

The problem with charter schools

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A coalition of teachers, parents and community groups is suing Washington state in an effort to strike down charter schools, arguing that they are unconstitutional.

Voters passed the charter law in 2012, making Washington the 42nd state to allow schools that are privately run but publicly funded. Now the Washington State Supreme Court must answer the core question: do charter schools meet the constitutional definition of public (or common) schools?

For readers who know very little to nothing about charter schools, they are elementary, middle and high schools that get state funding, but are run independently. Because they are free of some restrictions placed on public schools, charters are meant to have more flexibility in teaching curriculum. Charter schools are free and use a lottery system for enrollment.

Or, at least, that's what I was led to believe when I voted in support of charter schools in 2012. It seemed so straightforward. In my mind, our public school system is awful — teachers are forced to teach to the lowest common denominator, creating a subpar education for all.

The main counter argument I considered before voting was that charters take money away from already underfunded public schools. But, I thought, perhaps if we change the system first, the funding will later come with it. This was naive, of course.

Now that the state is being sued, here are some things I've learned about charter schools.

Some charters use selective outreach and recruitment, which has contributed to under-enrollment of students with disabilities and English-language learners, according to the National Education Association.

This practice flat out negates any claim charters might have to public funding and status as public schools. By definition, public schools must give equal access to all students. If a school can recruit students, that ideal of equality comes crumbling to the ground.

On a national scale, about four out of 10 charter schools are managed under contract by for-profit or non-profit charter “chains,” according to the NEA. To top it off, the management headquarters might not even be in the same city as the schools.

The idea that schools can be run as for-profit businesses with a main office overseeing a chain of schools spread out across a state like so many branches of McDonald’s, is honestly horrifying. Save it for college, because state and public universities that profit from taxpayer funding is a business best saved for higher education. Don’t make children’s education into a business plan.

The final death blow for charters has to do with how effective they actually are on average. Charter schools must show academic results through standardized testing. If performance goals aren’t met, a school can be closed. Not only can this put added pressure on 6 year olds, but studies looking at achievement between public schools and charters show very small differences. Some studies even show higher achievement for public schools over charters.

To be fair, there are some exemplary charter schools out there across the nation. Some cater specifically to low-income and minority students — these are the outliers that get media attention. But those outliers blind us to how horrible the charter system really is. Last year, a King County Superior Court judge ruled that funding charters with money restricted for public schools was unconstitutional, according to a report from KUOW. We’ll have to wait to see if the state supreme court agrees.