

Report reveals Pennsylvania charter schools pocket cash meant for student spending

Douglas Lyons
10 September 2016

A recent report reveals that Pennsylvania charter schools—semi-private operations promoted by politicians of both big business parties—are undercutting students’ education by spending less per student than they receive in tuition payments deducted from public schools’ budgets.

In August, the Pennsylvania School Board Association (PSBA) issued a special report entitled “Charter School Revenues, Expenditures and Transparency” that aimed “to collect, compile, and analyze information on charter school revenues and expenditures” in order to compare them to traditional public schools.

State law requires public school districts to make tuition payments for each student who attends a charter school—in the process taking away money from cash-strapped public schools. These payments are not based on the amount of money the charter schools themselves spend per student, but on the amount the public schools do.

Charter schools are therefore able to pile up extra money by spending less than they receive in tuition payments delivered from public districts. Enrollment in charter schools has, since 2007-08, increased by 97.4 percent, but school district tuition payments to charters have increased 139.3 percent or over \$865 million.

The Chester-Upland School District, in southeastern Pennsylvania, for instance, is compelled to spend 46 percent of its budget in the form of payments to charter schools for student tuition. Last year, Chester-Upland’s teachers, janitors, bus drivers, and other workers voted unanimously to work without pay due to the draconian budget cuts at the federal and state level.

Public schools are forced to pay even higher tuition rates for special education students sent to charter schools. On top of the regular tuition payment, public

schools are obligated to add a supplement based on a state-mandated formula. In the 2015-16 school year, charter schools had a surplus of roughly \$102 million from special-education tuition, which wasn’t used for educational purposes.

The extra regular and special-education tuition money doesn’t presume more educational spending. Public school districts spend, as a percentage of all expenditures, more on instruction than charter schools do. Charters spend a much greater percentage of their budget on support services and facilities—including administrators’ salaries—according to the report. They spent approximately \$828 more per pupil on chief school administrators and principals for the 2014-2015 school year than did public schools.

The report’s findings advocating a more “prudent use of public education funds” and more “accountability and financial transparency” dovetail with recent news reports revealing corruption and profiteering at charter schools. Nicholas Trombetta, 61, the founder of The Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School in 2000, pleaded guilty to federal tax fraud last month in front of US District Judge Joy Flowers Conti for stealing more than \$8 million dollars to buy, among other things, an almost \$100,000 condominium in Florida. He is facing up to 5 years in prison.

The state Department of Education, according to an audit by Democratic Auditor General Eugene DePasquale done in August of this year, paid more than \$2.5 million in public money for “questionable lease reimbursements” to buildings owned by charter school operators or related organizations, violating charter school law.

Meanwhile, the chief executive of the new Catasauqua Charter School, Loraine Petrillo, resigned in August over an enrollment flier that stated it is safer

to attend the charter school than the public Liberty High School in the Bethlehem Area School District, broadcasting unfounded claims of rampant drug pushing in school. It was mailed to homes just before the start of the 2016-2017 school year.

According to a study issued last year by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) analyzing Pennsylvania cyber charter schools, student achievement in reading was equivalent to 101 fewer days of reading instruction and 167 fewer days in math compared to students in traditional schools. Across the country, the average was 180 days less.

The lead author of that report, James L. Woodworth, quoted in *Trib Live* last month, said that “Basically, it means the impact of attending that [charter] school for a year is pretty much zero. We’re not seeing growth. The average student attending an online charter school is doing very poorly academically compared to an average student in a traditional public school. Online schools, the way they’re being done right now, is not effective for the students currently attending the schools.”

Democratic Governor Tom Wolf has nonetheless signaled his continued support for charter schools in Pennsylvania by offering a fig leaf of state oversight. He has launched a four-person unit to oversee these schools, saying in a public statement August 24: “Charter schools play an important role in our education system, but that role must be accompanied by sufficient oversight. Establishing this new division within the Department of Education will allow us to maximize our resources to not only ensure charters are being properly supported, but that they are being held accountable to taxpayers.”

The 2016-17 Pennsylvania budget passed this year does not restore cuts that former Republican Governor Corbett enacted on the state schools. According to the study, “Continued Cuts,” put out by the Pennsylvania Association of School Business Officials and the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators, even with the restoration of all the money slashed by Corbett, a majority of public schools would be unable to reverse previous cuts.

Elsewhere, the NAACP has brought a lawsuit against the Pennsylvania Department of Education for persistent funding imbalances that it says are “so inadequate and unequal” that they violate the

Pennsylvania constitution and the principle of equal treatment under the law. The state Supreme Court will hear the case September 13 in Philadelphia.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact