

Thinking Sensibly About Charter Schools in Jeffco

I have some serious concerns about the “community survey” that was conducted as part of this year’s school budget process, such as the fact that it was open for only six days, and you could send in multiple replies. As I’ve said before, I regard it as, at best, an expression of the opinions of a relatively small (somewhere between 1 and 13,000 people), but admirably well-organized group of Jeffco employees and people with like-minded views. However, behind every dark cloud there is a silver lining. In this case, it was the survey’s curious findings about this group’s attitudes towards Jeffco’s choice programs, option schools, and charter schools.

Seventy percent of survey respondents said they thought Jeffco should expand choice programs like STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math), International Baccalaureate, Gifted, and others like Warren Tech and certain special education programs. In contrast, only 39% thought Jeffco should expand its “option schools” like D’Evelyn and Manning, and only 22% thought Jeffco should expand charter schools. This interesting mix of views cries out for testing against standards of evidence and logic.

Let’s start with a brief background on charter schools, which comes from a just-published report by the Philanthropy Roundtable (“From Promising to Proven”, by Karl Zinsmeister):

“The first charter school opened in 1992. Beginning from nothing, the charter school movement took root slowly. At year ten, the total number of American children in charters passed half a million... In recent years, the number, variety, and quality of charter schools started to soar. By 2014 there were 2.6 million children attending 6,500 charter schools in the U.S. Every year now, more than 600 new charters open their doors for the first time, and an additional 300,000 children enroll (while a million kids remain on waiting lists, with millions more hungrily waiting in the wings). Charter school attendance began to particularly accelerate around 2009, and as this is written in 2014 it looks like there may be 5 million children in charters before the end of the decade...”

Today, for example, 43% of public school students in Washington, DC, attend charter schools, as do 35% in Kansas City, 29% in Cleveland, 27% in Philadelphia, and 26% in Phoenix.

As Zinsmeister notes, “the charter boom, though, is only going to get bigger. All but eight states are now experimenting with charters. Already, one out of every 19 American schoolchildren is enrolled in a charter school, and by five years from now that is likely to double to one out of every nine...What’s distinctive about charter schools? Let’s get some general facts on the table. Charter schools are:

- Public schools, funded with public money
- Privately managed (by organizations “chartered” by a public authority)
- Must meet the same graduation requirements as other schools
- Open to all, and tuition-free for every student
- Have no claim to neighborhood students; families must choose the school
- Select students randomly by lottery when applicants exceed available slots
- Operate autonomously, free of many of the conventions and union rules that district schools follow
- Can be a stand-alone school, or part of a network of charter schools; can be nonprofit or for-profit
- Frequently specialize to meet the needs of targeted students (dropouts, math achievers, artists, English-language learners, etc.)
- Nationally, two-thirds of existing charter students are minorities; approximately the same proportion are low-income
- Charter schools are subject to closure if they fail to improve student achievement”

I think it is most helpful to put Jeffco’s choice programs, option schools, and charter schools into the broader context of our critical need to improve academic achievement, and to graduate more students who are “college and career ready”, and prepared to succeed in our intensely competitive global economy. As I have written before, for too many of our children today Jeffco schools are not meeting this fundamental promise. The ACT is a national test, taken by all Colorado 11th graders. Despite spending almost a billion dollars per year, in 2013, 55% of all Jeffco 11th graders were below the minimum ACT math and reading scores for “college and career readiness.” For science, 61% fell below this mark.

As is the case in any complex adaptive system, there are no simple silver bullet solutions that we can use to quickly improve our performance. Instead, we have no alternative but to systematically innovate, experiment and learn our way to success. Some of these experiments will take place at the classroom level, in the

form of different curriculum materials and instructional practices. Some of them will take place at the school level, including different leadership approaches and different organizational forms (e.g., choice programs, option schools, and charter schools). And some of these experiments will take place at the district level, with new approaches to identifying, understanding, and transferring the most promising classroom and school level practices. There is nothing new about this experiment and learning driven approach to performance improvement – it is what the private sector and the military have been doing successfully for at least the past 25 years.

