



## **Kentucky Students Don't Need Charter Schools**

(Column from *KEA News*, January 2010, by Mary Ann Blankenship, KEA Executive Director)

Proponents of charter schools see them as the solution to Kentucky's education ills. For Kentucky's children to be successful, however, KEA believes we should focus together on funding *all* Kentucky public schools for *all* children rather than diverting our attention to an unproven strategy that eliminates oversight and accountability. Kentucky's school employees prove every day that we are dedicated to our students and are on the path to assuring that every child receives a great public education.

### **What are Charter Schools?**

It's hard to come up with one definition of "charter schools" because every state that has them has its own variation. In general, these schools get public funding for each child enrolled, are free from some or all state laws and regulations, and are self-governing. Most require a high degree of parental involvement and most are not required to provide all the services that public schools provide, including (in some states) services to students with disabilities, lunch, libraries, athletics, and transportation. In many states, charter schools receive more funding than regular public schools. In some states only non-profit organizations can run charter schools; in others, both for-profit and non-profit organizations can run them. Some do not require their "teachers" to be certified.

### **Charter Schools Don't Live Up to Their Promises**

Research by Stanford University shows that most students in charter schools perform about the same or *worse* than similar students in regular schools. Only 17% do better in a charter school, while 37% actually do worse.

When charter schools began, their supporters said they would serve as incubators of good ideas that could be spread to all schools and students. That just has not proven to be the case. I can't think of one good idea that's widespread in public schools today that started in charter schools.

While there are successful charter schools, there are many more mediocre or low-performing charters. Residents of northern Kentucky are familiar with recent news of two scandal-ridden Ohio charter schools that the state shut down. Almost every state has found significant levels of misuse of funds, scandal, and poor practices in charter schools. Almost all states have had to shut down charter schools that have robbed students of years of learning. Charter schools operate without the state oversight that makes such problems rare in regular schools.

### **Charter Schools Weaken Communities**

Our country was founded on democratic principles, including the obligation of all citizens collectively to provide for the education of all children. One of the strengths of many Kentucky communities is their support for local schools, shown through volunteerism, pride in student achievement, attendance at school events, and support of athletic and academic teams. When charter schools siphon off students – particularly those with the most involved families – community unity is fragmented.

Kentucky voters have a direct influence in their schools, through the elected members of their local board of education. Parents have a hand in running their children's schools through the elected parent representatives on school councils. Public schools are subject to open records and open meetings laws. Charter schools provide no

similar level of accountability. KEA believes that schools should maintain their transparency and electoral accountability to voters and parents.

### **School-Based Decision Making Already Provides Much that Charter Schools Promise**

In 1990, Kentucky enacted school-based decision making (SBDM) as part of KERA. Because of SBDM, parents and teachers have significant authority in every school, similar to the promise of charter schools. School councils can be creative and shape their schools to meet their community's needs. KEA believes that our efforts should be directed toward helping school councils in *every* Kentucky school live up to their promise for *every* Kentucky student, rather than focusing on a few charter schools with a few students.

Kentucky's system of school councils requesting waivers of laws and regulations makes more sense than charter schools' system of laws and regulations automatically not applying. If state laws and regulations get in the way of student learning, we should work together to repeal those laws, not let some schools ignore them.

### **Charter Schools Can Weaken Other Public Schools**

Charter sponsors shape their schools to attract only one segment of the population – based on ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, or learning ability. This detracts from the common vision of schooling in this country, that schools are where all children go and are treated equally. KEA does not support re-segregating our schools.

Proponents talk about their school enrollment being determined by lottery. That's only part of the story. To be considered in the lottery, parents have to be well-informed about options available to their children and put them into the drawing. In many charter schools, parents have to commit to volunteer, make sure homework is done and come for regular conferences. So, from the onset these charter schools consider only children with involved parents.

Charter schools can also usually dismiss students who do not perform, attend or behave according to their standards. So the weakest students end up back in regular schools, where they don't have the benefit of modeling high performing peers, who have been siphoned off to charter schools.

Some states' laws provide additional funding for charter schools, thereby reducing funding to regular schools. Regular schools also have to continue to provide meals, libraries, athletics, and transportation, even if their enrollment is reduced when some students go to charter schools. It takes the same amount of money to run a bus for 35 students that it does for 40 students. It takes the same amount of money to keep a school library open for 450 students that it does for 500 students.

### **Teacher Turnover at Charters Causes Student Learning Problems**

Research documents the commonsense conclusion that inexperienced teachers – like other new professionals -- are not as effective as more veteran teachers. Yet charter schools are usually staffed by less experienced teachers with a high level of turnover. Charter school teachers are twice as likely to leave their school in their first year as teachers at regular schools.

One reason for the turnover in charter schools is that these teachers and school staff often do not have the protections afforded other school employees; they are also paid less. Meanwhile, they are asked to work longer school days and years. No wonder many leave as soon as they can.

This revolving door of teachers causes instability and lack of continued education focus, which hurts students' learning.