

parentingthecore

A PARENT'S THOUGHTS ON EDUCATION IN THE ERA OF REFORM

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The Reality Television Paradigm of All-Charter School Systems 1

Today, the New York Times Sunday Review published an Op-Ed about the farce that is the so-called “New Orleans” charter school miracle. You should [go read it](#). A quote:

“There is also growing evidence that the reforms have come at the expense of the city’s most disadvantaged children, who often disappear from school entirely and, thus, are no longer included in the data.”

The quote is absolutely on target. Further, let’s talk about the logical results of how even a properly functioning (according to the charter cheerleaders) all-charter school district would work. By definition, a charter school is one that is intended to trade results for regulation: that is, We the Public eschew traditional regulation over watching how our public dollars are spent by the charter (which is governed by a private board, usually impervious to OPRA/FOIA requests and the like) in exchange for producing “results” — i.e., high scores on standardized tests from its students. If a particular charter school isn’t producing results by the end of its initial charter period, in theory the state and/or the chartering entity should be shutting that school down.

But the logical conclusion of that paradigm is a two-tiered system of charter schools. The so-called “high-performing charter schools” (e.g., the KIPPs, the Uncommon Schools, the Success Academies, the Green Dots, etc.) will figure out the formula for magically skimming-off as many of the high-performing kids as possible, and so their test scores will reflect the “results” the charter authorizers demand. But the rest of the charter schools, the B-squad charter schools of virtual charters, for-profits, mom and pop charters, less savvy charters, etc. — they are far less likely to have figured out, or, if they’re ethically run, to have wanted to figure out, the secret-sauce for creaming off those most likely to perform well on the standardized tests and quickly counseling out the rest. And so, instead, if the all-charter system functions as it is supposed to, after 3 years or 5 years or whatever, the B-squad charters schools will be shut down.

But what happens to the children who attended those B-squad now-shut-down charter schools, and/or those who are pushed out of the high-performing charters? Well, their educations are disrupted, over and over again, as they are shuffled from low-performing school to low-performing school. Their former schools shut their doors, over and over again. But new low-performing charter schools will continue to open in the wake of those that keeping closing: after all, until they drop out, the students of the low-performing charter schools need to be housed somewhere. For those relegated to the low-performing charter network, their chances to build communities around their schools are low, as even their schools are transient: heck, even if they do manage to graduate, many of their alumni won’t even have a school in which to hold a reunion ten or twenty years from now, because the iterations of the schools they attended will no longer exist. And that disruption, that lack of community, that being shunted around from low-performing school to low-performing school, that will make them less likely to graduate, less likely to be able to overcome the already-substantial long odds that accidents of demographics, the dark side of poverty, have placed in their way.

As evidenced by this article, an all-charter school system is a way to write-off our most challenging children, the ones that each and every one of us should look at and say that as citizens of this country, it is truly our moral responsibility to make sure that these children have every opportunity we can give them to break the cycle of poverty, because the American Dream is truly dead if a significant subset of our community has no way to succeed. But the way to keep the American Dream alive is to ensure that We the People provide our most vulnerable children with opportunities to attend well-resourced, integrated, stable schools that won’t disappear on them, sometimes mid-school year. It is not to keep pulling the educational rug out from under these children, every two, three, or five years.

But the charter cheerleaders, they say that closing down the low-performing charters, that’s evidence of success, because closing down low-performing charters is how the charter system is supposed to work: that’s how you hold

the poorly performing schools accountable, by shutting their doors when they don't perform. The charter cheerleaders, however, don't realize, if they're naive, and don't care, if they're cynical, that closing down one low-performing charter means opening another one in its place. After all, the low-performing students of the low-performing charters are those who aren't savvy enough to game and navigate the incredibly complicated systems privatization brings.

Instead, intentionally or not, they are shunted around from one substandard education experience to another until they simply give up and drop out, or, if they do graduate, graduate with substandard skills and substandard opportunities. The narrative that shutting down low-performing schools works is a narrative that is either incredibly naive or incredibly cynical. What that narrative isn't, however, is a narrative that serves kids — all of our kids — well.

That narrative is, however, as Michael Petrilli over at The Thomas B. Fordham Institute **implicitly admitted last winter**, a narrative that distinguishes between our country's deserving students, the deserving poor, and the un-deserving poor, who, at best, deserve, according to Petrilli and his allies, to be housed in a substandard world of alternative schools until they are eventually released from the system, likely into also-privatized prisons. Petrilli's vision is one that reflects the worst values of the Industrial Age we thought we had left behind, the "Hard Times" of a Dickensian dystopia in which some children are stuffed full of "facts, facts, facts, nothing but facts, ma'am," and slated for success, and the others, well, the others simply aren't our concern.

All of our children deserve better than this. All of our children deserve access to stable, caring, well-resourced, community schools that aren't going to disappear on them at the whim of some bureaucrat, whether or not they "perform" on the asinine boondoggles that are today's high-stakes standardized tests.

I, for one, say no thank you to the logical consequences of an all-charter school system, as any moral citizen of this country should agree. That isn't to say that our truly public school systems can't do better. Certainly, in many of our communities they can and should (especially if We the People actually provide them with the resources they need in an equitable fashion). But the answers to the real problems of poverty and deprivation are not privatization and prison. Or, to put it another way, publicly-funded education shouldn't be a real-life version of reality tv in which those who are savvier win the immunity challenges, and the less-savvy are voted off the island.

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