



EXCELLENCE FOR ALL PUBLIC SCHOOL CHILDREN NOW: A CALL TO
PUBLIC SCHOOL PARENTS ... CHARTER SCHOOLS IN CONTEXT

[April 2014: This is the third in a series of writings (workshops and mobilizations) by The Coalition for Public Education / Coalición por la Educación Pública (CPE / CEP). As always, we call on NYC public school parents¹ to take on the responsibility of changing, and ultimately transforming the NYC public school system.]

Fellow parents, as we often say, “Every child has the human right to an excellent education.” Our public school systems are tasked with the primary function of addressing and conscientiously satisfying this right. We understand excellence for “every child” to mean excellence **for all students**. Therefore “*equity*” must accompany excellence. Our public school systems cannot be excellent without also ensuring equity of opportunity to all of its students to learn and to excel. To us, excellence with equity means that the system itself (leadership, teachers, staff, parents and school environments) must be nurturing to all students, while offering them a variety of *high quality, interesting, enriching, motivating, challenging and empowering* experiences.

The sad reality is that in the main, public school systems are far from excellent, much less, equitable. Public schools, nationally and locally, are failing many students, especially, students of color. In fact, there are now decades of data backing up the claim that public school systems across the US are failing *most* Black, Latino, Indigenous and lower income students. It is precisely the reality of

¹ That includes current public school parents and also past and even future public school parents.
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sustained public school system failure that has pushed many Black, Latino and lower income parents into “the land of the charters”.

Charter Schools In Context²: Most strategically, charters have been specifically marketed to these parents and located in their neighborhoods. In NYC, as we will discuss later, the charters are usually “co located” inside existing public schools. Central to the charter school narrative is the promise of academic excellence and a vision of college in each of their student’s future. The prospect of one’s own child escaping a generally failing system while gaining access to one, which purports to lead to college has sent thousands of caring Black and Latino parents, and parents who head lower-income households, on personal quests to get their young “scholars”³ enrolled in local charter schools. Despite the fact that only a small percentage of students can even gain admission, it is not surprising that the charter school lure of a better future for their children attracts these parents. For many of them, the decision to sign up and join the frenzy of the charter school lottery is a “no brainer”.

However, to others of us, the opposite is the case. We recognize that it is the vast majority of NYC students that are at great risk. Therefore the solution set to the problem of mis-education must be comprehensive. We ask, “Where and what are the promising programs and initiatives focused on the rest of our children?” The once unifying concept of “educational excellence for every child” is being sacrificed on the altar of “a chance at excellence for *my* child”.

Understandably however, there is plenty of confusion on this matter to go around. After all, isn’t the charter school program a government creation? Aren’t charters being promoted by the highest ranking national, state and local *public officials*? And isn’t the program largely funded by the public sector and offered

² In this section, we will briefly frame the charter movement in a variety contexts, in relationship to our overall public education goal of educational excellence for all students. In an upcoming panel, we will also discuss the use of charters in the 1950s by white racists to *expropriate public money* and continue separate and unequal, privatized schooling.

³ In many charter schools students are always referred to as “scholars”... Can be easy means of “brand building” by charter promoters; and a seductive reinforcement of a hopeful parent’s vision of a “college future” for his/her child.

through the public school system itself? And finally, aren't charters the "only game in town" ...for my child?

Compounding the confusion has been the rather cynically planted claim by many private sector and public sector charter proponents that the charter school movement is the civil rights movement of this era. This is not true. It is sophistry and disinformation, which has been embraced by many who should know better. Some who apparently have not learned that the civil rights movement was a *struggle for equality* and that "the Movement's" basic demand was about justice for *all*.

Charters can only accommodate, at most, a handful of all the students in need, so even if they actually lived up to their promises, the plight of the vast majority our students still is dire. We ask charter parents, "Shouldn't the child next door, or in the apartment across the hall, who did not "win" the lottery, also have the opportunity of an excellent education and college in her/his future?" Yes, of course, every child is entitled.

