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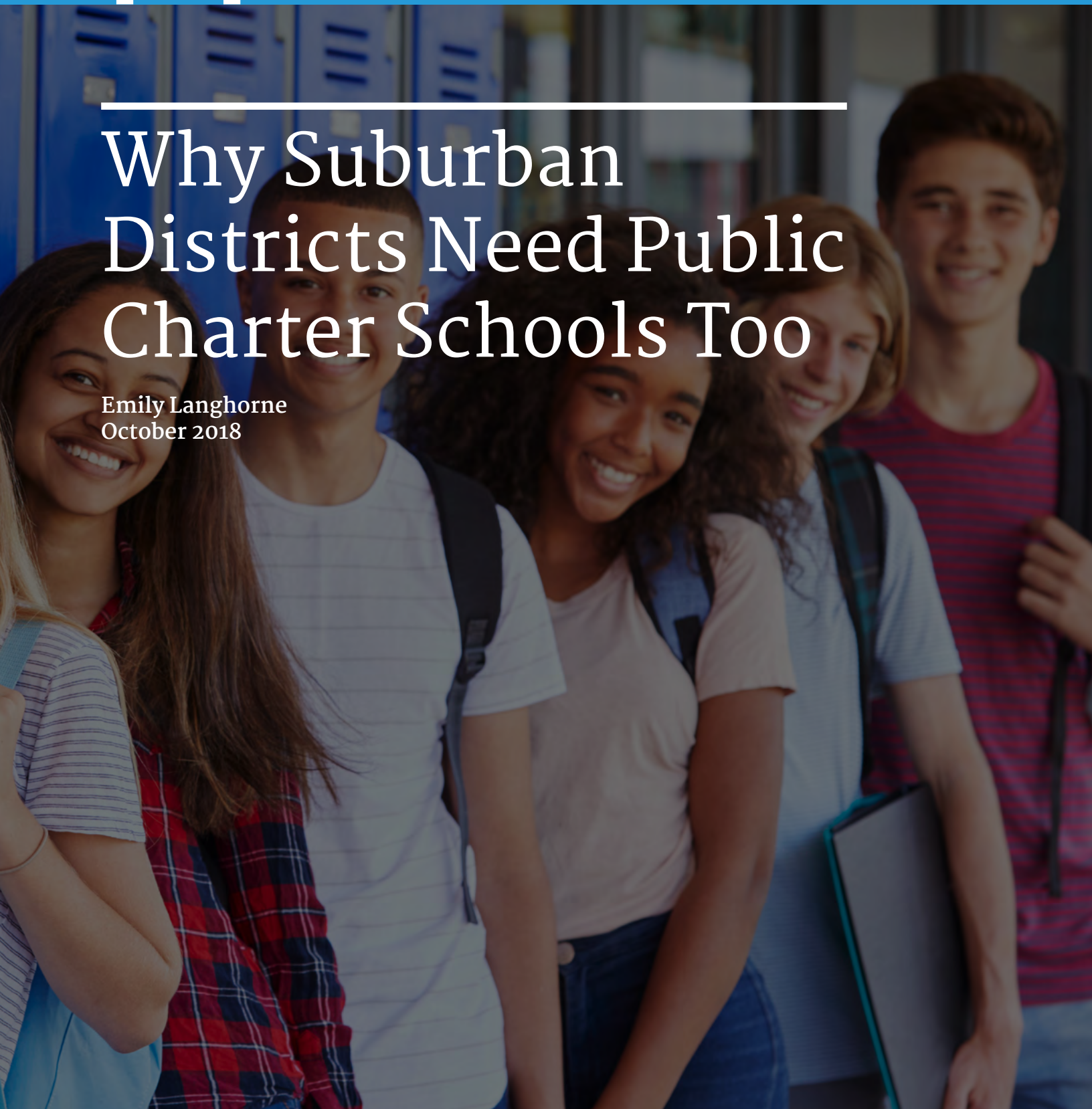

Why Suburban Districts Need Public Charter Schools Too

Emily Langhorne
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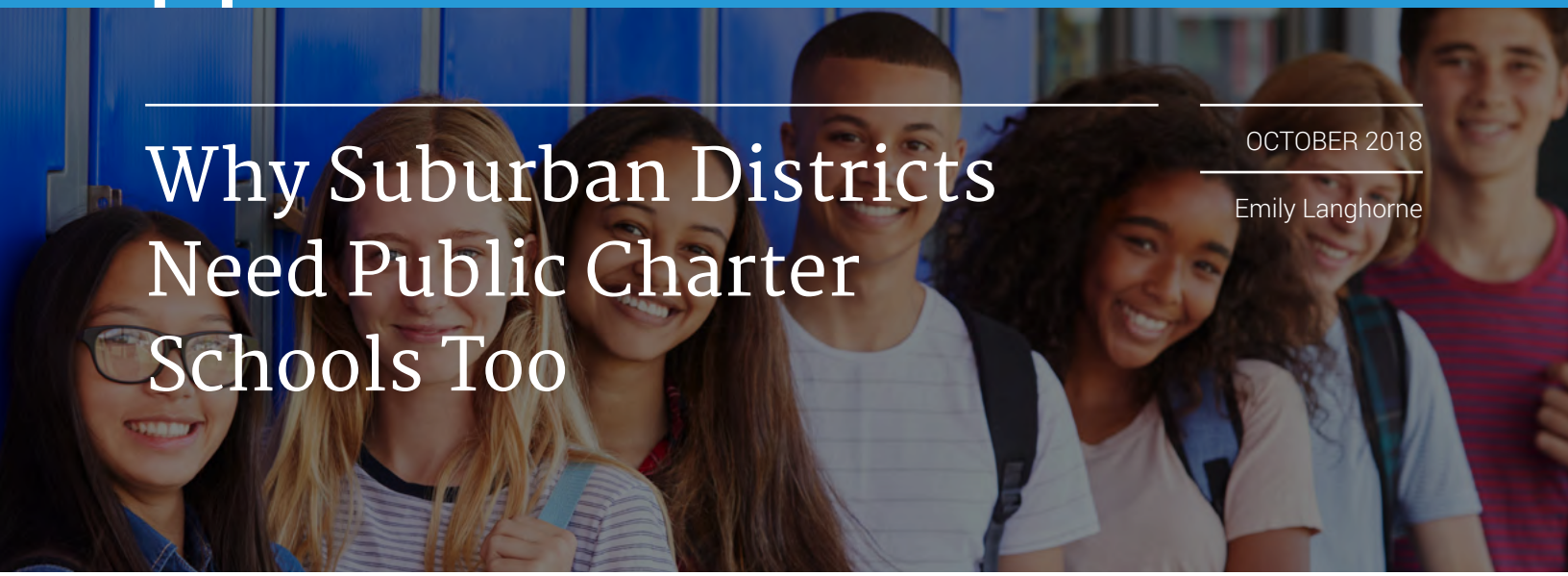

