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Preface

This is the fourth in a series of white papers sponsored by the Kean University Center for History, Politics, and Policy. This paper, authored by Dr. Frank Esposito, Distinguished Professor of History and Education, explores the charter school legislation and the benefits and challenges associated with it.

On behalf of the University and the CHPP, we thank Dr. Esposito for his excellent contribution, and believe you will find this paper informative.

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New Jersey's Charter Schools: Not a Panacea, but Still Filled with Promise

Frank J. Esposito

Problem

New Jersey still is home to too many failing public schools. Change is required -- that is the belief of many who support the charter school movement in the state. The charter school phenomenon is based on the idea that our traditional "one-size-fits-all" approach for designing schools should not be the only model offered to students. It is also centered on the concept that allowing students and their parents to select schools is a better way to match student interest to the focus of a theme based charter school.

Background

The results of New Jersey's nearly 17 year history with charter schools is thus far very promising. The Charter School Act of 1995, enacted in January 1996 by Governor Christine Todd Whitman and Education Commissioner Leo F. Klagholz, allowed for the creation on non-district public charter schools which would be governed by a non-profit board of trustees serving as the LEA (Local Education Agency). There are currently 86 charter schools in New Jersey. The law also permitted the conversion of existing traditional public schools to charter status if local voters approved the change.

The planners of the Charter School Act anticipated that some traditional schools would take advantage of this aspect of the law. Surprisingly, for those of us who worked on drafting the law, including then-Jersey City mayor Bret Schundler, this never happened. Resistance to the concept of charters was orchestrated by some administrators, teachers, and unions who argued that the

law would take money away from public schools. They ignored the fact that charters *are* public schools.

In New Jersey, as in many of the 40 other states with charter laws, charter schools have been largely an urban phenomenon attracting parents dissatisfied with the long-term failure of city schools. Before charters, failing schools could continue to fail for generation after generation.

Most charter laws, including New Jersey's, call for the closure of the school if it fails to meet its objectives after a specific number of years. The school can then be totally redesigned or replaced by another school, or a theme-based program.

Practical Application

New Jersey is fortunate to have a commissioner of education and governor at the moment who enthusiastically support charter schools and continue to set high standards for them. Several have been closed down recently for poor performance, as they should be. We can no longer afford to subject children to poor educational programs and we must never write off students in this manner. Sadly, that has happened in the past. As New Jersey Governor Chris Christie has said "It is not acceptable that a child who is neglected in a New Jersey school must accept it because of their zip code. We must give children a choice to attend better schools."¹

The results of national studies of charter schools have been mixed due, in part, to the varied measures used in the studies. However, in New Jersey, the results are more promising.

The recent CREDO (Center for Research in Education Outcomes) report, released in November,

¹ 2011 N.J. State of the State Address, January 11, 2011

2012, from Stanford University, indicated that 30 percent of urban charter schools in New Jersey outperformed traditional schools in their local district in reading and 40 percent outperformed them in math. Eleven percent of urban charter schools had lower gains in reading and 13 percent lower in math. While these are not flawless results, they do indicate that charters are especially worth trying in failing urban districts.

Response to Criticism

Critics maintain that the improvements in New Jersey are not significant and may be the result of parental interest and enthusiasm for charters. If so, how is that a negative in the learning process for a child?

Other critics have used clearly false statements to try to derail the charter movement. Statements asserting that charters are not public schools, do not take special needs children, can expel students more readily than traditional schools, all have been proven to be false. In fact, charter schools are also highly accountable for student success or failure when compared to traditional schools.

Charter schools may well be successful in urban settings because of the higher expectations most have for greater parental involvement, or quite simply from the added benefit that many offer of an expanded school year.

Moving Forward

The New Jersey charter school movement should continue to be supported and expanded while

being closely monitored for success or failure. Exemplary model charter schools, such as North Star Academy in Newark and Elysian Charter School in Hoboken, should have their programs replicated in both traditional schools and other charter schools. While not a panacea for all that ails education, charter schools remain a promising approach for improving our public schools.