the outliers depart their assigned

school for a better fit, for them, they are likely to do better in ways not fully reflected in low stakes test scores. And the departure of the outliers diminishes the teaching challenge in the traditional public school. With enough market share, chartered public schools without waitlists can gin up some competitive pressures. So, “chartery [sic] success” is possible – indeed, more likely – from charter law effects other than better test scores for charter users than for similar children that stayed in their assigned public school. Such effects are unlikely in states with restriction-laden charter laws. Another charter law benefit is that for some families it creates an acceptable free alternative to private school. Whether that is a system-wide net benefit remains to be seen. Research must determine if those savings out-weigh the reduced school system diversity that may result from private school closure because of losses to chartered public schools, and/or reduced private school start-ups because of that.