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INTRODUCTION

On November 8, 2016, while the rest of the world anxiously awaited the outcome of the U.S. presidential election, a subset of voters with a keen interest in education had their eyes on Massachusetts. This was the day Bay Staters would vote on Ballot Question 2, a proposal to raise the state's cap on public charter schools by up to 12 new schools per year.

Massachusetts is home to some of the highest performing charter schools in the country, with especially impressive gains at schools serving urban, low-income and minority students. In Boston, one of the eight districts in the state to have reached its cap on charter schools, students at charters learn the equivalent of an extra year of math and reading each year, when compared to their peers with similar demographics and past test scores at the city's traditional public schools.[1] The local school district, Boston Public Schools (BPS), enrolls about 53,000 students in a city of about 77,000 students. Currently, public charters enroll only about 10,000 students, but there are more than 32,000 children on waitlists for these schools.[2] (The other 14,000 non-BPS students are enrolled in either private schools, parochial schools, public schools in neighboring suburbs, non-BPS special education programs, or home school programs.)

The current law prohibits, or "caps," the opening of new charter schools in districts where more than nine percent of the district's net funding

goes to charters—or 18 percent for districts ranked among the state's lowest performing 10 percent of districts. The legislation proposed under Question 2 would have allowed new charters to open in areas like Boston that had reached their cap.

The proposal required that the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education give priority to applications for charter expansion in districts where student performance on state exams had been in the bottom 25 percent of all districts for the previous two years or in districts with a high demand for more public school options.

Yet, when election day came, a whopping 62 percent of Massachusetts voters voted against it.[3]

Afterwards, education reformers wondered, how could this have happened?

A month prior to the vote, veteran journalist and charter school expert Richard Whitmire had already answered this question with a question of his own: "It comes down to this: Will voters in Newton (median house listing price: $1.2 million) vote to help out voters in Roxbury (median list price: $479,000) looking for better school options?"[4]

The answer, it turns out, was no. Fifty-eight percent of Newton voters voted against the bill.

Robert Pondiscio, senior fellow and vice president of external affairs at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, lays the blame with an education reform movement that's "a bit too enamored of its own civil-rights-movement-of-our-time rhetoric to worry much about building a constituency among the middle class."[5]

In Massachusetts, as in most states, charter schools are concentrated in urban areas. Of the state's 92 public charters, 43 are in its five largest cities; Boston alone has 28. The remaining 49 schools are spread across 34 separate districts, most of which have only one charter school, except for Lawrence, which has eight.[6] The irony is that the election left the current law in place, which means that charters cannot expand in cities where parents are demanding them but are still free to open in the suburban communities that voted against them. The ballot measure would have affected only the state's eight largest cities that are at or close to their charter caps.

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Pondiscio thinks Question 2 would have been a whole different ballgame "if middle-class parents had thought that charter expansion could mean a better education for their children." But few middle-class, suburban voters had first-hand experience with public charters. In Newton, where the school committee publicly denounced the bill, only five of the town's more than 12,000 students attended a charter school.[7] In Hingham, where school committee members wrote opinion articles encouraging locals to vote no, only five to 10 students were enrolled in charters, all outside the town's boundaries.[8] Regardless, 52 percent of Hingham voters voted against the bill.

In Massachusetts, anti-charter activists loudly beat the drum that public charters "drain money out of public schools"— even though charter schools *are* public schools. In reality, Massachusetts reimburses each school district 100 percent of the money they lose the first year a student departs for a charter school, then 25 percent for the next five years.[9] So, when districts lose students to charters, they end up with more money per student for six years.

It seems the suburban vote was not rooted in bad experiences with charters, but rather in a lack of experience with them. Jay P. Greene, distinguished professor and head of the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas, explained these voters were "unaware of how charters might benefit them because already existing Massachusetts charters have largely failed to serve them. And the unions and their local suburban school officials are doing a great job of scaring suburbanites about how a charter expansion might harm the relatively good arrangements they currently enjoy."[10]

Unfortunately, Americans overall—especially those who have been exposed to charters only through media coverage—still don't understand how charter schools can benefit their communities because they don't have a clear picture of what charter schools are. Previous public polling on the opinions of charter schools fails to disaggregate the data for a suburbanite subset, but 2014 PDK/Gallup poll reveals that most Americans don't understand—or, worse, misunderstand—public charters. Fifty percent of Americans surveyed for the poll did not know that charter schools were public schools, and 48 percent thought they could teach religion. Fifty-seven percent believed charters could charge tuition, and 68 percent thought they could select students based on ability, confusing their admissions process with that of the selective magnet schools of a traditional district.[11] When PDK/Gallup provided those surveyed with a clear explanation of charter schools, support for the charters increased and opposition decreased.[12]

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A 2017 public opinion poll conducted by Ed Choice and the American Association for Public Opinion Research similarly found that nearly one-fourth of respondents were unfamiliar with or had never heard of public charter schools, and a poll conducted by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research during the same year found that 58 percent of participants knew little to nothing about charter schools.[13]

Because of this lack of experience, upscale, suburban families have become susceptible to the well-trodden myths about the supposed dangers of public charters. Internalizing the narrative of "progressives" like Dianne Ravitch, these families think that by being anti-charter they're defending America's institution of public education. In reality, they're defending a specific model of public education, one developed more than a century ago: an industrial-era model built around top-down management and bureaucracy, in which control and decision making belong to

the central office rather than the practitioners. This model is a poor fit for today's world because it treats all kids the same, often assigns them to schools based on their neighborhoods, and produces cookie-cutter schools that educate most children in the same way. It isn't working well for the majority of urban students. And here's the irony: it doesn't always work well for suburban students, either.