Furthermore, we contend that charter school proliferation has neither actually been a platform for wide scale excellence among its students, nor does it offer a coherent path to the educational excellence with equity for all students, which we seek. The financial and human resource costs of charters are too much when compared with the mediocre results they have produced.

Charter schools have been deliberately *miscast as critically important* parts of the solution to what ails public education. Charter school proliferation, was re-launched as a key plank in federal public education policy during George W. Bush's first administration. Called "No Child Left Behind (NCLB)", the national program was structured to further open up the cash resources of public education to a host of major corporate interests. A central, justifying theme was that public education is failing many students and the failings can only be reversed by a massive infusion of private sector "know how"; namely management concepts, operating structures, best practices and, of course,

supplies, equipment and (non-education trained) personnel. This soon meant that students in most grades, already heavily tested, became inundated by much, much more statewide-standardized grade-level “proficiency testing” (and *practice testing*). Within little more than a decade, NCLB and the Obama-Duncan⁴ program expansion, called “Race To The Top (RTTT)”, have institutionalized privatization⁵ but not come close to improving what ails public education. Largely because federal policy and funds have been heavily directed toward charter school proliferation, it has been accepted in many states and school districts as the only game in town. Some parents hope that charters are the *quick fix* means of closing the so called “achievement gap” that they have been touted to be. We urge parents and all public education rights holders to keep your “eyes on the prize” of excellence for all students, and struggle to transform your schools accordingly.

Veteran teacher-activist-scholar, Brian Jones notes, “charter schools have been seriously overhyped”. Remember, the “overhyped” term is largely linked to the charters being represented as the best chances for Black and Latino students, and students from lower income households to excel academically and get to college. The data nationally and in NYC indicate this is often not the case. Unfortunately, student performance is often similarly mediocre in both charters and public schools. That is, overall charter school student performance has been mixed; and not especially better or worse than public school student performance. Locally, the majority of charter students, have performed about the same on standardized tests as the majority of their public school counterparts. Also, similar to their public school counterparts, there are small percentages of charter students performing a little better or a little worse than the majority. Over time, some charter schools perform well, while many have mediocre testing results. However, more recently there is a report of evidence that charter

⁴ The Obama Secretary of Education is Arne Duncan, a lawyer and non-educator. As the Chancellor of Public Schools in Chicago Duncan had a poor record.

⁵ Bush & Obama have institutionalized high stakes testing, misguided teacher “accountability” (really teacher blaming for student high stakes test scoring), charter school proliferation, and perhaps the greatest *expropriation* of public funds by the corporate class.

performance is improving in comparison with NYC public school performance,. We think that charter schools should be showing higher student standardized testing results than the public schools, since the charters are notorious for weeding out special needs students, students with behavioral issues and many students whose parents have had disputes with charter school officials, arising out of (parental) child advocacy –all students, which are more likely to score lower on the proficiency tests. Public schools accept these returning students jettisoned by charter schools. The 2013 CREDO Report⁶ on charter school performance obtained data indicating that students in about 3 in 5 NYC charter schools had greater growth in math than students in the public schools; and students in about 2 in 5 NYC charters had more growth in English language arts (ELA). However, a number of scholars, in reviewing the report, found numerous significant flaws in the research methodology and data analysis.⁷ Finally, there are some charter schools whose students underperform on a sustained basis. The 2013 CREDO Report recommends that consistently sub par performing charters should be closed.

In NYC, charters siphon off virtually an equal amount of per pupil public funds as are received by the public schools. Many charters receive substantial private sector funding from hedge funds and other wealthy donors. In a recent interview on NYC public radio, Education Historian, Diane Ravitch noted that the Success Academy chain receives thousands of dollars more total per pupil funding than the public schools. The educational entrepreneurs who head most of the multi-school charter conglomerates pay themselves hundreds of thousands of dollars or more in annual salary and large additional amounts in benefits. We see no justification for these extravagances. The huge overages of funds, which inure to these would be “captains” of an increasingly privatized public education industry,

⁶ This is an update and expansion of a 16 state 2009 Report. CREDO is affiliated with Stanford University Graduate School of Education.

