



The League of Women Voters of Dane County, Inc.
March 2011 General Meeting and Issues Forum

Topic:

Charter Schools: Current Status; Prospects for the Future

Speakers:

Margaret McMurray

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Professor of Public Affairs and Political Science
UW-Madison

When:

Wednesday, March 2, 2011, 7 p.m.

Where:

The Capitol Lakes Grand Hall
333 West Main Street in Downtown Madison
Free Parking in Ramp Available Across the Street

LWVDC Education Committee Members:

Carol Carstensen, Chair; June Weisberger Blanchard; Kathy Johnson; Elizabeth Lewis;
Barbara McKenney; Pamela Rewey; Rose Sime; Mary TeSelle; Margy Walker

Discussion Questions:

1. What are the pros and cons of charter schools? Why is the charter school movement growing? What factors distinguish a "successful" charter school from an "unsuccessful" one?
2. What are virtual schools? What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of such schools?
3. Is there a basic set of information that all children should learn? Are charter schools responsible for teaching that? Do charter schools undercut the goal of the school being a meeting place for children from diverse backgrounds?
4. What impact does the existence of charter schools in a district have on the other schools in the district?

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Charter Schools: Current Research; Prospects for the Future
LWVDC Issues Forum, March 2011
Readings and Additional Resources

Study Materials Packet: Readings:

- Introduction 1
- Charter Schools: Explanations 2
- Charter Schools: Related Terms Explained 3
- CREDO, “New Stanford Report Finds Serious Quality Challenge in National Charter School Sector” (Stanford University, June 15, 2009, press release) 5
- Diane Ravitch, “A New Agenda for School Reform” (*The Washington Post*, Friday, April 2, 2010) 7
- Gayle Worland, “Virtual Charter Schools Growing Throughout State” (*The Wisconsin State Journal*, October 10, 2010) 9

Additional Resources on Charter Schools:

- “Despite Push, Success at Charter Schools Is Mixed” (*The New York Times*, 5/1/10):
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/02/education/02charters.html?hp>
- “Waiting for Superman” and the Education Debate (*The New York Times*, 10/1/10):
http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/02/opinion/02sat4.html?ref=brent_staples
- “Despite Image, Union Leader Backs School Change” (*The New York Times*, 10/15/10):
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/16/education/16teacher.html>
- “What Makes a School Great?” (*Time*, 9/20/2010)
http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2019663_2020590,00.html
- “The Myth of Charter Schools” (*The New York Times Review of Books*, 11/11/2010):
<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/nov/11/myth-charter-schools/>
- Diane Ravitch, “The Future of Public Education” (3/8/2011, 7-8:30 p.m., free lecture at the Wisconsin Union Theater, Memorial Union, 800 Langdon Street, sponsored by the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts & Letters, the UW-Madison School of Education, and the Wisconsin Center on Education)

Charter Schools: Current Research; Prospects for the Future

LWVDC Issues Forum, March 2011

Introduction

"I have indeed two great measures at heart, without which no republic can maintain itself in strength:

- 1. That of general education, to enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom.*
- 2. To divide every county into hundreds, of such size that all the children of each will be within reach of a central school in it." --Thomas Jefferson, 1810*

Public education is a foundation for our democratic society. Leaders of the United States, from Thomas Jefferson to Barack Obama, have understood that the very health and strength of the country is dependent on public education. Public schools prepare the people to be knowledgeable in their role as voting citizens. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, public schools integrated immigrants into American society and created a commitment to a common heritage. They continue to do so today. More recently we have asked public schools to take a greater role in preparing children for college as well as for the workforce. Public schools remain the one place in our society where children of different backgrounds have the opportunity to interact.

Starting with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in the early 1980's, there has been a rising chorus of critics attacking public education as well as calling for changes and reforms in education. Charter schools are one response to that criticism and call for change.