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Simply put, we need more suburban charters. Regardless of where they live, parents and students benefit from being able to choose from a variety of different learning environments. The spread of charter schools in suburban areas can create tremendous opportunities for families dissatisfied with the traditional neighborhood schools, whose children might do better in a system that offered a variety of educational models, specialized curriculum, and personalized learning. The development of a suburban charter sector can give suburban families the ability to find a best-fit school for their children while simultaneously broadening the political base for the charter school movement, which can help all kids by preventing low-income, urban families from facing another Question 2-like defeat.

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THE LANDSCAPE OF SUBURBAN CHARTER SCHOOLS

In the 2015-2016 school year, over half of the nation's 6,900 charter schools were in urban districts. Small towns and rural communities were home to more than 1,200 charter schools, and 1,800 were located in suburban areas.[14]

However, the demographics of America's suburban areas vary widely. A 2018 report by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute offered an in-depth, nationwide look at charter-school deserts – areas of three or more contiguous census tracts with poverty rates above 20 percent and no charter elementary schools. In states with the most charter schools – California, Texas, Florida, and Arizona – a majority of charter school deserts exist in inner-ring suburbs, not in urban centers.[15]

Large pockets of poverty often arise in inner-ring suburbs when a city's growing affluence is accompanied by a rising cost of living, which forces low-income and working-class residents out of the city and into neighboring suburbs. For instance, while Washington, D.C., has about 37,000 low-income students, its suburban neighbor, Prince George's County, Maryland, has more than 80,000. Yet the District sports

a thriving charter sector of 120 schools, while Prince George's County has only 11.[16]

Fordham's report calls attention to the need for charter schools in high-poverty, inner-ring suburbs. In our report, however, we are focusing on middle-class and affluent suburbs. Here, references to suburban areas do not include high-poverty suburbs.

The charter landscape also looks very different from state to state. In California, for example, only three percentage points more students are eligible for subsidized meals in charters than in traditional public schools, because so many charters are in suburban communities. In Arizona, the number is only 12 percentage points.[17] But, in Missouri, charters are only allowed in St. Louis and Kansas City, and in Ohio they are limited to the state's worst performing districts.[18]

Similarly, relatively liberal charter laws in Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah have resulted in a broader geographic distribution of charters than in the nation as a whole. Charters in these states are still mostly concentrated in urban areas, but to a lesser degree than in other states.[19] While the paucity of suburban charters is a problem in many states, the severity of the problem differs among the 43 states that currently have charter laws.

WHY MIDDLE-CLASS SUBURBAN KIDS NEED CHOICES TOO

Even among education reformers, there's a perception that suburban families don't need public school options, because these families have already made a choice by moving to the suburbs to find quality schools.[20] Without a doubt, high-poverty communities have the greatest need for more educational options. But that doesn't mean all is well in the suburbs.

In middle-income suburban neighborhoods, more than 20 percent of eighth grade students are not performing at grade level in either reading or math.[21] The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) – known as the Nation's Report Card and widely considered the country's most reliable measure of educational progress – continued a decade-long trend of flat scores in 2017, confirming that U.S. students nationwide are showing little growth, even in the suburbs. On the other hand, large urban districts, where charters are concentrated, have improved at rates greater than the nation over the past decade.[22]

In addition, the majority of America's students – including those attending what are perceived as the best suburban schools – perform poorly on international tests. It's no secret that, on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), U.S. students consistently score below students from equally developed countries in Europe and Asia. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), an intergovernmental economic organization founded in 1961 to promote economic progress and global trade, began issuing PISA in 2000. Since then, the test has been given to 15-year-old students around the world every three years.

The exam, unlike traditional standardized tests (including NAEP), is designed to test a student's fluency in problem solving and communication skills as well as creativity. It's not entirely multiple choice, and it measures literacy in science, math, and reading. In short, the test aims to assess which countries are teaching students to think for themselves.

In 2015, more than half a million students from 72 different countries and economies took the exams.[23] The U.S. maintained its 15-year history

of underwhelming performance, showing no major gains since the 2012 exam and ranking 25th in science, 39th in math, and 23rd in reading.[24]

While the U.S. does have more heterogeneity and larger socio-economic disparity than some of the higher-performing countries, these factors do not weigh as heavily on the U.S.'s performance as some might expect. The OECD has developed a way to gauge students' socio-economic levels, since comparing socio-economic levels across countries is difficult. The PISA exam does not ask students directly about their parents' income levels, largely because most students don't know, but the student questionnaire that accompanies the test does ask students about their parents' education levels, occupations, the number of books and computers in their home, and so on. Using these answers, the OECD has created an index of students' economic, social, and cultural status (ESCS).[25]

Based on the ESCS, even the U.S.'s most affluent students—with the most highly educated parents—look pretty mediocre. In 2012, American students who were in the top quartile on the ESCS index ranked 32nd in math, 27th in science, and 20th in reading compared to kids in the top quartile around the world.[26] In 2015, they ranked 35th in math, 25th in science, and 24th in reading.[27] Both years, they were far below their affluent peers in other developed countries, such as Belgium, Finland, Germany, South Korea, and France. That's especially disconcerting, because economists have found an almost a one-to-one match between PISA scores and a nation's long-term economic growth.[28] In her book *The Smartest Kids in the World and How They Got That Way*, Amanda Ripley concluded, "A great education by the standards of suburban America look[s], from afar, exceedingly average."[29]

The Global Report Card, released in 2012, came to a similar conclusion about America's most affluent suburbs. It compared U.S. public school achievement in math and reading from 2004 to 2007 with average achievement in 25 other countries considered to be economic peers. State accountability measures often inflate the achievements of suburban students on state exams – and the overconfidence of suburban Americans in their schools – by comparing students' scores to those of lower performing, low-income districts. The Global Report Card found that even an affluent district like Beverly Hills ranked only in the 53rd percentile relative to the international comparison group. In 2007, the average student in Beverly Hills was at the 76th percentile in math relative to other students in the state, but the Global Report Card determined that if Beverly Hills students were enrolled in schools in Singapore, the average student would have been only in the 34th percentile for math performance. In Canada, he or she would have been in the 46th.[30]

THE PERFORMANCE OF SUBURBAN CHARTER SCHOOLS

Such evidence suggests there's a need for more innovative and rigorous public schools in suburban areas as well as in urban areas. Because most charters are concentrated in urban areas, current research on the performance of suburban charter schools is limited. Previous research has found that nonurban charter schools do not see the same dramatic academic gains for students experienced by their urban counterparts. Then again, this could be because urban charter schools are generally compared to district schools with very low baseline scores, so a charter school's improvements look very good by comparison.[31] Nonurban schools, on the other hand, tend to be compared to schools with higher baseline scores. Of course, there are some suburban charter schools that do consistently outscore traditional public school students at their neighboring schools. (See "An Exploration of Suburban Charter Schools" for an examination of one such school.)

