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OPINION 11/06/2015 @ 2:24PM | 732 views

A Charter School Lesson For Washington



GUEST POST WRITTEN BY
Nina Rees
Ms. Rees is president and CEO of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

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The Supreme Court of Washington state should look to the success stories of charter schools, like KIPP. (AP Photo/Mel Evans)

The deadline has passed for charter school supporters to ask the Washington State Supreme Court to reconsider its decision striking down the state's voter-approved charter school law. In its ill-advised ruling, the court held that state money can only be spent on schools overseen by locally elected school boards. This harmful decision jeopardizes funding not only for charter schools, but for a host of other innovative state-sponsored education programs, including early college credit programs for high school students and programs for tribal youth. Washington's attorney general has asked the court to reconsider its decision, as are several public charter schools and supporting organizations.

It's important to understand what's at stake. In limiting the use of public education dollars to public schools overseen by locally elected school boards, the state Supreme Court relied on a very



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narrow 1909 definition of public schools. Basing education policy decisions on such an antiquated framework would deprive Washington state students of a century of advances in educational innovation.

One of the biggest and most promising advances has been the development of charter public schools. First launched in Minnesota in 1992, charter public schools are rooted in the simple premise that students benefit when they have access to a wider variety of good schools—and that this variety should exist within the public school system, accessible to all students.

Washington state vs. Washington, D.C.

To see how charter schools can help improve education, it's worth looking at the other Washington—Washington, D.C.—where an educational renaissance is taking place. In the mid-1990s, the Republican Congress and President Bill Clinton authorized the creation of charter public schools in the District of Columbia. At the time, the nation's capital was an educational embarrassment, with high dropout rates and low achievement scores. Parents were fleeing the city to enroll their kids in suburban schools in Maryland and Virginia. Great teachers didn't want anything to do with the city.

The introduction of charter schools to D.C., touched off a new focus on quality and academic achievement and generated competition for city-run schools.

As great charter schools entered D.C. with their no-excuses mindset, parents and city leaders began to see that they didn't have to accept failure—or even settle for mediocrity. The city's children could attend schools that raised achievement levels by using innovative approaches to teaching, improving discipline, and getting students not just to high school graduation but into college. The number of charters blossomed, and Washington is now home to great national networks like [KIPP](#) and outstanding homegrown public charter schools like the [Thurgood Marshall Academy](#).

Meanwhile, reformers in the city government, including Mayor Adrian Fenty and schools chancellor Michelle Rhee began to adopt in district-run schools some of the freedom and accountability measures that were working in charter schools. Rather than taking an adversarial view of charter schools, these leaders promoted

cooperation and friendly competition with charters, recognizing that students are better off when their parents have more great options to choose from.

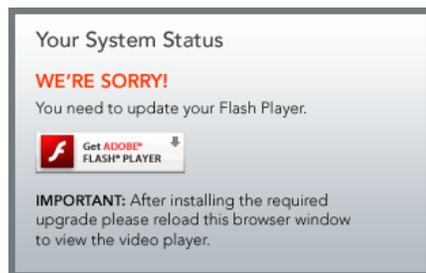
44% of D.C. public school students attend charter schools

Today, the educational landscape in D.C. is almost unrecognizable from where it was two decades ago. About 44% of D.C. public school students attend 112 public charter schools. And Washington, D.C., has the [healthiest](#) public charter school movement in the country based on quality, growth, and innovation measures.

D.C.'s public charter schools generally outperform city-run schools, especially for the most at-risk students. But achievement measures have improved for traditional public schools too. Graduation rates are higher. And the number of students enrolled in D.C.'s public schools—both traditional and charter—is on the rise. This is the result of city leadership that embraced educational innovation, and a strong commitment by teachers and leaders in all schools to work together to improve education for all students.

It will be a terrible shame if students in Washington state miss out on the opportunities and improvements that could come from embracing charter schools. And for a state as innovative as Washington, it would be highly out of character to bind today's students to an educational structure that was in place when Teddy Roosevelt was president. Let's hope the state Supreme Court has the courage to take another look at the law and reverse its previous ruling.

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