



## DeVos is Right About Michigan Charter Schools

By Ben DeGrow and Jarrett Skorup

### Summary

Though Betsy DeVos has been criticized for her support of charter public schools, the evidence is clear: Charter schools in Michigan are doing more with less.

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Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos went on “60 Minutes” recently and was pilloried for her answers to Lesley Stahl. That’s too bad because DeVos had the better end of the argument.

Much of the interview was about guns in schools and school choice, but a key moment focused on questions about her role in education in Michigan.

Stahl said the evidence for school choice is complicated. She made the point, correctly, that test scores in Michigan’s public schools have declined. But this was then used to suggest that charter schools don’t do a good job and have a negative effect on the traditional public schools around them. The first point is demonstrably false; the second is just a baseless conjecture.

The most rigorous research shows charter schools are raising the bar in Michigan. According to a recent Mackinac Center analysis, the state’s charter schools — which get less public funding than conventional district schools — add 32 percent more value to improving student achievement for each dollar spent. A new University of Michigan study found that more than 40 Michigan charter schools managed by National Heritage Academy significantly boosted students’ math scores. Stanford University’s Center for Research on Education Outcomes earlier found that the average charter school, both in Michigan at large and in Detroit specifically, provides the typical student an extra two to three months each year of valuable learning.

A 2015 study from the group Excellent Schools Detroit, a nonprofit focused on improving education in Motown, found similar results. The city’s charter schools were three times more likely to be rated “good” or “excellent” when compared to traditional district schools, the group said. According to our analysis, the city’s charter schools get 2.5 times greater return on investment in lifetime student earnings for each dollar spent. Detroit charters annually spend less than \$10,000 per student, one-third lower than the district’s \$15,000 per-pupil spending.

The same national data that shows Michigan falling in math and reading rankings also shows its charter school students making significant upward progress in relatively little time. Meanwhile, children from the state’s middle- and upper-class families, who are less likely to attend a charter, lost some ground to their lower-income peers.

The case that charters are harming the state’s overall performance is also lacking, and it’s a remarkable claim given they educate only one in



Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos on “60 Minutes”

10 Michigan public school students and are not evenly spread throughout the state. A Brookings Institution analysis found that roughly half of Michigan's students have no easy access to a brick-and-mortar charter school. This is because charters tend to locate in areas where parents are most desperate for better options — places like Detroit and Flint.

The causes of Michigan's academic struggles could comprise state and federal policies that affected all schools and students across the state, not to mention the effects of Michigan's unique one-state recession that lasted for most of the last decade.

Nor does the suggestion that charters are dragging down test scores of other schools match up with the established research. Most studies show charter schools have, at worst, neutral or small positive competitive effects on conventional public schools. Even more consistently, academic research shows strong benefits for students from public schools that compete with private school choice programs. The interviewer ignored DeVos's citation of this point in the recorded discussion.

During the interview, Stahl repeatedly declared that charter schools were taking funds from traditional districts, as if the number of students a school serves should not affect its revenue. Many Michigan districts have seen enrollment decline, and not just because some of their former students have enrolled in charter schools. Not mentioned was the fact that most traditional districts also financially benefit from choice programs — they are enrolling more students from outside their historical boundaries than ever before and pocketing the extra revenue they bring from state taxpayers.

As Michigan's economy has turned for the better, public schools are now more well-funded than ever on a per-pupil basis, when all revenue streams are included. And fewer districts are experiencing fiscal strain.

It's too bad that much of the focus from the media has been on false claims and insinuations about charter schools in Michigan. That misses the big picture of the battle DeVos is fighting in Washington and across the nation: All parents should be empowered to select the education that gives their children the best chance to succeed.

As DeVos said in the interview: "Any family that has the economic means and the power to make choices is doing so for their children. ... I'm fighting for the parents who don't have those choices. We need all parents to have those choices."

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