Nonetheless, Stanford's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) 2013 National Charter School Study concluded that while charter school students in urban areas showed substantial test score growth compared to their counterparts at traditional public schools, charter school students in nonurban areas had similar test score gains as their district counterparts.[32] However, this study relied on test score results from 2007 to 2011, and charter performance overall has improved relative to district performance since that time frame. A more recent report from CREDO on charter school performance in New York, which used student achievement data from 2012 to 2016, revealed that students at suburban charter schools gained 74 additional days of learning in math when compared to their peers at traditional public schools. Their reading gains were not statistically significant.[33]

The previous research on suburban charters fails to assess whether all suburban charters are actually trying to outperform district schools on standardized tests. Test scores are narrow performance measures, which can devalue schools that are increasing student achievement and engagement in creative ways.[34] Many suburban parents are drawn to schools with unique pedagogies, but the benefits of these schools aren't necessarily reflected in state test scores.

In dual-language immersion charters, for instance, students are often fluent in another language by fifth grade, but there are no state exams that measure the acquisition of that knowledge. Common Core aligned tests don't measure achievement in fine arts or technology or drama or student government, but parents find value in a well-rounded educational experience. Similarly, parents don't choose Montessori or project-based learning schools so their children will outscore others on standardized tests.[35] These schools are built to engage students and increase their curiosity, life-long learning, and self-efficacy.

> Quite simply, scores on state exams don't reflect the values and aspirations of all suburban dwellers.

Quite simply, scores on state exams don't reflect the values and aspirations of all suburban dwellers. In urban areas, with many failing schools and students significantly behind grade level, standardized test scores have become the dominant metric by which states judge the performance of a school. In areas where most

students consistently score at or above grade level, parents care less about the results on state exams. After all, state exams are generally composed of predominantly multiple choice questions, which don't push students toward deeper-level application of knowledge, problem solving, or creativity.

Once their child is performing at grade level, most suburban parents are interested in school culture and curriculum rather than higher test scores. After all, the "opt-out" movement, in which hundreds of thousands of parents across multiple states have pulled their children out of state exams, is mainly a suburban phenomenon.[36] Some suburban parents resent test-heavy education reforms, especially when they result in a narrowing of curriculum, teach-to-the-test instruction, and days full of test taking that don't enrich the educational experience of their children.

HOW CHARTER SCHOOLS CAN BENEFIT SUBURBAN KIDS

My Tang, a suburban mother of three, expressed interest in a proposal for a charter school in Oak Park, a suburb of Chicago, last year. "I'm not against [traditional] public schools," she explained. "It's just that all kids learn differently."[37]

Tang captured the biggest advantage charter schools offer in the suburbs. Kids learn differently, come from different backgrounds, and have different interests, so they tend to flourish in different schools. The industrial-era model, which treated all children as if they were the same, is as outdated in the suburbs as it is in the cities.

The priorities of charter school parents in the suburbs are not the same as those in urban areas. For suburban parents, public charter schools aren't usually a means to escape failing public schools; they're an alternative to an education system that is not innovative, engaging, or specialized. Appealing to such parents means placing less emphasis on test scores and more on curriculum, less talk about failing schools and more about different learning models.[38]

Even in the suburbs, traditional public middle and high schools often have a pervasive culture of student disengagement, often considered the teenage norm.[39] The students don't buy into the educational environment because there's nothing for them to buy into. They're obligated to attend a traditional public school, which is usually a comprehensive model and is remarkably similar to all of the district's other secondary schools.[40]

One benefit of having a variety of schools with different learning models is that more students will find a school that engages them, where they will take an active role in their education. And when students and parents make a choice, they are more likely to take ownership of the learning process. As a result, they're more likely to buy into a school's academic philosophy and culture, and student buy-in is incredibly important to student engagement and, by extension, learning.

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While many suburban parents do have a choice of schools, the organizational model of a centralized school district inherently limits true innovation, because it offers a choice from only

a pre-set menu of curricular options– Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate, Writing Center or Math Center, Arts or STEM. While districts schools may offer a variety of these different programs, there is usually no difference between schools in terms of day-to-day operations, school culture, or learning model.

Some suburban parents and students likely to leave traditional public schools for charter schools may also do so for social reasons. Charter schools that cultivate scholarly environments and nurture individual student interests create a welcoming atmosphere for students who don't fit in socially at traditional public schools, which often celebrate sports culture first and academics second.

Other suburban parents who send their children to charter schools are pursuing educational options not available in the traditional public schools. They're looking for a rigorous curriculum embedded in a unique learning model. While urban charters try to be better than their district schools, suburban charter schools often strive to be different.[41] In a thriving charter sector, one finds Montessori programs and other project-based models, dual-language immersion schools, schools that use computer-based learning in creative ways, competency-based schools, Waldorf schools, early college high schools, arts-focused schools, STEM schools, and more.

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By offering specialized learning environments, charter schools also have the potential to attract students from affluent, suburban families who would otherwise attend private schools. Some suburban charters clearly draw private school students back into the public education system. (For an example of one such school, see "An Exploration of Suburban Charter Schools.")

For example, affluent suburban parents in Orange County, California, have begun sending their children to Orange County Academy of Sciences and Arts, despite the excellent reputation of the local district. This charter is a modified Montessori school with mixed-age classes and instruction that focuses on self-directed learning—a learning environment not available in the district. Parents enjoy its small class sizes, more one-on-one student-teacher time, and emphasis on personalized learning.[42] Montessori learning is popular in suburban areas across the state; the California Montessori Project has seven charter campuses in the Sacramento area alone.[43] It's an option that most public school districts don't offer.

In Minnesota, suburban parents have been drawn to charters with project-based learning models. Le Sueur's Minnesota New Country School, located an hour away from the Twin Cities, opened in 1994, the first of many project-based, teacher-powered schools in the state. At teacher-powered schools, the faculty controls school-level decision making that, at traditional public schools, is usually handled by the principal. At New Country School, students' individual interests drive the learning process. There are no grades; each student has a personalized learning plan in which they work on a succession of projects either at Level I (7th to 9th grade) or Level II (10th to 12th grade). Teachers, known as "advisors," serve as a support system rather than a guide in this process. The school operates year-round and uses a computer-infused curriculum. Many

parents are drawn to the school because its curriculum relies upon the best practices of blended learning (digital learning combined with teacher guidance) to help students develop an intrinsic motivation for learning.[44]

In Texas and Arizona, suburban families have been drawn to both BASIS Charter Schools and Great Hearts Academies, two schools that have very strong but different learning models.

The culture of BASIS schools is one of self-development and rigor. The schools want students to pursue a world-class education at their own pace. The students don't wear uniforms, and self-expression is considered a virtue.[45] However, the curriculum is rigorous. Students are expected to spend hours on homework and to pass at least six Advanced Placement exams to graduate high school.

The culture of Great Hearts schools is more traditional than BASIS schools; students wear uniforms and walk quietly in the halls. Great Hearts offers a classical liberal arts education: students study and discuss the Great Books, focus on citizenship and character development, and work to develop an understanding of the "human condition."

Despite their differences, both schools have taken root in these states' suburban neighborhoods, and a number of parents have one child enrolled in Great Hearts and another in BASIS. After determining that a school had a strong academic record, parents from these neighborhoods reported wanting a curriculum and instructional model the fit that personality of their children so that they would find the school day engaging rather than boring.[46]

In pockets throughout the country, suburban charter schools like these are flourishing, offering students rigorous curriculum, personalized learning, and unique school designs. (To read more about three such schools, see "An Exploration of Suburban Charter Schools.") However, the growth of charters in suburban areas has been slow, often hindered by a variety of factors that have little to do with school performance.

Report continues on page 17.

AN EXPLORATION OF SUBURBAN CHARTER SCHOOLS

Hatikvah International Academy Charter School: A Charter Navigates the Political Realities in New Jersey's Suburbs While Creating an Environment of Academic Excellence

Founded in 2010, Hatikvah International Academy Charter School has thrived in a state that's been historically unfriendly to charters outside of urban areas. Located in East Brunswick, New Jersey, the K-8 Hebrew-immersion school serves nearly 500 students, and the families represented at the school come from 24 school districts in New Jersey.

The school prides itself on student engagement, which it defines as "the sustained connection a learner has towards an aspect of his or her learning and education." Students are taught in both English and Modern Hebrew, and the teachers purposefully embed opportunities for students to notice local and global issues that impact humanity and then challenge students to develop their own solutions to these problems. "We don't believe that a five-year-old in kindergarten is too young to begin this process," says School Director Dr. Marcia Grayson.

Through its focus on the study of the Hebrew language and culture, Hatikvah International's mission is to ensure students understand the value of learning about other languages and cultures. With this emphasis on global thinking, it's no surprise the school is one of only three public schools in New Jersey to have earned the highly regarded authorization for the rigorous International Baccalaureate (IB) Program. The external authorization for IB certification requires that the school demonstrate a service-learning, critical thinking, globally-minded curriculum, and the International Baccalaureate foundation must approve of the curriculum, assessments, and its professional development of the teaching faculty and leadership team.

The school's teachers aim to serve children's individual academic needs, which extends to both students who are performing at grade level and need more challenging work and students who have special needs and require a customized program to be successful within a fully inclusive environment. On state exams, students at Hatikvah International Academy outperform students at each of the schools they would be attending if they had stayed in their resident districts. These schools include some high achieving National Blue Ribbon schools.

"In testing grades, we have one of the highest percentages of special needs students in the state of New Jersey for charter schools," says Dr. Grayson. "We are very proud of this fact since our test scores are comparatively high, and they include students who have various learning challenges, demonstrating that our inclusion program is working well."

Overall, the racial demographics of Hatikvah International mirror the demographics of East Brunswick Public Schools as does their percentage of English Language Learners and special needs students. The one area in which the school falls short is its percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch. However, as innovative schools do, Hatikvah International Academy has implemented a strategy to reduce this discrepancy. The New Jersey Department

of Education recently granted Hatikvah International Academy's request to include a weighted lottery, in which socio-economically disadvantaged students receive admissions preference.

Despite its overwhelming academic success and progressive pedagogies, Hatikvah International has faced resistance from the surrounding school districts. When the school opened in 2011, the East Brunswick Board of Education sought an appeal attempting to overturn the charter's approval. The Appellate Division of the Superior Court of New Jersey rejected the East Brunswick Board of Education's case, and the Supreme Court of New Jersey refused to hear their follow-up appeal.[76]

In 2015, when the school submitted a five-year renewal application with plans to expand enrollment from fifth to eighth grade, Highland Park School District, a neighboring district, submitted appeals opposing the state's decision to approve the charter's expansion, claiming too many students from within Highland's boundaries were choosing to attend Hatikvah International. Several local districts joined with Highland Park's Board of Education.

The appeals had no effect on the daily operations of the school; the enrollment expansion went on as planned and, in 2018, the Appellate Division of the Superior Court of New Jersey sided with the state saying the districts' contention that their enrollment would be harmed if the expansion was allowed "did not provide a basis to deny Hatikvah's application."[77]

Regardless of neighboring districts' objections, the school is in demand. The school holds a lottery for the 75 open seats in kindergarten and to form a waitlist for other grades. The number of students on the waitlist consistently hovers around 500.

Hatikvah International Academy Charter School is an example of a suburban charter that boasts high test scores while offering personalized learning, language immersion, and the International Baccalaureate Program; it's no wonder that parents from multiple suburban districts are waiting for their child to have a chance to attend.

