

The Times

Tale of two public schools: Inequitable funding harms charters' kids

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BY MARY JO MCKINLEY

Charter schools are closing the achievement gap among New Jersey's poor urban schoolchildren, yet they continue to be treated as second-class citizens when it comes to receiving state education funding at levels enjoyed by other elementary and secondary schools.

A new report by the Education Law Center supports this troubling conclusion. Charter schools in New Jersey predominantly serve students in the state's most at-risk "Abbott" districts, the report states, but charter schools in those districts receive state funding at levels far below that of the public school districts. The ELC went further, stating that there was no basis in the law for the state to "exclude students attending charter schools in Abbott districts from receiving the same funding as their peers in district schools."

A couple of real-life scenarios illustrate the impact of the state's policies toward charter schools. Two siblings in Newark attend different public schools: One attends North Star Academy Charter School and has an almost certain prospect of attending a four-year college. The other child attends East Side High School and has only a 15 percent chance of attending a four-year college. The child who attends East Side High School receives \$17,974 in education funding, and the child who attends North Star is funded at \$10,582, or 59 percent of his sister's funding level.

In another example, two young brothers share a room and live with their single mother in an apartment in Red Bank. One attends Red Bank Middle School, the other Red Bank Charter School. The boy at Red Bank Middle School will receive Targeted At-Risk Aid (TARA) funding next year, while his brother at Red Bank Charter will not.

Each pair of siblings comes from the same home and therefore has the same needs and shares the same challenges and the same socioeconomic background, yet they are not treated equally by the state.

The charter school success story has taken place against a backdrop where school funding inequity has become a widening chasm. Charter schools have seen overall funding formula reductions over the past decade and charter school districts are not receiving the additional school aid provided to other at-risk schools. In addition, charter schools are prohibited from constructing new facilities and, unlike traditional districts, receive no state funding to lease, purchase or renovate existing ones.

It's as if the state intends to put New Jersey's public charter schools in a precarious position; as a result, nearly all are feeling the pinch. Instead of rewarding charter schools that serve as uniquely accountable engines of education innovation, the state Department of Education continues to undermine the intent of New Jersey's Charter School Program Act of 1995.

From their inception, charter schools have been expected to do more with less. But even as public school districts have seen "full funding" shrink in recent years, charter public schools on average are receiving only 48 to 65 percent of what their peers in district schools receive, after facilities costs are taken out of operating budgets. There is no justification that the state can provide for forcing charter schools -- or any other school for that matter -- to choose between needed remediation programs and fixing a leaking roof.

Thus, although Abbott charter schools mirror the socioeconomic and racial characteristics of the district schools, their students receive substantially less educational funding than their peers. The funds that charter schools receive are far below the level determined by the court to be sufficient for the programs and services that are necessary to mitigate the effects of concentrated poverty.

For the next fiscal year, the New Jersey Department of Education has dedicated \$67 million in TARA funding, recognizing that per-pupil spending in many non-Abbott districts is well below the state average and

that these districts need more assistance in their efforts to provide students with a constitutionally mandated "thorough and efficient" system of education. Poorer non-Abbott public school districts will receive additional funding for each low-income student to help close the achievement gap. Not so for charter schools in the same districts. Although 49 out of 53 charter schools, and 65 percent of all public charter school students meet the criteria, they have been deprived of TARA funding.

Soon, we are promised, there will be an opportunity to fix these problems. The intention is that charter school representatives will have a seat at the table for the development of the new funding formula to ensure equity among all New Jersey public schools. But until the day comes when funding truly follows the child, the state must do much more to treat charter schools equitably and ensure that "thorough and efficient" isn't an empty promise. It is a constitutional mandate, after all.

New Jersey's 53 public charter schools, which serve more than 16,000 students, deserve an equal opportunity to achieve the promise that their teachers, administrators, parents and, indeed, the state envisioned. It is time the state match the commitment that so many have made to charter schools and do the right thing by providing the funding that was promised by law and is so richly deserved.

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