

## Charters make sense

by Stephen C. Bronack, Ph.D.

Last week, the North Carolina-based Common Sense Foundation suggested the recent Duke University and American Federation of Teachers reports on the efficacy of charter public schools support their earlier contention that charter public schools have an adverse effect on public schooling within the state. The foundation suggests that charter public schools have an overall negative impact on public education, including a tendency to increase racial segregation. Unfortunately, experience, logic, and data do not support the contention.

The authors note that schools have been “healing through integration” since the 1970’s. But they forget to mention that this integration was not a result of some magical spell schools placed on citizens. Instead, we have subjected millions of kids over the last 35 years to long bus rides to and from very unfamiliar parts of town—parts of town parents are unwilling (in most cases) or unable (in fewer) to live, yet to which they are perfectly willing to ship their children each morning. Were it not for bussing, traditional public schools would be no more integrated than charter public schools. Segregation is a social problem, not a school one. If we, as citizens, were more willing to live among ourselves, we would not be having conversations about the roles schools must play. It is unfortunate that schools – indeed, school children – must be held accountable for grownups’ unwillingness to integrate themselves.

Common Sense points to Greensboro Academy as an example of racial segregation because the student body is ‘whiter’ than the city’s population, as a whole – noting that it is “difficult to attribute such gross racial disparity to chance.” In fact, any racial harmony within traditional schools – that is, once you control for mandated attendance via bussing, etc. – is far more a result of “chance” than any racial segregation in public charter schools, where attendance is driven by choice.

I also find it troubling that Common Sense would challenge the legal standing of charter public schools at a time when the legality of traditional public schools in North Carolina is itself under question. A few weeks ago, the state Supreme Court upheld their 10-year-old ruling that the state is not providing a “sound, basic education” for all eligible students in North Carolina – a constitutional obligation state educational leaders have been struggling to skirt in rural and other underserved communities since it was brought forward.

The most egregious error in Common Sense’s argument, however, is the foundation upon which they base their misjudgment of the charter school movement on public education.

Common Sense suggests that because charter public schools do not provide what they categorize as “outstanding education,” advocates have a weak argument – noting that charter public schools “actually provide education that is inferior to that provided by local public schools.” First, they are not reflecting accurately the actual and projected

experiences of many of the students served by these charter public schools. Superintendent Mike Ward noted recently that fewer than 60% of North Carolina students graduate from high school within 14 years and that if White students were pushed out at the same rate non-White students were, “we’d declare a state of emergency and do something about it.” Even using DPI’s numbers – which the Education Trust reported earlier this Spring are skewed – non-whites are up to twice as likely to dropout.

Second, I wonder why the same logic does not apply to those who advocate for traditional public schooling – in which this past year less than one-third of those tested across the state in grades 4 and 8 performed “at grade level”? In fact, as a group of Harvard University researchers noted on Aug 18 in the Wall Street Journal, traditional public schools did less well on the NAEP than religious schools and followed a spread amazingly similar to that which separates charter public schools from traditional ones – a distinction the AFT has been quick in the past to attribute to inherently dissimilar groups of students, rather than superior schooling (of course, they are probably right).

Common Sense should take a closer look at the AFT study. The most telling statistic is actually one of non-significance (statistically) and works against the very case AFT is trying to make. As Secretary Paige also noted, when the data are disaggregated along racial lines, the ethnic disparities that have plagued traditional public schools for decades have disappeared within charter public schools. As far as I am concerned, any innovation that increases the likelihood of keeping traditionally underserved students engaged in public education – and through which *any* of these students perform at or above grade level -- can hardly be categorized as “inferior.”

Common Sense chastises charter public schools that operate in more affluent communities for out-performing those in less affluent ones, but does not recognize that this phenomenon is analogous to the social dilemma traditional public schools have failed to address adequately, themselves. And let us not forget that traditional public schools in North Carolina have a long, storied history; charter public schools are barely in the “toddler” stage—approximately one-third of the charter public schools whose data were included in the AFT study were less than two years old when the NAEP data were collected.

It might interest Common Sense to note that charter public schools are just that – *public* schools. Charter public schools in North Carolina do not divert a single penny from public schooling in North Carolina. Nor do they divert any “precious educational resources” from traditional public schools outside of those that rightfully follow the student from the traditional public school to the charter public school—and in many states, they don’t even get all of that.

Common Sense gets one – and, IMHO, only one – thing right in this poorly-reasoned piece of spin (and I’ll quote it, below):

“Students need a multicultural environment that challenges them while making them aware of and appreciative of diversity. This goal can best be achieved through public education that has the funding it needs to keep excellent teachers and first-rate facilities.”

Charter public schools exist in North Carolina because the traditional approach to public schooling inadequately attends to these core needs. There is no characteristic inherent to charter public schools that prevent them from serving the communities in which they exist as well or better than the traditional ones. Correct: schools and grocery stores are different. But so are ‘turnover’ and ‘competition.’ Common Sense would do well to re-educate themselves about charter public schools. If they do, they will find that many of those who have dedicated time, effort, and attention to charter public schools have done so because, like Common Sense, they believe in public education and—like Common Sense—they are guided by a belief in equality and justice for all people. When it comes to charter public schools, I believe Common Sense has made an uncommon error in judgment.