

School Reform Town Hall Debate

You are parents, students, teachers, school administrators, and community members of an urban school district that has about 14 schools and 6,000 students. About 50% of students are low-income, which is determined by their eligibility for free or reduced lunch. Since the implementation of NCLB, testing data has revealed that district schools have chronically lower test scores than surrounding suburban communities and that there's an achievement gap between low-income and non low-income students, and also between white/asian and black/hispanic students. Teachers are struggling with behavior/discipline challenges and 50% leave within the first 5 years. Students who have chronically performed poorly in school for years are losing interest in school by 8th grade and the high school drop-out rate is on the rise. While parents value the diversity of the schools, many who can afford to are still leaving the district for "better" schools in the suburbs or paying for private school education. The two lowest performing schools have only about 20% of their 4th and 8th graders reading and doing math at the proficient or advanced levels for the last 8 years, with little improvement. The school board is seeking proposals for reforming schools.

Two groups of parents, students, school staff, and community members have organized competing proposals. The Pro-charter group proposes inviting a "successful" charter school operator to take over the lowest performing schools (300 students). The Pro-district group opposes charter schools and proposes other reforms, which may include major restructuring like replacing administrators and teachers, and/or increasing funding for the lowest performing schools for reforms such as improving teacher pay, smaller classes, funding for preschool, remedial tutoring, magnet programs, etc.

Judges: Local school board

Each side will speak from three perspectives:

Parents/Students

Teachers/Administrators

Community/Businesses

Pro-charter: Your goal is to make a compelling case for how the potential benefits of charter schools exceed the potential harm.

Pro-district: Your goal is to make a compelling case that it's worth continuing to invest in even the lowest performing schools rather than to turn to charter schools.

Each side's 3 groups will have 5 minutes to present their case (at least two people should speak), followed by 5 minutes of Q&A from the town representatives and audience. At the end there will be an additional 10 minutes of discussion. You should come to the debate equipped with evidence and reasons for your position. Also, anticipate what the other side's strongest arguments are and prepare to counter those. See below for some resources as starting places.

Resources

Pro-district:

How to fix our schools

<http://www.epi.org/publications/entry/ib286>

The Myth of charter schools

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/nov/11/myth-charter-schools/?pagination=false>

4,100 Students Prove "Small Is Better"™ Rule Wrong

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/28/education/28school.html?pagewanted=all>

[National 'group portrait' of charters indicates significant portion underperform](#)

A new study from Stanford University is the first national assessment of charter school impacts, a longitudinal, student-level analysis that looks at more than 70 percent of the students in charter schools in the United States. This "group portrait" shows that a decent portion of charters (17 percent) provide superior education opportunities for students. Nearly half of charter schools nationwide have results no different from local public school options, and over a third, 37 percent, deliver learning results significantly worse than would have been realized in traditional public schools. The report notes that overall, two groups of students, English language learners and those in poverty, fare better than average in charters, outperforming their peers in traditional public schools. But despite success in particular states or subgroups, the report says its results "indicate a disturbing and far-reaching subset of poorly performing charter schools. If the charter school movement is to flourish, or indeed to deliver on promises made by proponents, a deliberate and sustained effort to increase the proportion of high-quality schools is essential." The authors recommend the replication of successful school models, and "accountability in exchange for flexibility." Schools that consistently fail must be closed.

Read more: http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE_CHOICE_CREDO.pdf

See below for Out of the Debate and Into the Schools, which shows how district schools can also be successful in educating disadvantaged students

Also, some Cambridge Public Schools might provide examples of how low performing schools with relatively high percentage of low-income students are revitalized by starting new programs to attract non-low income families. CPSD has a controlled school choice policy in which parents can rank their preference of schools which is taken into account during school assignment. The low performing schools tend to be the ones that aren't among the top choices and thus are part of a vicious cycle where parents whose kids are most likely to do well in school don't choose these schools and thus these schools continue to underperform, which reinforces their negative reputation, which influence how parents rank schools. However, this cycle can be broken by introducing a new program, such as the Tobin school, which had a higher percentage of low-income students, as well as lower test scores and a general negative reputation. The school introduced a Montessori program a few years ago and is now among the highest preferred schools in the district, in which there are more families who want to enroll their children than there are seats available. The controlled choice policy sets aside at least 40% of seats for low-income students. Other programs that attract middle-class and upper middle-class families include dual-language programs and "honor-level" tracks for high achieving students.

Pro-charter:

Video: Interview with school admin at charter school (start at around 3:20)

<http://www.educationnation.com/index.cfm?objectid=1CEADA03-CA72-11DF-8853000C296BA163>

Article and video about how charter schools have revitalized New Orleans public schools since Katrina (61% now attend charter schools)

<http://www.thegrio.com/specials/katrina---five-years-later/charter-schools-give-new-orleans-public-schools-hope.php>

Informing the Debate

Boston Foundation sponsored study comparing charter, pilot and traditional public schools

The report directly addresses two of the most frequent criticisms leveled at earlier studies of Pilot and Charter schools: that their students are not representative of traditional Boston schools but rather are

more likely to succeed; and that charters and pilots tend to shed students who do not perform up to their standards, again creating an elite student body that will inevitably outperform their BPS peers.
<http://www.tbf.org/utilitynavigation/multimedialibrary/newsdetail.aspx?id=9490>

Out of the Debate and Into the Schools

Disadvantaged students who attend Boston's charter schools showed significant improvement compared to peers at more traditional schools and a new report released today by the [Boston Foundation](#) identifies time spent in school as the critical factor driving that improvement.
<http://www.tbf.org/utilitynavigation/multimedialibrary/newsdetail.aspx?id=14260&parentId=9490>

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11.124 Introduction to Education: Looking Forward and Looking Back on Education
Fall 2011

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