The readings provide information on what charter schools are and what we know about their potential for leading education reform, as well as explanations of terms and programs that are related to charter schools.

Charter Schools: Explanations

What are charter schools?

In Wisconsin, charter schools are public, non-religious, tuition-free schools. They are created through a contract (called a charter) between the operators of the charter school and the sponsoring school board. (In Milwaukee and Racine, other agencies can also sponsor charter schools – Milwaukee Common Council, UW-Milwaukee, MATC and UW-Parkside for Racine.)

Are all charter school laws the same?

No, each state has a charter school law. The laws vary greatly across the nation in terms of who can create a charter school, in the relation between the charter school and elected school boards, in the criteria of who is eligible to teach in a charter school, and in ways that achievement is measured. Wisconsin has a relatively strict charter law which gives much of the responsibility for approving and supervising charter schools to the local school board.

What flexibility are charter schools given?

Charter schools are exempt from many state and local regulations. In exchange for this flexibility, they are held accountable for meeting the student achievement goals set out in their contract.

Are there any local, state or federal laws/regulations that charter schools must follow?

At the federal level, charter schools must follow the laws governing special education and civil rights policies.

In Wisconsin, at the state level, charter schools must:

1. give the annual state tests measuring student achievement, Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examinations (WKCE);
2. complete the annual School Performance Report required of all public schools;
3. count their students for membership on the third Friday of September;
4. hire only teachers licensed by DPI.

At the local level, in Wisconsin, school boards write into the charter any local policies from which the charter school will be exempt.

How are charter schools organized?

Charter schools are free to be creative in setting up their administration and governance structures as long as the structure provides for parental involvement. Charter schools are required to have parental involvement and a governing board. The governing board must be independent and autonomous from control by the authorizer.

How are charter schools financed?

The state has a grant process that provides up to \$300,000 a year (for a school of 300 or more students) for up to 3 years. The first year is, typically, for doing the plans for a

charter school; assuming the school opens the year after the planning year, the authorizer may apply for funds for two additional years. These funds may not be used to pay basic salaries or rent for a facility; the funds can be used for staff development, attendance at conferences as well as some basic equipment.

The basic school costs will come from the district that authorizes the school. The charter with the school district will specify how much, on a per pupil basis, the district will contribute to fund the school. This will be, most likely, the average cost of educational services for a student at the particular level the school will serve.

What is “instrumentality” and “non-instrumentality” related to charter schools?

In Wisconsin charter schools may be organized as an “instrumentality” of the school district; which means that the charter school employees are employed by the school district and entitled to the same benefits (insurance, unemployment compensation, retirement, etc) as all other district employees.

If a charter school is organized as a “non-instrumentality” of a district, than the charter school employees are not district employees but are employees of the charter school itself – and the organization which has authority for the charter school as determined by the charter. The wages and benefits are then set by the charter school.

How many charter schools are there in Wisconsin?

In the 2010-11 school year there are 206 charter schools in 79 school districts, serving 37,222 students. The first charter schools in Wisconsin were authorized in 1993; at that time the legislation authorized only 20 schools. In 1995 the number limit was removed.

Charter Schools: Related Terms Explained

Open Enrollment

A state program which allows Wisconsin parents apply to have their children attend a public school in a district other than the one in which they reside. (E.g. a student lives in the Madison School District and the parent wants the student to attend a school in the Verona School District.) Currently in Wisconsin, there is a 3 week period in February of each year when parents may apply for open enrollment placements for the following school year. The district of residence (Madison in the example above) must pay the receiving district (Verona in the example) approximately \$7,000 for each student who is attending the other district’s school. The district of residence is allowed to count that student in its student enrollment, a factor in the determining the level of the revenue cap.

