

Op-Ed: Students Lose in the Politics of Distortion

With the Alabama Legislature in session and elections upon us, we are bombarded with negativity at every turn. In an effort to elevate the conversation and engage in meaningful, productive discussion, we invite you to join us in supporting civil discourse regarding important issues that affect our children and our state's prosperity.

A+ Education Partnership works closely with educators in our state. While we are encouraged that the discussion of issues like public charter schools and the Common Core State Standards have brought some new life to the urgency of our children's educational needs, we are very concerned about how these issues are being distorted in million-dollar advertising campaigns. Too many organizations are using political fear tactics which cloud the truth, hindering real progress and consensus.

For example, a pamphlet being circulated by the Alabama Federation of Republican Women about Common Core State Standards contends that the State Board of Education (which is Republican-dominant) is involved in a plot led by the president to "train students to be Democrats." By introducing misinformation, this organization has chosen to scare people rather than engage them in an honest debate.

Instead, we should be discussing the merit of the standards, how they were developed, and if they will help our students compete successfully with students from other states.

(Review the standards at www.alsde.edu/home/General/alccs.aspx and click on a fact sheet at http://www.aplusala.org/uploadedFiles/File/A+,_What_are_Common_Core_Standards.pdf).

The standards were developed by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association to help states increase the academic rigor of K-12 schools. Education leaders used them as a basis for developing Alabama's own standards in mathematics and English/Language Arts as part of the state's college and career ready efforts. The standards do not dictate how teachers should teach.

The current debate around public charter schools has also seen its fair share of misinformation and the use of fear tactics. The Alabama Education Association (AEA), uses its circular, the *Alabama School Journal*, television and radio advertisements to make claims against charter schools' effectiveness. Ads running under the name of AEA's sponsored organization Sound Options for Academic Reform (SOAR) oversimplify and misrepresent research findings to make these claims.

Instead, we should be genuinely asking these questions: What strategies does the state currently have in place for closing the achievement gap? Are those strategies working? What options are available to help students who attend chronically low-performing schools?

Charter schools **are public schools**. The money would still be spent in local public schools to teach local students who may have a better chance at success with a non-traditional approach to learning. Even one of the most critical studies of public charter schools that is often cited by AEA, a 2009 study conducted by Stanford University, states that students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunches tend to perform better in charter schools than traditional public schools. This is significant in a state like Alabama where 58 percent of our public schools students fit into this category.

While charters alone cannot solve our educational problems, they clearly have proven to offer a successful option for some students when developed and executed well.

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(Go to http://www.aplusala.org/uploadedFiles/File/Public_Charter_School_Fundamentals.pdf for facts on public charter schools.)

If we only listen to the short-sighted, fear-based messages, true reform in our education system is not possible, and our children are the losers.

Our students deserve excellence in our system and our leaders. And Alabama citizens deserve to have clear facts from all sides, and productive, civil discourse in all discussion. We encourage you to research facts, ask more questions, and turn off the ads that attempt to scare you into a decision.

[A+ Education Partnership](#) was founded 20 years ago by a diverse group of Alabama citizens who believed that the quality of a student's education should not be determined by his or her zip code. We work directly with public schools by engaging innovation in the classroom and fostering excellence with teachers and administrators. We help implement proven best practices that show real results with students. A small part of our mission is to promote good public policy that supports such innovation and would put Alabama on a faster track to real reform.

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