

SOUTHERN ECHO

US DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION EFFORTS TO PRESSURE STATES TO ADOPT PERMISSIVE CHARTER SCHOOL LEGISLATION IS WRONG FOR MISSISSIPPI SEPTEMBER 10, 2009

It is difficult to conceive that there is "charter school language", framed in legislation for Mississippi, which can be "acceptable" when the principle of the situation is that so-called charter schools divert resources from the support of public schools, to the detriment of the effort to transform public schools from where they are to where they need to be.

Efforts to tie Title I to charter school policy would take Mississippi in wrong direction

The effort of US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to tie access to Title I and other education funding to authorization by the individual states of charter schools, or the loosening of restrictions on the authorization of charter schools, is most unfortunate. To cut off Title I funds in Mississippi to force the adoption of a national policy on charter schools would have the ironic consequence of doing more to undermine public education for low-wealth children and children of color than to help them. The Duncan reform strategy seeks to impose a national policy view about the charter school model that does not comport, and is not consistent, with the historical, political and cultural context of public education in Mississippi.

Charter schools provide wrong path toward historically-discredited dual school system

Once we open up the "dual schools path" in Mississippi the legislative will to commit the needed funding and other resources to the public schools will diminish dramatically. If we had conceded diverting funds to privately owned, privately governed, publicly-financed schools, whether they are called "charter schools" or "educational academies", we would never have accomplished in public education what we have in the past 15 years.

MS Dept. of Education, with broad public support, moving to transform public schools

With outstanding public support from across the broad spectrum of education stakeholders notwithstanding tight budgets in recent years, the MS Dept. of Education has launched, for examples, new dropout prevention programs, tougher accountability standards, new teacher recruitment, development and retention efforts, leadership development programs and early childhood learning programs. Nevertheless, the pressure is on to let "impatient factions" and "private school" interests in communities pull resources away from the public schools to design their own schools with public funds and other public assets, using different educational standards and less accountable governance, etc. that will undermine the effort to complete the process for transformation of the traditional public schools.

Former MS State Supt. of Education asserts that race remains the heart of the problem

Former Mississippi State Supt. of Education Hank Bounds (2005 to 2009) has been very open and clear that the history of race and racism has played a central role in creating the education situation from which we are trying to extricate ourselves, including the challenge of systemic poverty in the state that is integrally entwined with the issue of education. A central part of this history has been the public will, effort and resources devoted to creating and maintaining a dual

school system, initially as a segregated public system, and more recently as a dual public school and private academy system in significant parts of the state. In the past 15 years we have defeated efforts to create publicly-funded private schools, publicly-funded school vouchers, and publicly-funded virtually all-white public schools using class-based residential neighborhood segregation as a basis. To some the charter school device may be a genuine and innocent experiment. But to others it is the latest iteration of trying to avoid the use of public funds to create a quality educational opportunity for all students regardless of race, class, status and geographic location.

Recent charter school studies show charter schools not necessarily the right prescription

Several recent major national and regional charter school studies demonstrate that charter schools, per se, are either no more or less successful than regular public schools in some locations. At the same time, in other locations they are proving to be less successful than traditional public schools regarding significant benchmarks (see, for example, the Rand Corp., Stanford Univ., and Univ. of Minnesota studies). Significantly, these studies show that the long-term charter school experience is that the charter schools increase both economic and racial segregation rather than promote diversity.

The national charter school advocates, including national charter school guru Joe Nathan, agree that charter school success turns on effective leadership, sufficient resources, quality teachers, challenging curriculum, competent financial management, meaningful parental and community engagement in policy formation and implementation at the school level, and significant state oversight of the process to which parents and students can appeal when concerns about the effectiveness of the school arise, or disputes occur that engender such issues as due process or fundamental fairness.

In Mississippi leadership and innovation not the exclusive province of charter schools

Well ... these are the same issues for traditional public schools. If we can "enable" best practices in so-called charter schools, then why can't we make this happen in the existing framework of the public schools? The Mississippi 2008 charter school bill provided no meaningful standards either for the education of the students or the governance of the school. Nor were there any standards as to the capacity of the applicants to create, govern and administer such a school. There was no provision for meaningful parental engagement, and beyond an initial information meeting, no requirement at all of parental access to the governance process. Under all of the charter school bills since 2004 the charter schools created would be owned and operated by a private corporation, not a public or governmental entity. These private corporations would be subject to regulation, but only in the same way as other private corporations, at least as the proposed legislation has been designed. The capacity to assess, evaluate and ultimately to revoke the school's charter have had few real teeth because the oversight standards have had little meaningful detail. In 2009 the several Mississippi charter school bills provided little by way of modification to overcome these fundamental flaws.

Mississippi charter school legislation would undercut efforts to improve the public schools

In these charter school bills each school district would be given the right and latitude to design its own charter school standards and processes. Furthermore, once an application has been made the burden of proof is not on the applicant, but on the local school district and the state department to show cause why an application should not be accepted.

This is ironic in light of all the education policy commitments that have been made in Mississippi based on what we have learned in the past 15 years about what it takes to create a quality school. None of this "learning" is incorporated into the proposed charter school legislation in Mississippi.

What is the point of designing and implementing new strategies to transform the public schools, but not give real, sufficient time for the programs to work or providing the resources needed? Even as we have fully funded the MAEP formula in 2007, 2008 and 2009, we have robbed Peter to pay Paul by undercutting the Education Enhancement Funds (which provide funds for buildings, buses and instructional materials), and have failed to provide teacher pay that is competitive in the southeast region. Furthermore, it was clear during the public hearings of the 2006 Legislative Commission to revise the MS Adequate Education Program (MAEP) school funding formula, that the necessary standard is a "quality education", but that when fully funded MAEP does not yet provide sufficient funds to provide a quality education for all students, especially children at-risk.

So – it is absurd to under-fund public schools, blame the under-funded public schools for failure to perform (a self-fulfilling prophecy), and prescribe as a solution further diverting public school funds to so-called charter schools, and thereby further under-fund both public schools (and also the charter schools, as well). The fact that a few under-funded low-wealth public school districts in Mississippi have done better, or significantly better, than most under-funded low-wealth school districts, does not negate the essential core impact and significance of the systemic under-funding for most schools.

Dual schools through charter schools will undercut path of progress for most students

What is "realistic" is that if we concede the dual path to dual schools we will lose the fight to provide the necessary resources to the existing traditional public schools. We will be left with a junk pile of unfunded mandates. And that will be a tragedy! Then what will we have accomplished?

The critical interests of Mississippi children, especially low-wealth and African American children, should not be sacrificed on the altar of a national education policy designed to promote charter schools elsewhere!

#