

Bernie Sanders's War on Charter Schools Is Hardly Progressive

Bernie Sanders is fortifying efforts to preserve the educational status quo and stifle change. Earlier this week, the 2020 Democratic presidential candidate announced his 10-point plan for education reform, including banning for-profit charter schools, placing “a moratorium on public funds for charter school expansion” and ensuring that charter schools look and act the same as conventional public schools.

Educational Innovation

The whole point of charter schools is to encourage educational experimentation and innovation. Bans, moratoriums, and calls for conformity erode this intent and threaten to make charter schools—which serve 2.8 million children in the US and would likely help many more if state caps were lifted—indistinguishable from traditional public schools.

That seems to be the goal.

In an effort to secure the highly coveted endorsement of powerful teachers' unions that have long been hostile to education choice and charter schools, Democratic presidential hopefuls are beginning to signal their opposition to choice. Sanders is leading the way, and Elizabeth Warren appears to be second in line. As *PBS* reports,

Democratic presidential candidates have already begun competing for key endorsements in the education sector, including engaging directly with teachers' unions to ask for their support ahead of the primaries.

Teacher Unions Oppose Charter Schools and School Choice

Teachers' unions, of course, are smart to oppose charter schools and other school choice programs. Their primary purpose is to secure the jobs and benefits of their union members who work in conventional public schools. Charter schools are publicly funded but independently run, most often by a non-profit organization. They are typically tied to state academic standards, curriculum frameworks, and testing requirements that limit their full autonomy, but charter schools are often free from collective bargaining agreements, giving them much more flexibility in hiring and firing decisions.

That's an existential threat to a labor union whose sole purpose is job protectionism. It would be foolish for teachers' unions to support or ignore their non-unionized competitors. Sanders reinforces this fundamental teachers' union tenet, stating in his plan that charter

schools will be held accountable by

matching employment practices at charters with neighboring district schools, including standards set by collective bargaining agreements.

In his plan, Sanders echoes the common rhetoric of anti-choice advocates like teachers' unions, suggesting that school choice measures create "two schools systems" and arguing that "we need to invest in our public schools system" to combat segregation and inequality. But as all of us know, we already have segregation and inequality in the public school system. If you can afford a house or apartment in a more affluent community with better schools, your children's educational opportunities are greater than if you're relegated to an assigned district school in a poorer community. Forced schooling tied to zip codes creates segregation and inequality.

Charter Schools Are Underfunded

School choice mechanisms, like public charter schools, voucher programs, Education Savings Accounts (ESAs), and tax-credit scholarship programs seek to eliminate these barriers by expanding the education options available to low- and middle-income families. Championing mandatory school assignments based on a family's zip code is hardly progressive. Promoting, creating, and increasing access to more educational options for families is much more forward-looking than clinging to a coercive system of mass schooling.

While pandering to teachers' unions may score political points, Sanders's attack on charter schools is largely unfounded. In his plan, Sanders argues that charter school "growth has drained funding from the public school system"; yet research suggests that charter schools are significantly underfunded compared to their conventional counterparts. University of Arkansas researchers Patrick Wolf, Corey DeAngelis, and others reported last fall that charter school students in 14 cities with heavy concentrations of charter schools received an average of \$5,828 per student *less* than traditionally schooled students.

Overall, students in public charter schools received 27 percent less funding than students in conventional public schools. In some cities, like Atlanta, that funding gap was as high as 49 percent, with charter school students receiving roughly half as much money as public school students. Last month, Wolf and DeAngelis published a new study on charter schools, finding that for every dollar spent, charter school students were more productive and had better outcomes than students in traditional schools. From a taxpayer accountability perspective, public charter schools are a good investment.

Despite the positive results of charter schools, particularly those in urban areas, we will

undoubtedly see more Democratic presidential candidates following in Sanders's footsteps by proposing federal restrictions on education choice. With a trend toward collectivism, the idea of individual freedom and parental choice in education is concerning to many on the left. They cite segregation and inequality as societal scourges yet dismiss education choice mechanisms designed to free families from forced government schooling tied to one's zip code.

All parents should have the freedom to choose the best educational option for their children, and all children should have the best opportunity to reach their full potential. Doubling down on efforts to strengthen an inherently coercive system of mass schooling by diminishing education choice is a troubling retreat from freedom and opportunity.