A recent article in the *Wisconsin State Journal* (February 5, 2011) gave the following data:

Madison & State Open Enrollment Statistics

Open Enrollment	Madison In	Madison Out	Net	State
1998-99	44	50	-6	2,464
1999-00	55	64	-9	4,858
2000-01	51	90	-39	7,213
2001-02	49	129	-80	9,602
2002-03	72	144	-72	12,378
2003-04	72	159	-87	15,409
2004-05	119	154	-35	18,223
2005-06	165	212	-47	21,028
2006-07	150	232	-82	23,406
2007-08	154	310	-156	25,899
2008-09	171	455	-284	28,025
2009-10	178	613	-435	31,916

Virtual School

A virtual school is a school where instruction is provided to students who are physically remote from a “school building” and from the teacher. Most of the student services and courses are conducted through internet technology. Teachers must be licensed by Wisconsin DPI in the subjects and grade levels they are teaching. The student/teacher ratio must be no more than 60:1 (and could be lower). There are 16 virtual schools in Wisconsin and state law currently limits the number of students who can be enrolled in virtual schools to 5,250. All students in virtual schools must take the state academic assessment tests.

Using Open Enrollment some virtual schools enroll as many as 800 students from around the state. As explained above, a student enrolling via Open Enrollment requires the district of residence to pay \$7000 to the district running the virtual school.

Magnet School

Magnet schools are public schools with specialized courses or curricula, such as arts, science, foreign language, etc. They are designed to attract students throughout a school district or geographic area. Examples of magnet schools in Madison are Wright Middle School, Spring Harbor Middle School and the Open Classroom at Lincoln.

Home Schooling (aka Home Based Private Education)

Home schooling refers to private education typically provided in a student's home by a parent or guardian, but sometimes by a tutor or a virtual school. Wisconsin has **no certification or license requirements for those who provide instruction in home school programs**, and it does not prescribe any assessment or testing for students enrolled in such programs.

A parent or guardian files a form with DPI indicating the intent to provide home schooling for the student and certifying that the instruction will provide 875 hours of instruction for the school year and that the education will "provide a sequentially progressive curriculum of fundamental instruction in six subject areas (reading, language arts, mathematics, social studies, science and health)."

In 2009-10 there were 19,049 students in Wisconsin in home-based education programs. Over the last 25 years, this enrollment has been 2% or less of the total number of Wisconsin students.

New Stanford Report Finds Serious Quality Challenge in National Charter School Sector

CREDO, Stanford University (June 15, 2009, press release)

Stanford, CA – A new report issued today by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University found that there is a wide variance in the quality of the nation's several thousand charter schools with, in the aggregate, students in charter schools not faring as well as students in traditional public schools.

While the report recognized a robust national demand for more charter schools from parents and local communities, it found that 17 percent of charter schools reported academic gains that were significantly better than traditional public schools, while 37 percent of charter schools showed gains that were worse than their traditional public school counterparts, with 46 percent of charter schools demonstrating no significant difference.

The report found that the academic success of students in charter schools was affected by the individual state policy environment. States with caps limiting the number of charter schools reported significantly lower academic results than states without caps limiting charter growth. States that have the presence of multiple charter school authorizers also reported lower academic results than states with fewer authorizers in place. Finally, states with charter legislation allowing for appeals of previously denied charter school applications saw a small but significant increase in student performance.

The Stanford report, entitled, *“Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States,”* is the first detailed national assessment of charter school impacts since its longitudinal, student-level analysis covers more than 70 percent of the nation’s students attending charter schools. The peer reviewed analysis looks at student achievement growth on state achievement tests in both reading and math with controls for student demographics and eligibility for program support such as free or reduced-price lunch and special education. The analysis includes the most current student achievement data from 15 states and the District of Columbia and gauges whether students who attend charter schools fare better than if they would have attended a traditional public school.

“The issue of quality is the most pressing problem that the charter school movement faces,” said Dr. Margaret Raymond, director of CREDO at Stanford University. “The charter school movement continues to work hard to remove barriers to charter school entry into the market, making notable strides to level the playing field and improve access to facilities funding, but now it needs to equally focus on removing the barriers to exit, which means closing underperforming schools.”

