

**MISSISSIPPI CHARTER SCHOOLS:
PART OF A ZERO-SUM GAME TO THE
DETRIMENT OF TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS
By Mike Sayer, Southern Echo
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WHO WILL BE SERVED?

Some people say that they want to enable charter schools because they want a quality educational opportunity for *all children*, which underperforming school districts and schools are not providing.

All children, regardless of race, ethnicity, class, gender, national origin, disability, location or status, ought to be entitled to obtain an effective, quality, first-rate education from early childhood through college. That ought to be our *moral center*. As a value system it is fair and just.

However, many legislators, the Governor, the Lt. Governor, the Speaker of the House, out-of-state and in-state corporate charter entrepreneurs and some, but not all, local charter advocacy organizations are *opposed* to or *unwilling* to stand up publicly to support appropriating sufficient revenues to traditional public school districts and schools to secure a quality public education for *all children*.

They would prefer a corporate takeover of underperforming schools ... i.e. low-wealth underperforming districts. Rather than provide the supports necessary to enable these districts to become successful they would prefer to shut them down and privatize these public schools by turning them over to privately-owned, privately-governed, publicly-funded corporate entrepreneurs ... who will never serve *all children*.

This is especially galling because the charter proponents willingly concede that the percentage of students who may go to charters in the foreseeable future will be very small. 1%? 2%? 5%? Even 10%? That means that 90% to 99% of our children will still be in traditional non-charter public schools into the foreseeable future.

Traditional public schools *choose all students*. Charters will *choose which students*!

MONEY MATTERS

It is simply untrue that "money doesn't matter". Otherwise, the proponents of charter schools wouldn't fight so hard to ensure that state, local and federal dollars follow the child from the traditional schools to the charter schools. That money matters is why the charter organizations will work hard to raise foundation grants to underwrite the new charters. It is why the US Dept. of Education, which is actively promoting charters, is providing billions of dollars through Race to the Top and other programs to encourage and subsidize the development of charters. It is why the Gates, Walton and Beard foundations are providing billions of dollars to fund charter enterprises.

When some of the charter proponents say “It is all about the children”, it has a disingenuous ring. Here is why:

1. At present the operating expenses of public education are funded through a combination of state, local and federal dollars. This is a “fixed pot of money” set each year by the state, county and federal entities, which is divided among the public school districts. In Mississippi approximately 65% of the local school districts’ operating capital comes from the state-appropriated MS Adequate Education Program (MAEP).
2. But MAEP has been under-funded by the legislature and the Governor by more than one billion dollars over the past 5 years, according to analyses provided by the MS Economic Policy Center.
3. ***This is where the zero sum game kicks in:*** In 2013 the legislature and Governor approved the charter law (HB 369), which will now further divide the *under-funded* pot of state, local and federal dollars *between traditional public schools and charters*. Instead of increasing the “funding pot” to ensure sufficient funding for both traditional and charter schools, the Legislature and the Governor have chose to take necessary funds from the traditional schools to provide to the charters. As a direct consequence, the funding needed to operate the already-underfunded traditional schools will be *further reduced*.
4. This strategy will make it more difficult for the underperforming school districts and schools to turn around their circumstance to become successful.
5. The legislators and Governor who support this fiscal strategy are not blind to its impact on underperforming schools. House Education Chair John Moore (R – Rankin) said to me during the 2013 legislative session, “The underperforming schools cannot succeed and putting more money into them is a waste of time.”
6. *We have to conclude that undercutting the traditional school districts and schools by underfunding them is the intended consequence of conscious policies.*
7. There is more evidence to this effect. Two examples:
 - a. In 2013 the Legislature passed the *Literacy-Based Promotion Act* (SB 2347 – 2013), which provides for retaining students in the 3rd grade who do not pass a high-stakes reading test to demonstrate that they have moved from “learning to read” to “reading to learn”. At the heart of this law is the mandate that all students from pre-K, or K, or 1st grade through the 4th grade, be assessed for reading skills and barriers, and be provided intervention and supports needed to enable them to be on grade level in reading skills.

But here is the kicker: the statute expressly provides that even if the Legislature fails or refuses to provide funding for the assessments, interventions and supports that are the heart of the literacy strategy, students must be retained in the 3rd grade if they do not pass the 3rd grade reading test (unless they qualify for an exemption).

Florida put up one billion dollars to support their literacy program. Governor Bryant asked for a modest \$15 million, but the Legislature cut the appropriation to \$9 million. The MS Dept. of Education announced this summer that they only had sufficient funding to employ 75 reading mentors to train teachers to teach reading effectively, an essential feature of the legislature.

There are 149 school districts. Worse, the Dept. of Education has only been able to attract 25 “qualified mentors”.

Another critical, but under-funded program! The rate of retained students in the 3rd grade will be treated as another grave mark against under-performing districts and schools to justify the move away from traditional schools to privatized education.

- b. Teacher *under-pay* is another piece of the puzzle. Mississippi grossly underpays its teachers when compared to each of the states which border our state, or when compared to the southern region. The low-wealth underperforming districts have the greatest *critical teacher shortages*, according to data provided by the MS Dept. of Education, and also have the *least experienced* teachers. Under-pay makes it harder for underperforming schools to compete for the best teachers.

THE ZERO-SUM GAME IS FAILING: WE NEED TO INCREASE THE SIZE OF THE POT!

Many of those who oppose increased funding for public education hide behind the notion that the state cannot afford to do so because the state does not have sufficient revenues. Further, they say, public education must compete with Medicaid, higher education, community colleges, health and human services and corrections. *But many of these are the same people who successfully fought to cut between \$60 and \$85 million in business taxes during the 2013 legislative session alone.*

Their mantra is “No new taxes”. Having made the conscious choice to cut taxes rather than provide additional funding to public education, they contend that any attempt to restore the tax cuts will constitute an increase in taxation. This is the policy *shibboleth* they hide behind.

Some of them complain that people who receive a variety of benefits just to survive, such as Medicaid, Medicare, SNAP or Social Security are “takers”. But they don’t complain that many of the wealthiest corporations doing business in Mississippi, using Mississippi resources funded by hard-working Mississippi people paying taxes out of what is left in their Mississippi pockets, actually pay no or nearly no taxes to the State of Mississippi. *Who are the real “takers”?*

They talk about running education on a business model. Okay. A successful business model aligns its budget priorities with the goals of the business. If the budget does not support the goals, it is a bad or insufficient business model. Mississippi’s stated goal is to turn around underperforming districts, but the Legislature and Governor do not provide underperforming school districts with sufficient resources or supports to turn them around. *That’s a bad business model.*

Our moral center is focused on a quality education for *all children*. However, if the design and content of our education policies are rooted in a failing *zero-sum game* that works counter to the interests of all children, then we have to question whether these education policies are rooted in a fair and just moral center.