BASIS Public Charter Schools: A Network Bridges the Suburban-Urban Charter Divide Through a Curriculum That Creates Internationally Competitive Students

If you look at the 2018 *U.S. News and World Report* national rankings of the best high schools, you'll immediately notice something interesting about the top five schools: they're all operated by the charter management organization BASIS. In fact, BASIS operates a total of seven of U.S. News top 20 schools.

BASIS Charter Schools have a unique learning culture where students are taught to love learning, seek answers, and, ultimately, find the subjects they're passionate about. The schools appeal to

parents and students in many communities – including both suburban and urban areas—across the U.S. because they deliver on a simple but vital promise: to educate students at the highest international level.

BASIS produces students who are competitive internationally. In 2012, teenagers at two of Arizona's BASIS schools took a special version of the PISA test designed to compare individual schools to international benchmarks. The average BASIS student outperformed the average U.S. student by almost three years in reading and science and four years in math. Moreover, they outscored average students from South Korea, Finland, and Shanghai, where students have consistently produced the highest scores.[78]

BASIS currently runs more than 20 charters in Arizona, Texas, and Washington, D.C.; most of them are in suburban areas.[79] Every BASIS school in the U.S. has a significant waitlist. Even at BASIS's suburban Oro Valley campus, located in an area of Arizona with a strong local school district, the waitlist is approximately 400 students.

All of BASIS's campuses not only use a unique curriculum, but they also have a unique instructional model. In first through third grade, students have a "learning expert" who accompanies them throughout the day to courses taught by different teachers, the "subject area experts." BASIS schools introduce certain subjects earlier than at most other schools. These subjects include: Mandarin, engineering, Latin, physics, logic, economics, chemistry, and others. BASIS also has an Advanced Placement-infused program where students can take Advanced Placement (A.P.) courses as early as eighth grade.

"The BASIS curriculum is not for everyone," says BASIS Charter Schools Executive Director DeAnna Rowe. "But, for parents and students who want an education at this particularly unique level – and make no mistake, there are many families who do indeed want such an education – there is nothing like it."

Students are expected to take biology, chemistry, and physics before high school. They're also expected to not only take, but also pass, at least six A.P. exams to graduate.[80] "Our network's greatest achievement might be the notion that we are here for any student that is willing to work hard – for any child that wants this sort of high-achieving academic environment," says Rowe. "You can't find this at many other American schools, and not every student or family wants this sort of experience, but we will welcome and support anyone who wants it: *anyone* at all, no matter their previous academic or personal success or background."

BASIS teachers are experts in and passionate about their subjects; many hold doctorates in their content area.[81] Many have also had real-world experience in their academic disciplines. "It's amazing to be a teacher at BASIS," says Rowe. "You know that, when you walk into your classroom every day of the school year, you have the opportunity to be as passionate about your subject as you want to be and to be as creative with how you disseminate your material

as you could possibly dream. You have fellow teachers who are just as invested in their material and administrators who have your back."

Without a doubt, BASIS schools have produced amazing outcomes for students from a variety of backgrounds. At all high school campuses – both suburban and urban – most BASIS students score higher than average on A.P. exams. Because overall BASIS students have scored remarkably well on international tests, too, the network of schools has been highlighted by the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development.

Many suburban parents believe that their local public schools are not providing a rigorous, engaging, and internationally competitive education, and these parents know from BASIS's reputation that its schools will.

Odyssey Public Charter School: A Charter's Unique Learning Model and Long-Term Suburban Success Help Bring Students Back to Public Education

Founded in 1999, Odyssey Charter School is one of the oldest public charters in the Los Angeles area. Located in the suburb of Altadena, Odyssey began when community members and a few of the local teachers from Pasadena Unified School District decided to start a school for much more progressively-minded educators and families. The teachers felt that the top-down, scripted approach to education in the local district limited their professionalism. As educators, they were seeking an environment where they have voice and the autonomy to implement classroom practices that best fit the individual needs of their students. In the district-run schools, everything was policy-based. It was about procedures and compliance rather than leadership and innovation. The teachers began to have a conversation with community members about beginning a school centered on creating a learning environment that blends socio-emotionally and developmentally appropriate lessons for students. The kindergarten through eighth grade school began with 180 students; it now enrolls 480.

The charter faced little resistance getting off of the ground. Assistant Director of Odyssey Charter School Carlos Garcia Saldana thinks that's because in 1999, charters were so new in the area that there wasn't much opposition. Rather than an attitude of animosity, the local school district had one of confusion. "It was more of a sense of 'What's a charter? What do we have to do with you?' rather than any outward opposition," says Saldana.

Saldana believes Odyssey Charter School offers a more flexible learning environment than the traditional public schools in the neighborhood. Odyssey's educational philosophy is that students "learn best by doing." Their learning model is a "classroom without walls" where teachers embrace exploratory and individualized learning. The school has multi-aged and looped classes (students stay with the same teacher for two years). Its mission is to develop

students who take an active role in their learning, are aware of their interests, and look to expand their knowledge both within and outside of an academic environment.

Odyssey also emphasizes co-curricular activities. It has a strong arts program where students discuss artists, historical art movements, technique, and/or theme prior to creating their own art. Art classes dovetail with core subjects; classroom teachers often partner with the art teacher to make connections across disciplines. The school has a gardening class, too. On the campus, there is a one-acre garden and fruit orchard. The class, known as Odyssey Orchards, aims to give students a nature-based learning experience. Students learn how to care for plants and grow healthy foods. The lessons are ecological, hands-on, and interdisciplinary.

The school's model has proven extremely popular with suburban parents. Many parents have moved to the area with hopes of getting their children into Odyssey. Like other oversubscribed charters, Odyssey uses a lottery system. "This year we had over 700 applicants for fewer than 70 openings," says Saldana, "Our admissions rate for the last seven years is eight percent on average."

The demographics of the school reflect the makeup of the community; however, the makeup of the community has been changing in recent years. Two years ago, Odyssey joined the Coalition of Diverse Charter Schools, a group dedicated to supporting the creation and expansion of public charters with diverse student bodies, because having a multicultural and intentionally diverse student population is an important part of the school's identity.

Nevertheless, the number of applicants from affluent suburban families continues to increase each year. Most of these parents, Saldana says, would not put their children in the suburb's district-run schools. In fact, many of the students who don't get into Odyssey enroll in private schools. Saldana often receives phone calls from parents of students on the waitlist, asking if their child's number is likely to come up. These parents must put a deposit down at a private school to reserve their child's spot for the next year, Saldana explains, and they don't want to waste the money if their child is going to get into Odyssey. In the past three to five years, the number of students applying for transfers into Odyssey from private schools has also increased.

