
Democracy in America American politics

Charter schools

Learning moment

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IN THE bitter debate about charter schools, one of the myths perpetuated by critics is that charters are generously funded by rich donors. [Steve Nelson](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/steve-nelson/charter-schools-bill-de-blasio_b_5045454.html) (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/steve-nelson/charter-schools-bill-de-blasio_b_5045454.html), head of the Calhoun School in Manhattan, mused in a recent op-ed that charter schools “claim to operate with more efficiency, but their budgets are augmented by an infusion of capital from billionaire philanthropists and hedge fund managers who know a lot about PR and very little about education.” Mr Nelson contends that charters are not more efficient with money, as charter proponents say, but just have more of it.



This is wrong, and badly so. Research has been mounting that shows that charter schools have in fact less money than their public rivals. This financial imbalance is confirmed by [a new report](http://www.uaedreform.org/wp-content/uploads/charter-school-funding-report.pdf) (<http://www.uaedreform.org/wp-content/uploads/charter-school-funding-report.pdf>) from the University of Arkansas, published in the *Journal of School Choice*. The study looks at the total available revenue for traditional and public charter schools in 30 states and 48 major cities in the 2010-11 school year. In all states, except Tennessee, charter schools receive less money per pupil than traditional public schools. Sometimes this deficit is small. New Mexico charter schools receive only \$365 less per pupil. Other times it is enormous. In Washington, DC, charter schools receive \$12,736 less per pupil. Across the 48 major urban areas examined (where charter schools are more common), the deficit between public and charter schools was about \$4,352 per pupil. The gap is

smaller if averaged across all charter schools in the country, at \$3,814. Still, this is a funding gap of 28%.

This is a big gap, and it is growing. And this funding squeeze is on top of the contractions that all schools have faced during the economic downturn. While charter schools are often viewed as noble experiments funded by billionaire idealists, this impression is misleading. Traditional public schools actually receive slightly more money from private and philanthropic donors than charter schools: \$19 per pupil.

Critics will find room for scepticism. The study was funded by the [Walton Family Foundation](http://www.waltonfamilyfoundation.org/grantees/families-for-excellent-schools) (<http://www.waltonfamilyfoundation.org/grantees/families-for-excellent-schools>), which supports charter schools and groups such as Families for Excellent Schools, an advocacy group that recently spent \$3.6m to fight an attempt to charge charter schools' rent in New York. But the report's data is in keeping with a growing body of research that shows that charters attempt to deliver better academic results with less money than public schools.

The funding disparity matters for several reasons. The first is the most plain: if charter schools are receiving nearly one-third less funding per pupil, on average, one has to wonder whether they are being set up for failure. Critics often complain that charter schools are less helpful to students with special needs, and less lenient when students misbehave. Charters are more likely than public schools to expel difficult pupils. The money gap explains some of this: with fewer resources to manage problematic pupils, charters can't afford to be more helpful or more forgiving.

The other reason this matters involves the games of municipal politics. The new mayor of New York, Bill de Blasio, entered office demanding that charter schools pay rent for their space inside public buildings. The administration has since backed down, but the city council has not. The council's education committee announced this week that it intends to hold a hearing on "charter school management and accountability" in May. Despite the hard realities of public and charter-school budgets, it is rather difficult to sway the public's perception that charter schools are privileged experiments funded by the wealthy and enjoyed by the lucky few.