Let’s now turn to the mix of students found in Jeffco’s charter, non-charter, and option schools. The following demographic data is based on publicly reported information for the 2013 TCAP math test:

Based on TCAP/Math/2013 Grades 3-10			Charter %	Non-Charter %	D'Evelyn & Manning Middle %
F&R Eligible	GT	IEP	N/A	N/A	N/A
F&R Eligible	GT	Not IEP	0.8%	1.6%	N<16
F&R Eligible	Not GT	IEP	1.7%	3.8%	N<16
F&R Eligible	Not GT	Not IEP	14.0%	29.1%	6.6%
Not F&R	GT	IEP	N/A	N/A	N/A
Not F&R	GT	Not IEP	10.2%	12.5%	29.6%
Not F&R	Not GT	IEP	6.4%	4.0%	N<16
Not F&R	Not GT	Not IEP	66.9%	49.0%	63.8%
			100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Total F&R			16.4%	34.5%	6.6%
Total GT			11.0%	14.1%	29.6%
Total IEP			8.1%	7.8%	N/A

This table makes some interesting points. First, the often-heard claim that charters accept fewer special education (IEP) students than neighborhood schools isn’t supported by this data. This finding also needs to be seen in relation to other studies that have found that charter schools are less likely than traditional schools to put students in special education programs (see, for example, “No Labels”, by Marcus Winters which analyzes a recent controversy in New York about this issue).

Second, it appears to be Jeffco’s option schools, and not its charters, that take the lowest percentage of students eligible for free and reduced meals. On this issue, it is also interesting to note the rapid increase over the last five years in the number of Free and Reduced students attending Jeffco charter schools, which ranges from 108% in Grade 3 to 331% in Grade 8. I suspect that if the district provided transportation for F&R students to charter schools, these figures would be even higher.

As noted above, charter and option schools are just one part of a larger program of experimentation, the goal of which is a dramatic improvement in Jeffco’s

academic achievement scores. With that in mind, a critical question is how they have been performing versus this goal, in comparison with option and neighborhood schools.

The first issue to address is the right metric to use when answering this question. Absolute achievement levels, as measured by the percent of students scoring proficient or advanced is inappropriate, as it is driven not just by school value added, but also by family socioeconomic status. Median Growth Percentile is also inadequate, as it is a relative, not absolute measure, and only covers improvement over a one year time period. In my view, the best measure of academic achievement improvement over time is “Effect Size”. Mathematically, this is defined as the average TCAP scale score in the ending year, less the score in the beginning year, divided by the standard deviation of scale scores in the ending year (to create a common basis for comparing schools). An extensive body of research (e.g., by Professor John Hattie) has established that Effect Sizes of .30 or more are important, as they are equivalent to about an additional year of student learning.

The following table compares the grade by grade Effect Sizes achieved by charters and non-charters between 2009 and 2013, for two groups of students: free and reduced eligible (but not GT or IEP) and not free and reduced eligible (and not GT or IEP):

Jeffco Math Effect Sizes, 2009-2013, based on Average TCAP Scale Scores				
F&R/NotGT/NotIEP		NotF&R/NotGT/NotIEP		
	<i>Charter</i>	<i>Non-Charter</i>	<i>Charter</i>	<i>Non-Charter</i>
Grade 3	0.48	(0.07)	(0.04)	0.02
Grade 4	0.02	0.17	0.24	0.07
Grade 5	(0.05)	0.13	0.06	0.13
Grade 6	0.20	(0.02)	0.17	0.01
Grade 7*	0.25	0.08	0.30	0.11
Grade 8	0.54	0.03	0.10	0.07

* 2011 to 2013, due to insufficient public data in earlier years

Jeffco Writing Effect Sizes, 2009-2013, based on Average TCAP Scale Scores				
F&R/NotGT/NotIEP		NotF&R/NotGT/NotIEP		
	<i>Charter</i>	<i>Non-Charter</i>	<i>Charter</i>	<i>Non-Charter</i>
Grade 3	0.05	(0.12)	(0.31)	(0.18)
Grade 4	0.30	0.07	0.21	(0.07)
Grade 5	0.05	0.02	0.05	(0.03)
Grade 6	0.06	0.00	(0.04)	(0.10)
Grade 7*	0.25	0.10	0.05	0.12
Grade 8	0.70	0.15	0.04	0.14

* 2011 to 2013, due to insufficient public data in earlier years

To be sure, within both the charter and non-charter school groups, there are individual schools that produced Effect Sizes significantly above and below these averages (which implies both a wide range of opportunities for learning and transfer of effective practices, as well as the need to either turnaround or close down ineffective charter and neighborhood schools). However, at this aggregate level, the Effect Size data indicates that Jeffco's charter schools have often done a better job of improving achievement scores than the district's non-charter schools. Given that a critical goal of the charter school movement has been to identify better ways of improving student achievement, Jeffco's experiment with charters has been successful. Unfortunately, the benefits of this success have been limited by Jeffco's apparent inability to understand and scale up the most promising achievement improvement approaches (at charter, option, and neighborhood schools) across the whole district.

A final question with respect to achievement is the Effect Sizes delivered by Jeffco's option schools over the 2009 – 2013 period. As data is limited, I have focused just on D'Evelyn and Manning's middle school programs, and just on students who are not eligible for free and reduced meals, not GT, and not IEP. D'Evelyn's Effect Size in math was .29, and in writing, .09. Manning's in both math and writing was .11.