The report found several key positive findings regarding the academic performance of students attending charter schools. For students that are low income, charter schools had a larger and more positive effect than for similar students in traditional public schools. English Language Learner students also reported significantly better gains in charter schools, while special education students showed similar results to their traditional public school peers.

The report also found that students do better in charter schools over time. While first year charter school students on average experienced a decline in learning, students in their second and third years in charter schools saw a significant reversal, experiencing positive achievement gains. The report found that achievement results varied by states that reported individual data. States with reading and math gains that were significantly higher for charter school students than would have occurred in traditional schools included: Arkansas, Colorado (Denver), Illinois (Chicago), Louisiana and Missouri.

States with reading and math gains that were either mixed or were not different than their peers in the traditional public school system included: California, the District of Columbia, Georgia and North Carolina.

States with reading and math gains that were significantly below their peers in the traditional public school system included: Arizona, Florida, Minnesota, New Mexico, Ohio and Texas.

"If the supporters of charter schools fail to address the quality challenge, they run the risk of having it addressed for them," said Dr. Raymond. "If the charter school movement is to flourish, a deliberate and sustained effort to increase the proportion of high quality schools is essential. The replication of successful charter school models is one important element of this effort. On the other side of the equation, however, authorizers, charter school advocates and policymakers must be willing and able to fulfill their end of the original charter school bargain, which is accountability in exchange for flexibility."

To download a copy of the full report and executive summary, visit: <http://credo.stanford.edu>

About CREDO at Stanford University

CREDO at Stanford University was established to improve empirical evidence about education reform and student performance at the primary and secondary levels. CREDO at Stanford University supports education organizations and policymakers in using reliable research and program evaluation to assess the performance of education initiatives. CREDO's valuable insight helps educators and policymakers strengthen their focus on the results from innovative programs, curricula, policies or accountability practices. <http://credo.stanford.edu>

A New Agenda for School Reform

By Diane Ravitch

The Washington Post, Friday, April 2, 2010

[I used to be a strong supporter of school accountability and choice](#). But in recent years, it became clear to me that these strategies were not working. The federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) program enacted in 2002 did not produce large gains in reading and math. The gains in math were larger before the law was implemented, and the most recent national tests showed that [eighth-grade students have made no improvement in reading since 1998](#). By mandating a utopian goal of 100 percent proficiency, the law encouraged states to lower their standards and make false claims of progress. Worse, the law stigmatized schools that could not meet its unrealistic expectation.

Choice, too, has been disappointing. We now know that choice is no panacea. The districts with the most choice for the longest period -- Cleveland and Milwaukee -- have seen no improvement in their public schools nor in their choice schools. Charter schools have been compared to regular public schools on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 2003, 2005, 2007 and 2009, and have never outperformed them. Nationally, only 3 percent of public school students are enrolled in charters, and no one is giving much thought to improving the system that enrolls the other 97 percent.

It is time to change course.

To begin with, let's agree that a good education encompasses far more than just basic skills. A good education involves learning history, geography, civics, the arts, science, literature and foreign language. Schools should be expected to teach these subjects even if students are not tested on them.

Everyone agrees that good education requires good teachers. To get good teachers, states should insist -- and the federal government should demand -- that all new teachers have a major in the subject they expect to teach or preferably a strong educational background in two subjects, such as mathematics and music or history and literature. Every state should expect teachers to pass a rigorous examination in the subjects they will teach, as well as a general examination to demonstrate their literacy and numeracy.

We need principals who are master teachers, not inexperienced teachers who took a course called "How to Be a Leader." The principal is expected to evaluate teachers, to decide who deserves tenure and to help those who are struggling and trying to improve. If the principal is not a master teacher, he or she will not be able to perform the most crucial functions of the job.