At the start of the 2018 school year, Odyssey opened its second school in the same area. "We have a moral and ethical responsibility to grow," says Saldana. By expanding its capacity for enrollment, Odyssey can serve more families, maintaining its diverse student population while simultaneously bringing students who would otherwise attend private schools back into America's public education system.

THREE FACTORS THAT HINDER THE SPREAD OF SUBURBAN CHARTER SCHOOLS

1. Political Barriers

States like Minnesota, California, and Colorado adopted charter laws early on. As a result, they passed laws that allowed charters to exist throughout the state. In California, charters began appearing first in the suburbs, only later in the cities.[47] The state has an abundance of Montessori and Waldorf charter schools, often started in middle-income suburbs where parents can't afford private schools and can't find traditional public schools with learning models based on these progressive pedagogies.[48]

However, as time passed, opponents of charter schools in other states, often spearheaded by the teachers unions, began to put pressure on legislators to limit the reach of the charter sector.[49] Some charter laws, like those in Illinois and Rhode Island, limit the number of individual charter agreements permitted statewide (120 and 35, respectively). Other laws, like Ohio and Missouri's, limit the regions in which charters can open.[50]

However, even if a state's law does not limit the number of charter schools, it can create other difficulties for the spread of charters into nonurban areas. That's certainly the case in Maryland, which passed its charter law in 2003.

Unlike in most states, which set up independent authorizing boards, in Maryland, local school boards are the only authorizers for charter schools. In general, local school districts often feel as though they're in direct competition with charters, so they have little incentive to authorize them, particularly in affluent areas where the traditional, zoned public schools have strong reputations – in terms of test scores and college-going rates – tied to equally strong property values.

By 2011, eight years after the charter law passed, Montgomery County, one of Maryland's most affluent areas, had yet to authorize a charter school. That year, the local school board rejected all three of the charter applications it received, including an application for Crossway Montessori Charter School. The Maryland Department of Education ordered the school board to reconsider the applications after finding no solid grounds for the rejections.[51]

Eventually, the school board approved the charter for Crossway Montessori Charter School, a pre-K through elementary school. Parents and students loved the school; but, in 2014, facing funding difficulties, the school's board decided to convert Crossway Montessori to a private school. That left the district without a Montessori learning model, so families who could not afford private tuition no longer had access to the school's unique pedagogy. Montgomery County currently has no charter schools.[52]

Some state legislators support charter schools in urban areas but oppose them in the suburbs, fearing the wrath of local school boards,

superintendents, and constituents.[53] Consider New Jersey, where state legislators have supported charters in Newark and Camden but resisted efforts to create them in nonurban areas.[54]

In 2011, the state received applications for Mandarin-immersion schools in the suburban communities of Maplewood and Livingston. Neither school district had a single language-immersion program, but they pushed back anyway, citing high graduation rates and standardized test performance as evidence that the community didn't need new choices. The 10 local districts the charters aimed to serve banded together and wrote letters of protest to the state department of education.[55] Their biggest complaint? If students opt to attend the charter school, it will "drain" per-pupil money away from district schools.

Then-governor Chris Christie and then-education commissioner Chris Cerf, both decidedly pro-charter, nonetheless began to hedge their support of charters in suburban communities with strong academic reputations.[56] Ultimately, the New Jersey Department of Education rejected the applications for both schools, along with all applications for charters in suburban Essex County, too.[57]

2. The Lake Wobegon Effect: Suburbanites Overestimate Their Local Public Schools

Despite evidence that suburban students are falling behind on international tests when compared to their socio-economic peers in other countries, many suburban families think their schools are doing just fine. In Phi Delta Kappa (PDK) polls since 1981, Americans have consistently viewed their local schools more favorably than Americans public schools as a whole. In the 2016 *Education Next* survey, 55 percent of America's gave their local schools an "A" or "B" rating while just 25 percent graded the nation's schools as an "A" or "B."[58] In the 2017 PDK poll, 49 percent of Americans gave their local schools an A or B grade.[59] This pattern reflects the natural human tendency to view things more favorably when one is familiar with them.[60] The well-documented "mere-exposure effect" explains the link between familiarity and preference.

Suburban parents also tend to have an emotional connection – often rooted in nostalgia – to a traditional neighborhood school, valuing the school's role as a community center more than its role as an academic institution. Their children attend the same school they attended; their sons and daughters play for the same sports teams and have the same local rivalries. Sometimes, they even have one or two of the same teachers.

Many comprehensive high schools also have large stadiums and a pervasive sports culture, two things some families consider integral that academically-focused, lower-funded charter schools sometimes forgo in exchange for smaller class sizes and innovative learning models. As Paul E. Peterson, Harvard University's director of the Program on Education Policy and Governance, explains, "Charter schools have had difficulty penetrating rural and suburban communities. There, a public school, no matter its quality, is perceived as a valuable community institution."[61]

These realities present serious obstacles to growing suburban charter sectors, given that most suburban parents have no first-hand experience with public charter schools. The

national conversation around charters has largely focused on the growth of the schools in urban areas, and the media's consistent coverage of "no excuses," discipline-heavy public charters has stigmatized charters as schools designed to save urban students from, and give urban parents alternatives to, failing schools. The danger of this narrative is that it creates the perception that public charters are only for "failing" districts.