Having looked at the demographic and achievement evidence, let us now turn to some specific objections that recently have been raised against the expansion of charter schools in Jeffco (many of which are the same ones that were previously raised against the expansion of charter schools in Denver).

(1) Charter schools use non-union teachers.

At one level, this is a position I understand and respect. All organizations, including teachers unions, need revenue to survive, and a reduction in union teachers means a reduction in dues revenue for their union. If I were a teachers' union president, I would also oppose charter schools on this basis. In contrast, both choice programs and option schools employ union teachers.

However, there is another aspect to this issue that is potentially more troubling. In discussions about student achievement shortfalls, Jeffco's Chief Academic Officer has identified as possible root causes "poor fidelity of implementation" of improvement initiatives in some schools, and "widely varying levels of rigor" in classrooms across the district. If restrictive union work rules have contributed to these problems, then we should view the union's objection to charter schools in a different light.

(2) Charter schools don't take enough at-risk students.

I have already noted the substantial increase in the percent of F&R students in Jeffco's charters, in spite of transportation constraints. Here I will note that we

could further increase this percentage if Jeffco made a greater effort to induce high performing charters that focus on at risk students, like STRIVE and KIPP, to open schools in our district. Consider this comparison: In Jeffco, only 36% of Grade 8 F&R students were proficient or advanced on the 2013 math TCAP, compared to 61% at STRIVE and KIPP charter schools in Denver. In the past, critics have claimed that these results were due to STRIVE and KIPP attracting students whose parents were more involved in their education. However, a more recent independent analysis by Mathematica Policy Research (“KIPP Middle Schools: Impacts on Achievement and Other Outcomes”, 2013) refuted this claim and concluded that, “The average impact of KIPP on student achievement is positive, statistically significant, and educationally substantial.”

(3) Some charter schools are run by profit making corporations.

I fail to understand the philosophical or economic difference between a neighborhood or option school that buys materials and services from multiple profit seeking private sector companies, and a district that purchases a different type of service – operation of a charter school – from another profit seeking company. It would be one thing if people argued that the district should do no business with any profit-seeking company. But that is not the argument they are making.

More importantly, if a profit-seeking operator of the charter school is delivering great achievement results for our kids, why should it matter?

(4) Charters take students from neighborhood schools.

True, but so do choice programs and option schools, when parents decide that these alternative offerings are a better fit for their children’s educational needs. As such, this objection to charters is really a much broader attack on all forms of educational choice, and perhaps beyond that as well (after all, doesn’t Honda take customers from General Motors?).

(5) Charters take money from neighborhood schools.

To reiterate the point: charter schools are public schools. As such, there is a very strong argument that the amount of funding we provide for each public school student should be equal (before additional uplifts for students with special needs, like at-risk and special education) regardless of the program they attend. Moreover, choice programs and option schools also take money from some neighborhood schools when students leave the latter for the former (that is one reason why some of our school buildings have substantial amounts of unused capacity).

A final aspect of this issue is the claim that Jeffco’s charters agreed to accept a less than equal level of per-student funding as part of the negotiations leading up

to the 3A mill levy referendum. My response is that if one side in a negotiation has virtually no power, and is faced with a “take it or leave it” offer, the outcome is predictable. But that does not mean that it was a legitimate negotiation, or that its result should be used as the justification for depriving one group of public school students of their right to equal funding of their education.

(6) Jeffco doesn't close poorly performing charter schools.

I agree with this criticism, but would also logically extend it to poorly performing neighborhood and option schools, as has been done in Denver. While we should do our utmost to turnaround any poorly performing school, if these efforts fail then we must ultimately be willing to close them and send their students to schools that are delivering substantially better achievement results.

Upon careful examination, most of the arguments raised in opposition to charter schools in Jeffco seem either without merit or lacking in logical consistency. In light of this and the results they have achieved so far, it is hard to rationally oppose adding more charter schools, especially those that primarily serve at-risk students. But don't take this conclusion just from me; I'll leave the last words to the editorial page of one of America's most liberal newspapers, the Boston Globe (“Education Reform Has Worked for Massachusetts; Time for the Next Round”, March 13, 2014):

“By almost every measure, [charter schools in Massachusetts] have been a success. Taking children by lottery, charter schools have produced markedly better test results than traditional public schools. This is usually ascribed to highly motivated principals and teachers, longer school days, and intensive tutoring at the most successful charters. Parents clearly believe that charters can be a ticket to success: The waiting list numbers in the thousands. Just as architects of charter schools intended, their innovations are now being applied to public schools, either through the turnaround process or collective bargaining...Advocates on both sides can argue these points all night. But the goal isn't to fuel a war between traditional public schools and charters; it's to develop the most effective education policies and then apply them broadly.”

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