



Wednesday, April 22, 2009

## What true school reform means

**Iris Salters**

We are hearing a lot about making changes to our public schools. Taking a second look at things can be good, but change merely for the sake of change is rarely constructive.

The goal for some seems to be simply turning our struggling schools over to private management or converting them into charter schools. These primitive solutions put politics -- and, in some cases, profits -- before the best interests of our students.

Let me be clear: The Michigan Education Association is not against charter schools or other changes that lead to greater student success. But there are no "silver bullet" solutions to the complex problems that face public education.

For example, if charter schools are truly to work in the best interest of our students, they must be held accountable to the role for which they were designed. What has been lost in the debate is that charters were always intended to be incubators -- small pilot schools where new ideas could be tested. If they were successful, the point was to bring those innovations into the larger public school system so all students could benefit.

Now, it seems, some are content merely to slap the label "charter" on an underperforming school, hand it over to a private company and walk away. How does this benefit our students?

Unlike public schools that offer an education to everyone, charter schools can pick and choose which students they admit by persuading parents that their children "don't fit" and send them back to traditional public schools. Do we honestly believe large numbers of students with challenges and special needs from struggling schools are going to be welcomed with open arms in a school run by a for-profit company?

And more important, why do we believe a private company will somehow be better at educating our students than professional educators?

Some charter schools do an excellent job, but a recent analysis shows that, in many cases, charter schools are performing far below the districts in which they reside.

There are lots of reasons why students in certain schools -- public or charter -- struggle. But many of those reasons begin long before students ever walk into the classroom. More than

ever, we have students coming to school hungry, facing homelessness because of an eviction or foreclosure, without access to basic medical care, and without the support and comfort of a strong home environment.

David Berliner, a professor at Arizona State University, did an excellent study in which he found that out-of-school factors play a powerful role in achievement gaps. His study, which was released by the Great Lakes Center for Educational Research and Practice, also shows that until America deals with those issues, we cannot expect to achieve our national goals in education.

This is not to say schools are powerless to improve student success rates. We have innovation going on across the state, where students are achieving great things. Our teachers and other public school employees spend their personal time and money seeking high-quality professional development, finding the best ways to reach students who might be slipping through the cracks. We have dedicated our lives to providing the best possible education for all students and, aside from their parents, no one has a greater interest in seeing that they do well.

In schools that are not improving, we determine why. Instead of declaring them "failing" schools, we need detailed analyses of what each school is doing wrong and what can be done to fix it. We must learn from what works in other areas and inject it into struggling schools.

Let's work together to foster creative, successful strategies and share them with the larger educational community. Only then can we truly "reform" our schools so every student has the chance to succeed.

*Iris Salters is president of the Michigan Education Association, a union that represents teachers and education support staff, and a board member of the Great Lakes Center for Educational Research and Practice. E-mail: [letters@detnews.com](mailto:letters@detnews.com).*

**Find this article at:**

<http://www.detnews.com/article/20090422/OPINION01/904220316>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

© Copyright 2008 The Detroit News. All rights reserved.