In 2011, Montgomery County Board of Education blocked the efforts of local parents to start an extended-day, year-round foreign-language-focused public charter school. District leaders argued that the new school wouldn't offer any opportunities that weren't already available for students at district schools—a fact that clearly was not true. Joe Hawkins, a former researcher for the county schools who wrote the charter proposal, believed the real objections were quite different. "I think there's a serious mindset … that charter schools mean something bad is happening if one is opened," he said. "That's what they do in the ghetto. That's what they do in failing urban districts."[62]

In New Jersey, Montclair's interim Superintendent Ronald Bolandi expressed his opposition to the proposal for a French-immersion charter school in 2016 by saying, "Montclair is not a failing school district. Montclair is a wonderful school system."[63]

James Crisfield, the former superintendent of Millburn, New Jersey, voiced a similar sentiment when parents tried to open the Mandarin-immersion charter school in 2011. "I actually like the idea of charter schools in districts where the schools are not succeeding and not meeting the students' needs," Crisfield said. "That's not the case in Millburn… Where the schools are not failing but are actually excellent, I don't see any point of adding cost to the system."[64]

Jutta Gassner-Snyder, a parent advocating for the charter, felt differently. Her family had moved from Australia, where the daughter had attended a Mandarin-immersion pre-school, to nearby Maplewood, which did not have a single language immersion school. The original charter law "had no mention to save failing school districts," she said. "It was instituted to see what other education model is working that is not currently implemented in the school system."[65]

For charter schools to take root in suburban areas, the narrative around them needs to change from one centered on creating options for low-income families to one that emphasizes creating innovative schools for all kids.

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3. Charter School Myths and Misconceptions

When Americans aren't certain what charter schools are, they become susceptible to myths and misconceptions about them. Sinister narratives about charters perpetuated by special interest groups and local school boards make them wary of charters. Moreover, the media's propensity to focus on discipline-heavy, "no-excuses" charter schools fails to showcase the abundance of innovative charters that are providing diverse learning models and rigorous curriculum in urban and suburban areas.

Consider Allison Jack's recent attempt to establish a charter in the western suburbs of

Chicago. Jack, the director of charter growth and support for the Illinois Network of Charter Schools, has been leading an effort to open a charter in suburban Oak Park, which will serve the surrounding suburban communities, including her own. Jack is working with WeCan (Western Educational Community Action Network) to open a school that focuses on personalized learning and de-emphasizes test prep in favor of pedagogies like the Socratic method.[66]

In response to Jack's efforts, some local parents quickly formed The Truth About Choice in Education – an anti-charter school group. As a means of "educating" people in the community about charter schools, the group held a screening of *Backpack Full of Cash*. The film, narrated by Matt Damon (a staunch defender of the traditional public school model and anti-choice activist, who sends his children to private school), misrepresents the progressive roots of the charter movement as well as the impact of charters on urban students.

Around 200 people attended the screening, as the *Chicago Tribune* reported.[67] Afterwards, Oak Park resident Susan Jaros admitted to the *Tribune* reporter that she hadn't understood the growth of charters nationwide, but the film had made her concerned about their impact on public schools.[68]

Parent and group member Lisa Pintado-Vertner commented, "There's a bad reputation for charters for a reason."[69]

Another parent attendee, Jason Wulkowicz, said the film "hit on all the most important points about the problems of privatization of public education."[70]

Most of these suburban parents had no direct experience with public charters; their resistance was prompted by misconceptions they'd formed based on the myths they'd been told, the inaccurate stories they'd read, and the film they'd just seen.

Explaining her anti-charter position, local parent Cassandra West said, "I've read too many stories where, across the country, many districts have gone to all charters and they're not what they are cracked up to be." However, New Orleans is currently the only district in America that's close to being entirely composed of charter schools (98 percent as of 2018), and it has seen the fastest improvements in the nation over the past 12 years. West also said that "[Charters] often don't help students of color, even though they say they do," yet there is a plethora of research documenting the positive academic gains made by students of color at public charters.

Karen Yarbrough, the administrator of The Truth About Choice in Education, and Steve Krasinsky, one of its founding members, cited the NACCP 2017 report on charter schools as having

influenced their opinions about the negative impact of charter schools on students of color.[71] The report received widespread media coverage, but education experts called its findings into question, while pointing out the NAACP received hundreds of thousands of dollars from national teachers unions each year.[72]

Yarbrough was one of the few parents interviewed who had lived in a city with a large charter sector. She moved to Oak Park from Chicago. She told other parents and reporters that "charters have really devastated the Chicago Public School system" – an assertion that conflicts with both the 2017 long-term research study conducted by Dr. Sean Reardon, developer of the Stanford Education Data Archive, and the 2017 NAEP scores, both of which highlight Chicago Public Schools as one of the fastest improving urban districts in the country.[73]

As this story illustrates, misunderstanding of charter schools has given rise to resistance from suburban activists who think they're protecting public education from "privatization and corporate reform" without understanding the charter movement's progressive roots and mission. They've bought into a narrative that charters destroy public schools because they often don't realize that charters *are* public schools, which can create opportunity for all students.

MILLENNIALS TO THE RESCUE?

A generational divide may also play a role in the suburban charter school resistance. According to a 2017 study on millennials and education, millennials, the generation having the most children today, are likely to support public charters.[74] Like the rest of America, millennials do not begin with a good understanding of charters; however, they are more open to big changes in the way America's public schools operate. For starters, only 27 percent of millennials surveyed believed that a student's home address should determine where they go to school. On Echelon Insight's poll, once charter schools were defined, support among the millennials rose from 22 percent to 40 percent. Only 13 percent continued to hold a negative view, while the rest needed more information to decide. White millennials had the greatest growth in support for charters – a 24 percent positive increase – once the concept of charters was explained.

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Over half of millennials feared that the problems in America's schools would keep getting worse because there would not be enough significant changes made, regardless of funding increases. Sixty-three percent of millennials who supported public charters believed that traditional public schools were stuck in an outdated model and that charter schools could be more creative and effective in how they taught students.

Millennials also believe strongly in the rights of parents to choose the school that best meets the needs of their children. Forty-nine percent said parents should be able to make this choice "for any reason"; 56 percent said they should have this right if a better selection of academic programs were available at another school; and 72 percent said students should be able to attend another school "if they have special needs or talents better suited to a different school."[75]

Their belief in parent power and school choice makes millennials more likely than previous generations to endorse the spread of charters in all areas. Two-thirds or more of millennials favored letting charters do all the following differently than traditional public schools: merit pay for teachers, hiring teachers with professional backgrounds besides teaching, teaching a more challenging curriculum, establishing stricter disciplinary codes, and establishing a school culture that expects all students to be college ready.

Millennials also believe "teacher flexibility," "teacher creativity," and "positive school climate" are the factors that have the greatest impact on school quality. These characteristics are more likely to be found in innovative public charters than in traditional public schools. Given their progressive values and interest in public school choice, perhaps millennials will be the generation that propels the growth of charters, regardless of where they are located.

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