We need superintendents who are experienced educators because their decisions about personnel, curriculum and instruction affect the entire school system. If they lack experience, they will not be qualified to select the best principals or the best curricula for their districts.

We need assessments that gauge students' understanding and require them to demonstrate what they know, not tests that allow students to rely solely on guessing and picking one among four canned answers.

We should stop using the term "failing schools" to describe schools where test scores are low. Usually, a school has low test scores because it enrolls a disproportionately large number of low-performing students. Among its students may be many who do not speak or read English, who live in poverty, who miss school frequently because they must baby-sit while their parents look for work, or who have disabilities that interfere with their learning. These are not excuses for their low scores but facts about their lives.

Instead of closing such schools and firing their staffs, every state should have inspection teams that spend time in every low-performing school and diagnose its problems. Some may be mitigated with extra teachers, extra bilingual staff, an after-school program or other resources. The inspection team may find that the school was turned into a dumping ground by district

officials to make other schools look better. It may find a heroic staff that is doing well under adverse circumstances and needs help. Whatever the cause of low performance, the inspection team should create a plan to improve the school.

Only in rare circumstances should a school be closed. In many poor communities, schools are the most stable institution. Closing them destroys the fabric of the community.

We must break free of the NCLB mind-set that makes accountability synonymous with punishment. As we seek to rebuild our education system, we must improve the schools where performance is poor, not punish them.

If we are serious about school reform, we will look for long-term solutions, not quick fixes.

We wasted eight years with the "measure and punish" strategy of NCLB. Let's not waste the next eight years.

Diane Ravitch is a historian of education. Her most recent book is The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education.

Virtual Charter Schools Growing Throughout State

By Gayle Worland

The Wisconsin State Journal, October 10, 2010

Early each school day morning, 10-year-old twins Galyn and Grace Hartung and their 8-year-old brother Henry bound out of the house and run to the school bus stop to play with friends from their Cross Plains neighborhood. But when the school bus pulls up to the curb some 20 minutes later, only the friends get on board.

The Hartung kids, virtual school students, head back home to a brightly painted basement room where many assignments are digital, the teachers are heard through a laptop and the study hall monitor is mom.

"It just feels like a normal way to do school," said Grace.

Galyn, Grace and Henry are among some 3,955 students enrolled this fall in 12 virtual charter schools statewide. That's up from 3,829 students in 2009-10 and 2,983 in 2008-09.

While controversy over virtual schools - How many students should be allowed to attend them? Do they provide a sound education? - has died down since a lawsuit by the Wisconsin Education

Association Council prompted changes to state law in 2007, this online approach to education has seen a steady increase in participation, drawing in more students formerly home-schooled and helping to shift the financial landscape of many brick-and-mortar school districts.

Almost 93 percent of virtual school students are "open enrolled" from districts across Wisconsin, meaning the per-student state dollars that normally would go to their home district follows them to another region of the state.

In Madison, an estimated \$6,796 will follow each of the 101 students open-enrolling this year into a virtual school based in another district, a total of nearly \$700,000.

A report by the state's Legislative Audit Bureau published in February found that in the 2007-08 school year, per-pupil expenditures for virtual school students were less than what the district received in open-enrollment dollars. That same year, virtual schools spent \$714,900 for advertising, the report showed.

"One of my concerns is that (virtual schools) are a huge money-maker for the district hosting them, and that shouldn't be what drives education," said Rep. Sony Pope-Roberts, D-Middleton, who chairs the state Assembly's education committee.

When she examined virtual schools a few years ago, "In my mind, these students were not really being represented by a board of education that knew them, cared about them," Pope-Roberts said. "The curriculum came from out of state. There was a lot about it that I found very distasteful. On the other hand, there's been a lot going on in virtual schools that I find very high quality. So it's a mixed bag."

Virtual charter schools in Wisconsin are public schools, with the charters issued by public school districts and students subject to the same standardized state tests as other public school students.