⁷ In an analysis of the CREDO Report done for The Think Tank Review, Stanford research methods expert, Sean Reardon, noted: The report describes the variation in charter school effects across schools in a way that may distort the true distribution of effects by omitting many ineffective charter schools from the distribution.

should instead be spent on more effective public school solutions that benefit all students. Given the undistinguished performance of charter schools, we believe that the vast sums of funds and other resources, which go to them, could be much more effectively and equitably spent on student learning and personal development among many more students, than will ever be reached by the charters. For example, charter schools usually reach about 4 or 5 –at most, 6-- percent of students of a public school system. That’s as few as 1 student in every 20 or 25 students, but no more than about 1 student in 15 or 16. With such a small percentage of a system’s students even attending a charter school, many other public schools and students with similar needs go wanting. For example, in NYC only about 12 students in 20 graduate on time and an even smaller amount, about 5 students in 20 are college ready (based on their scores on the ELA and Math Regents). For Black and Latino students, that *college ready* ratio shrinks to a little more than 2 in 20. All of these very low student performance levels are outrageous. If the goal were excellence for all students, then *on time graduation with college readiness* would be a reasonable metric. We therefore ask this question: “Why spend tens of millions annually in a program that only has mediocre results and serves about 1 student in 20, when arguably 15 to 18 students in 20 actually require more critical support to both graduate on time and to achieve college readiness?” We say, “Instead, direct those *charter school proliferation funds* into general public school system programs and initiatives, which work well and also promote equity.”⁸ The even more pointed question is, “What are the actual changes needed in public education to ensure the opportunity of an excellent education for every student?” We know that whatever the answer, the changes must be both fundamental and comprehensive.

Please note that charters have generally not been utilized for their originally stated main purposes: *of being less bureaucratically hindered schools to test and model useful innovations and effective educational practices for expanded use in*

⁸ In other writings and in subsequent workshops and panels we will present practices and initiatives, which we believe are effective pathways to actual educational excellence with equity. Collectively, these pathways reflect many of the fundamental changes that are needed.

the overall school system. The consistent failure of school systems and policy makers to conscientiously and thoughtfully compile /record and **appropriately apply** the lessons learned from successful charters, to the broader public school population, is wasteful, negligent and wholly unacceptable. It is also a strong indication that achieving the egalitarian goal of “*educational excellence with equity*” has not been the purpose of charter school proliferation. We conclude that the waste, negligence and sustained inequality are all intentional.

In our view, charter school proliferation in NYC has been mostly destructive. A close look reveals proliferation to be an instrument of great private wealth accumulation and public sector manipulation. We find that charters may be the most effective item in the corporate sector’s “*privatization of public education*” toolkit.

In NYC, opponents of charter school proliferation, often refer to *co locations* as “invasions”. Charter *co locations* have consistently imposed a variety of negative effects on public school students. Typically, there are losses of needed classrooms, libraries, laboratories, bathrooms, as well as diminished cafeteria and auditorium access. Based on cost, performance and divisiveness, charters are more effective in relieving the public trough of funds than of offering most of their students excellent educational experiences. Much more often than not, they consistently serve their anti labor funders & backers well by undermining collective bargaining, worker rights, and public unions. Charter school proliferation simply means “privatizers” receive more dollars by usurping more of the public commons without doing appreciably more to extend educational excellence with equity. Thus continues a public-private misappropriation on a grand scale. Charter schools have the potential of becoming even more ubiquitous in NYS & NYC, due to the full political encouragement and funding support of RTTT / Obama-Duncan, mayoral control / Bloomberg, Cuomo et al.,. This means, to an already flawed public school system, more hype to potential charter parents, and more *co location* disruptions to the remaining public school students in those buildings. In turn, this serves to be dramatically divisive: charter

school students & parents vs. the public school students & parents. The affective (emotional) damage to students is immense as well. In recent years we have seen impassioned, articulate, yet quite disillusioned students, parents, teachers and community folk make their cases to “un-listening” members Bloomberg’s Panel for Educational Policy (PEP). We shall soon see what a new mayor and chancellor and a new PEP, operating under the same old laws will mean.

Call us and visit us on line!