

Charter schools help improve public education

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As Americans, we value public education. It's among our society's most important values. Without it—and the educated populace it produces—our nation as we know it could not exist. Our republic rests on the shoulders of knowledgeable citizens who can think critically.

But, public education as a value—a philosophy—differs from the delivery system of public education. *How* we impart knowledge to children should not be confused with *why* we do so.

Through our nation and state's history, we have crept continually closer to public education's ultimate goal of preparing all children to fulfill their inherent potential. If we're ever going to turn this grand dream into reality, we have to keep innovating, adapting and experimenting with our delivery of public education. There is no one solution that will magically solve our shortcomings, and we must keep working to find better ways to educate all students.

In 42 other states, public charter schools are one part of the solution. Charter schools provide another tool for improving the delivery of public education, and they should not be seen as a threat to it. In the vast majority of cases, public charter schools are founded by local community members and teachers. Charter schools have proven especially effective for low-income students, for whom a quality education is not just important, but the only sure path to a better life.

Today in Alabama, our delivery of public education is as strong as it ever has been. Our graduation rate is at an all-time high. Thanks to the College and Career Ready Standards and Plan 2020, more students are learning to think critically instead of learning to take a test, while more teachers are doing what they love—*teaching*.

However, we still haven't reached the goal.

Many graduates are still unprepared for success—in work or in life. And, in schools across Alabama (even those with strong reputations) there are still students with immense potential who are struggling to hit their stride academically. Likewise, there are still teachers who yearn for an environment where they truly can be treated as professionals.

In communities that have embraced public charter schools, innovation is taking root for the benefit of all students.

Houston educators identified best practices from the city's most effective public charter schools and implemented them in 20 of its lowest performing traditional schools. These were called the "Apollo 20" schools, reminiscent of the space

program. A Harvard study on the Apollo 20 schools later showed students' average math skills grew 25-50% beyond what was expected for one year. This same idea is now being copied in other cities with high performing charter schools collaborating with local school systems.

At the University of Chicago, the Urban Education Institute operates a charter school for 1,700 low-income students. It also trains teachers, conducts research on public schools, and collaborates with schools nationwide. It is quite literally an education laboratory. Not only are 100% of its charter school's graduates accepted to college annually, but more UEI alumni persist in college than any other non-selective Chicago school. Imagine the possibilities if we copied this model to study what produces reliably excellent schooling in Alabama—both urban and rural.

Public charter schools are fostering innovation that can improve our delivery of public education, and they should not be viewed as a threat. They help to uncover best practices that are being used and adapted by traditional public schools. They empower educators to design schools that best serve their students, and they encourage outside-the-box thinking that we desperately need in Alabama if we are to ever reach the goal of providing a strong public education for every student.