The Wisconsin legislature in 2007 imposed a yearly enrollment cap of 5,250 students in virtual schools statewide, a cap that Rep. Brett Davis, R-Oregon, and the father of a student at a brick-and-mortar public school, has tried to abolish.

"We're simply at the tip of the iceberg when it comes to online learning," said Davis. "I think the opportunities are limitless across Wisconsin."

Many reasons for enrollment. Advocates for virtual schools say the reasons students enroll in them are as diverse as the students themselves. Some have disabilities, behavior problems, attention deficit or severe allergies that prevent them from functioning well in a traditional

classroom. Others are high-achieving students who want to work at a faster pace or trim back their school day to pursue another interest such as music. Still others might be young mothers who want to stay home with a baby or students in a rural district who prefer online learning to a distant school that includes a long daily bus ride.

Even though the cap on virtual school enrollment has not been reached, supporters continue the push to end it. They also say students should be able to apply for admission in a virtual school at any time, not just during the brief statewide open-enrollment period each February.

"Our viewpoint is that every parent and every child should have every option open to them," said Julie Thompson, vice-president of the outspoken parent group Wisconsin Coalition of Virtual School Families. "I know families where they send two of their students to a regular school, and two of them to virtual school, because that's what works for each individual child."

Cheryl Hartung first learned about the option from a postcard advertising the Wisconsin Virtual Academy, or WIVA, chartered for the past two years by the McFarland School District and using curriculum from K12, a company whose net income rose nearly 75 percent in the last fiscal year.

Hartung's daughter Blake, now 15, was struggling with math in fifth grade and Hartung had concerns about the social pressures that awaited in middle school. One of her other children had special-education needs and Hartung decided to enroll the three younger siblings in a virtual school as well.

"I was in no way dissatisfied with what was happening locally (in public schools)," said Hartung, a former broadcast journalist and stay-at-home mother whose husband is the information technology director for a family agribusiness firm.

But with computer learning "I thought, 'Think of how much more you could do.'"

Unlike home schooling, virtual schools provide teachers, curriculum and supplies. Parents become "learning coaches" - and should expect to put in four to six hours daily for students in the early grades, said Leslye Moraski Erickson, WIVA's head of school.

"We are very up front with our families that this is a family commitment," she said. "For the parent that thinks that virtual education is 'less schooling,' we'll be direct about what it entails. You do need a level of motivation, particularly as you launch into the middle school and high school years. If you are disengaged in your current school environment, it's even more difficult in ours."

Districts are adapting. Public school districts are adapting to the demand for online learning. In Middleton-Cross Plains, the district's new 21st Century eSchool combines virtual schooling with the chance to take two courses in a district school and participate in extra-curricular and athletic activities.

The Madison School District offers about 100 credit classes, ranging from core subjects to marine biology and Latin, to high school students through its Madison Virtual Campus program. Rather than being a virtual school, this "hybrid" system allows students to take some classes online while staying connected to services such as counselors, psychologists and the extra-curriculars a high school offers, said Lisa Wachtel, executive director of curriculum and assessment for the Madison School District.

Wisconsin Virtual School, a partnership between the state Department of Public Instruction and CESA 9, provides online courses to middle and high school students enrolled in their home districts across the state - and saw a 58 percent jump in course enrollments this year.

It's not unusual for students to move in and out of virtual schools: Linda Kostelyna's three sons in Madison were all home-schooled until she enrolled them in Wisconsin Connections Academy, a virtual school based in Appleton. Now, two of the three are students at Memorial High School. Blake Hartung attended WIVA for three years before heading to Middleton High School as a freshman in 2009. The family's basement has been outfitted as a classroom for her younger siblings, mostly from boxes shipped from their virtual school: three laptops, textbooks, workbooks, paints and brushes for art class, materials for science projects, and more.

"One year they sent us a microscope," said Cheryl Hartung. "It can't all be on the computer."