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What's Behind That Insanely Hostile New York *Times* Story on Charter Schools?

By Jonathan Chait



Something suspicious is going down here. Photo: Bill O'Leary/The Washington Post via Getty Images

There are certain times when the pose of objective journalism falls apart completely, and **Sunday's New York Times story** ([//www.nytimes.com/2014/04/26/us-a-walmart-fortune-spreading-charter-schools.html?_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/26/us-a-walmart-fortune-spreading-charter-schools.html?_r=0)) about the Walton Family Foundation's sponsorship of charter schools is one of those times. A straightforwardly left-wing attack on charter schools would be coherent. But since the *Times'* news section can't run an ideological polemic, the argument is instead submerged in the form of insinuations. (I should note that my wife works for a Washington charter-school network, though it does not receive any funding from the Walton Foundation.)

The scandal, as it were, is that the Waltons give a lot of money to charter schools in Washington, D.C., which serve mostly poor, black children. There is no allegation of misallocation of funds, waste, improper political influence, or profit motive. The allegation is that "While charter schools and vouchers may benefit those families that attend these schools, there may be unintended effects on the broader public school system."

The story, however, does little to substantiate this allegation. It quotes a parent who says that the charter system "puts the onus on public schools to take on the people and children that other schools don't want." It does not mention that Washington's charter schools are required to admit students only by lottery, which prevents them from turning away students "other schools don't want."

Lottery-based admission might still attract children with more organized or motivated parents. But there's no evidence that the success of charter schools has come at the expense of neighborhood schools. Students at both charter schools and neighborhood schools in Washington have shown **steady increases**

([//www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/dc-posts-significant-gains-on-national-test-outpacing-nearly-every-state/2013/11/07/dccco8co-475c-11e3-b6f8-3782ff6cb769_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/dc-posts-significant-gains-on-national-test-outpacing-nearly-every-state/2013/11/07/dccco8co-475c-11e3-b6f8-3782ff6cb769_story.html)) in their test scores. (Is this because teachers are “teaching to the test,” or even cheating? No — the increases are on the NAEP test, which is not used to evaluate teacher performance.)

So the students in the charter schools are doing better. Students in the neighborhood schools are also doing better. Lots of families are getting more choices, and nobody is being deprived of anything they had before.

What, exactly, is the problem here? It is very hard to say. Marc Sternberg, the Walton Foundation’s education director, is interviewed for the story, and comes across as a man struggling to understand what he stands accused of:

Mr. Sternberg, who started his career in Teach for America and founded the Bronx Lab School, a public school in New York City, does not apologize for Walton’s commitment to charter schools and vouchers. “What’s the argument there?” he said during an interview. “Don’t help anybody until you can help everybody?”

He said the foundation was focused not on ideology but on results, a word he repeated many times.

The language here is typical. Sternberg, we are told, “does not apologize,” as if somebody caught in the act of helping a nonprofit organization educate underprivileged children should be expected to apologize. He exhibits a suspicious tic of repeating the word *results*, possibly because he is hiding something, or possibly because he believes that is the appropriate way to judge his work.

This sort of insinuation-without-accusation pervades the tone of the story. “The size of the Walton foundation’s wallet,” the story ominously reports, “allows it to exert an outsize influence on education policy as well as on which schools flourish and which are forced to fold.” Outsize influence? Well, that’s just, like, your opinion, man. The story continues: “With its many tentacles, it has helped fuel some of the fastest growing, and most divisive, trends in public education.” Divisive? Tentacles? There aren’t any cuddly, benign creatures that have tentacles, are there?



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