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Frequent Misconceptions About Charter Schools

By Michele Gregoire Gill
UCF Forum columnist
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(Photo by Wokandapix at pixabay)

As a charter school founder, I hear many misconceptions about charter schools. Though I do not believe charter schools are necessarily the solution to the low student engagement and out-of-date curriculum and pedagogy that is the hallmark of many traditional schools, they are an option for some kids, especially underserved kids or those who do not thrive in regular public schools.

But misconceptions about charter schools cause confusion for parents, educators and politicians interested in public schooling.

The main difference between a charter school and regular district school is that a charter school is controlled by its own volunteer, nonprofit school board, rather than the district school board. A charter school is free to have a mission and vision that differs from the district's goals for its schools, as long as the charter school adheres to the contract negotiated with the school's authorizer, usually the district's school board.

Charter schools are entitled to some exemptions from state legislative requirements. In Florida, for example, many charter schools do not have to be unionized, which gives the school administrator more flexibility in hiring and firing. Still, Florida charter schools, like other schools, must adhere to class-size rules, administer state standardized testing, provide reading remediation for students who are not proficient on state standardized tests, and other requirements.

From my experience, some charter schools are able to provide more individualized, caring, and innovative educational experiences to students because of their flexibility and local control. Even so, that is not true of all charter schools, so parents should be careful to research and visit any prospective school for their child.

Many people confuse charter schools with private schools. Charter schools are public schools and they do not charge tuition.

Many people confuse charter schools with private schools. Charter schools are public schools and they do not charge tuition. Public schools – district and charter – get funding from the state based on their pupil enrollment. Students are admitted based on state-determined criteria and a lottery system.

Charter schools also are subject to the same accountability requirements of district schools. They must submit to state testing requirements, and in Florida, they are given the same school grade for performance based on students' achievement. Charter schools must be independently audited and these audits are submitted to the school district and must be publicly available each year.

Some critics charge that charter schools take away funding from public schools. That is not true, except perhaps if a district school does so poorly that it loses significant enrollment and does not make adjustments to better meet the needs of its students. If students leave a district school to go to a charter school, then the funding follows that student. If the district school remains at capacity, it still receives governmental funding. Many students who attend charter schools come from private and homeschooling experiences, so these students aren't leaving district schools. Those that do leave district schools do so for a reason.

Charter schools serve as just one of several schooling choices available to parents. Many wealthy families leave district schools to send their kids to private schools. Charter schools provide this choice also for those families who cannot afford private education.

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A common misconception I have heard is that charter schools are for-profit institutions. Charter schools must have a 501(c)(3) nonprofit status. Some charter schools hire out some of their management services to nonprofit charter management organizations or for-profit, education management organizations; however, the school itself and the board are nonprofit entities. For-profit management companies serve only about 12 percent of the public charter schools in the United States.

Charter schools also do not get to cherry-pick students, nor should they. Charter schools must admit any student whose application is chosen in a lottery each year. The process is completely random, except for certain preferences specified in the charter agreement that must meet state legislative requirements (such as sibling preference).

Charter schools may not ask any questions about student disabilities, income, or achievement on the lottery application. This is the way it should be.

Because acceptance to charter school is not automatic, as it is with district zoned schools, charter schools get students with parents who are motivated to submit the enrollment documents. This often means, though, that charter schools get a higher proportion of students who struggle with schooling, either through their giftedness, peer relations, behavior, special needs, or learning difficulties. This is because parents who are happy with their children's achievement and well-being in their zoned schools have no motivation to move their child to a charter school.

Finally, schools that accept vouchers and charter schools are two very different subjects. Vouchers are a means of allowing parents to receive taxpayer funding to send their children to private schools, which are allowed to hire uncertified teachers, teach religion, and choose not to provide services for students with disabilities.

Charter schools, except for very rare exceptions, must hire certified teachers, may not advocate for a particular religion, and must provide services for students with disabilities.

I want to make something clear: One can be in support of charter schools and still oppose school vouchers and privatization.

Ideally, in my opinion, there would be multiple public school options available to families, with differing approaches to learning, and parents would be able to choose a school that best fits their child's needs and interests. These schools would have authority to make decisions that are responsive to their communities.

However, given the heavy pressure on schools to produce high standardized test scores, charter schools act as a buffer and can provide a more independent learning environment for students.

I see them as a stopgap measure—a way to offer something new while avoiding the heavy bureaucratic over-control of schools currently plaguing K-12 schools in this

country. Perhaps this is not ideal, but a good alternative, especially for families who cannot afford or who don't have access to other educational options for their children.

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