



Student progress depends on teacher quality

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Jeanne Allen's June 1 letter continues to stress the valuable contribution charter schools are making for education reform -- in particular urban school reform. She is correct to point out that education is a civil right for all students.

She may or may not be correct in suggesting that in some circumstances charter schools are forcing the greater number of public schools to improve. Her syntax is confusing at best in making this point, for example when she writes, "they force conventional public schools to improve to compete."

I also find her citation regarding "the few credible studies that demonstrate charter students outperform other public school students when valid comparisons are used" to be quite revealing. Yes, there are a "few" studies that demonstrate charter success, and the schools that are performing well should be commended. But there are also charter schools that are failing.

See for example the success of a KIPP school in Chicago and the forced closing of another because it did not perform up to standards. Amistad, in the New Haven, Conn., area is a wonderful example of a well-run, successful school that meets the needs of students who struggle with poverty. But there remains the example of Michigan, where more than 200 schools were opened and where it has been reported in The New York Times that they are failing and "having a negative impact on student achievement and public education in general."

What is most important for the public, in and outside of any school, to understand is that public schools will remain the bedrock of our American democracy. And in this recognition, we must find ways to celebrate and support the tens of thousands of public school educators and students who are succeeding in the face of predictable obstacles created by poverty.

Most alarming, choice left to itself may well increase social stratification. America will soon become a majority-minority nation; does it make sense to isolate our students from learning to compete in a diverse world?

It is time to stop bickering about charters versus publics. The real issue is supporting all schoolchildren and youth by providing sustained support for the educators who strive valiantly to serve them. With improved teacher quality comes improved student achievement. Good student data will ultimately strip ideology of its influence over public policy. And it is here where the battle lines should be drawn: What does the qualitative and quantitative data indicate about a school?

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