

Ensuring That Michigan Charter Schools are Accountable to Students and Families

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THESIS

To make charter schools more accountable to the communities they serve and to ensure that they fully invest in their students, charter schools should not be allowed to spend tax dollars on advertising.

BACKGROUND & ANALYSIS

Charter schools were initially conceived to be laboratories of alternative approaches in education, places to determine if traditional public schools should adopt new pedagogical practices. Although this idea of experimenting with public education had promise, it has been taken to an extreme in Michigan, which now has 308 charter schools.¹ Roughly 10 percent of Michigan students are enrolled in charter schools, and more than 50 percent of students in Detroit and Flint attend charters.²

With this growth, it has become more important to ensure that the charter model still works and that charter schools are held accountable to the students they serve. Charters get public funding but do not have to follow many of the regulations that traditional public schools do, which gives them freedom when it comes to matters such as structuring curriculum.³ It also gives them financial liberty. Charter schools often spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on advertising their school to potential students—money that could be better spent in the classroom or adequately paying their teachers. In fact, charter schools spent more than \$1.4 million of state money on advertising during the 2015–2016 school year. Some parents feel that the schools they entrust with their children’s education aren’t totally committed to their students, especially when they use government money to attract more students instead of investing in their current students’ education.⁴

TALKING POINTS

- Charter schools need to be more accountable to state government and to the families and communities they serve.
- Charter schools often spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on advertising their school—money that could be better spent in the classroom or adequately paying their teachers.
- A cap on advertising spending would encourage schools to spend on improving their classrooms rather than attracting more students.

KEY FACTS

- Charter schools spent more than \$1.4 million of state money on advertising during the 2015–2016 school year.
- There are more than 300 charter schools in Michigan that need to compete for the same students to get state money.
- Some charter schools spend more than \$400 per student per year out of the \$7,500 in per-student funding allocated by state government.⁸

THE POLICY IDEA

Banning charter schools from using state-appropriated funds on advertising after their first year of operation, and implementing a cap on the amount of state money a charter school may spend on advertising in its first year, would ensure that state funding would go toward education and not marketing. Schools that want to continue advertising could use donations or grants from outside sources to finance their efforts.

POLICY ANALYSIS

Charter schools receive state funding on a per-student basis. Schools often use too much of that money on marketing and advertising at the expense of investing directly in the students they already have. In fact, since charter schools get funding from the state government based on enrollment figures, they are structurally incentivized to commit more money to advertising. Often, this has led to huge ad buys by charter schools. When the *Detroit Free Press* ran a series on charter schools in 2014, it found that one for-profit charter school corporation spent more than \$375,000 of public money in one week on an ad campaign to promote its charters. Other charter corporations, such as Michigan Connections Academy and LifeTech Academy, spend more than \$400 per student per year. This is out of the \$7,500 in per-student funding that the state government gives charters.⁶ While funds are being used for advertising, students in charter schools face crowded classrooms, sudden teacher departures, and cuts to extracurricular programs.⁷

To hold charter schools more accountable, schools should be restricted from advertising with state money after the first year of operation. This policy would force charter schools to attract students through the merits of their curriculum, the abilities of their teachers, and their other academic qualities. State funds would be spent on factors that would directly benefit students instead of on ads.

NEXT STEPS

Charter schools are regulated by the Michigan Department of Education, which in turn is controlled by the Michigan Legislature. With the Democrats gaining seats in the legislature, and Gov. Gretchen Whitmer demonstrating a commitment to rein in charter schools, making connections with members of the Michigan House of Representatives and the governor and advocating for increased charter school accountability is the most direct way to change charter school policy. We hope to connect with the legislators who introduced the last major charter school reform bill in Michigan, the School FACT Act, including State Reps. Christine Greig, Tim Sneller, and Brian Elder and State Sen. Hoon-Yung Hopgood. We also plan to meet with other state representatives and senators to both build support for a bill on school advertising and learn how to enhance our policy.

However, it's also important to raise awareness with the public. At the University of Michigan, we plan to hold a panel to talk specifically about how charter schools can be more accountable to students and families and will connect with professors doing charter school research. To encourage a conversation and promote the work we have done, we will write op-eds in the campus newspaper, the *Michigan Daily*. Furthermore, we want to connect with charter schools themselves and talk to them about their experiences in order to get a firsthand perspective of what needs to be improved in the charter system.

ENDNOTES

1. NACSA. "Michigan State Map." Accessed March 19, 2019.
2. Julie Mack. "23% of Michigan Public School Students Opt for School Choice." *Mlive.com*. August 29, 2016.
3. Mark Binelli. "Michigan Gambled on Charter Schools. Its Children Lost." *The New York Times*, September 05, 2017.
4. Jerry Sova. "Schools spend thousands on marketing to attract students." *Mlive*, 25 Dec. 2011. https://www.mlive.com/news/2016/08/charters_schools_of_choice_enr.html
5. Eclectablog. "For-Profit Charter School Corporation's Detroit Media Ad Buy Now Has a Price Tag: Several Hundred Thousand Dollars." 26 June 2014. <https://www.eclectablog.com/2014/06/for-profit-charter-school-corporations-detroit-media-ad-buy-now-has-a-price-tag-several-hundred-thousand-dollars.html>
6. RJ Wolcott. "Books, Pencils and Billboards: Local School Ad Spending Spikes." *Lansing State Journal*, Lansing State Journal, 12 May 2017.
7. Binelli. "Michigan Gambled on Charter Schools." *The New York Times*, 2017.
8. RJ Wolcott. "Books, Pencils and Billboards: Local School Ad Spending Spikes." *Lansing State Journal*, Lansing State Journal, 12 May 2017.