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# Inconvenient Truths: Charter Schools and Student Achievement

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# Inconvenient Truths: Charter Schools and Student Achievement

By Dr. Roger Wilson, GVSU Faculty

Illustration by Kathy Tran, GVSU Student

## Introduction

Since the advent of the charter school movement in the early 1990s, the field of education has witnessed an increasing body of reports and studies that both affirm their academic achievement value as well as question it. From the outset, the reporting, whether from the Center for Education Reform (CER), the Mackinac Center in Michigan or the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), has often reflected a political and thus ideological perspective pitting one set of data or anecdotes against another. Claims by both sides are too frequently all-encompassing, painting their findings as indicative of the current state of all charter schools. Consequently, much of that research suffers from problems of worthiness (Miron, Evergreen & Urschel, 2008). Weak methodology exacerbated by over-reaching and spurious conclusions is not uncommon (Henig, 2008). In short, the availability of quality research is limited. And what does exist favors neither, but supports both. Simply put, “there is no consensus about whether, on average, charter schools are doing better or worse than conventional public schools at promoting the achievement of their students” (Ferguson et al., 2011, p. xxi). Rather, the relative success of student achievement in any school depends upon factors unassociated with its type. However, that does not necessarily sit well with supporters or opponents. Many prefer to rationalize away compelling evidence that contradicts their beliefs including narrowly framing the superiority of their school’s type, or worse

still, they simply ignore its unwelcome realities rather than endeavor to reconcile its increasing legitimacy and implications for their all or nothing positions. In that sense, many on both sides are demonstrably ideologues when it comes to this issue.

## Brief History of Charter Schools

Much of the current state of our educational landscape is derived from President Reagan’s response to the highly critical 1983 report “A Nation at Risk” which decried the state of American education, particularly high schools. His message conveyed the perception of public schooling as “a monopoly” and thus a structural and ideological impediment to its own reform. Rather than attempt a fix, Reagan’s administration and its supporters envisioned alternatives. It was a message rooted in the writings of economist and free market champion, Milton Friedman, who in 1955 had authored a chapter entitled “The Role of The Government in Education” (Friedman, 1955) where he proposed his idea for educational vouchers. By the time Reagan had come to power in 1980, Friedman had acquired a Nobel prize (in 1976), become a regular contributor to Newsweek magazine, and written two well-received and publicly readable books on economics and choice, one of which was complemented by a ten-part series on PBS TV (“Milton Friedman,” n.d.). In 1981, President Reagan named him to his Economic Policy Advisory Board. For Friedman, a libertarian, it was all about human freedom and independence, and expanding

democracy through market competition and choice, two of the bedrock principles of capitalism. These were also the foundational principles that would come to guide the school choice movement which provided the fertile terrain for the growth of charter schools.

Reagan's successor, George H. W. Bush, maintained the mantra of public school monopoly, and carried the torch for school choice, a term that initially meant lifting the historical restrictions upon local public school assignment based upon one's residence. Meanwhile, the educational concept of "charter" grew out of an attempt "in the 1970's to describe a novel contracting arrangement designed to support the efforts of innovative teachers within the public school system" (Saulny, 2005, ¶3). For example, East Harlem schools in New York, particularly its high schools, were profound educational failures in the early 1970s, with at least one local high school dropout rate approaching 93 percent (Fliegel, 1994). District Four sought alternative ways to improve its delivery. One involved the creative restructuring of departments or programs within schools in concert with relaxed administrative regulations and the "chartering" of teachers for 3-5 years, allowing them sufficient time for their innovations to flourish. Another alternative was the "school within a school" model. Both of these had instructional improvement at their core as well as minimal budgetary impact upon the school or district since existing faculty and resources, including buildings, were to be used. This was the conceptual beginning of current charter schools.

The term school "charter" was first coined in the early 1970s by Ray Budde in the draft of a book entitled "Education by Charter" where he sought to clarify the

chartering phenomenon (Budde, 1996). But conceptually, "chartering" and the book received little enthusiasm. Now fast forward to early 1988 where a very different political terrain regarding education prevailed at the national level. America was experiencing social and cultural upheaval, and Budde's ideas now resonated. In the spring of that year, Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), floated the idea of autonomous schools within schools during a National Press Club speech. The idea was called "charter schools" after Budde's writings. That summer the Citizens' League, a Minnesota-based

group focused upon policy issues related to civic and community life, picked up on Shanker's musings as both the League and Minnesota legislators had been struggling for several years to address the issue of K-12 finance as well as the notion of school choice for low-income students (Kolderie, 2008). Six months later in December 1988, the Citizens' League released its report entitled "Chartered Schools = Choices for Educators + Quality for All Students." By 1991, Minnesota had the nation's first charter school enabling legislation. And the rest is history. Not quite the educational concept that Shanker or Budde had in mind when each envisioned teachers being "contracted" to restructure their programs and schools.

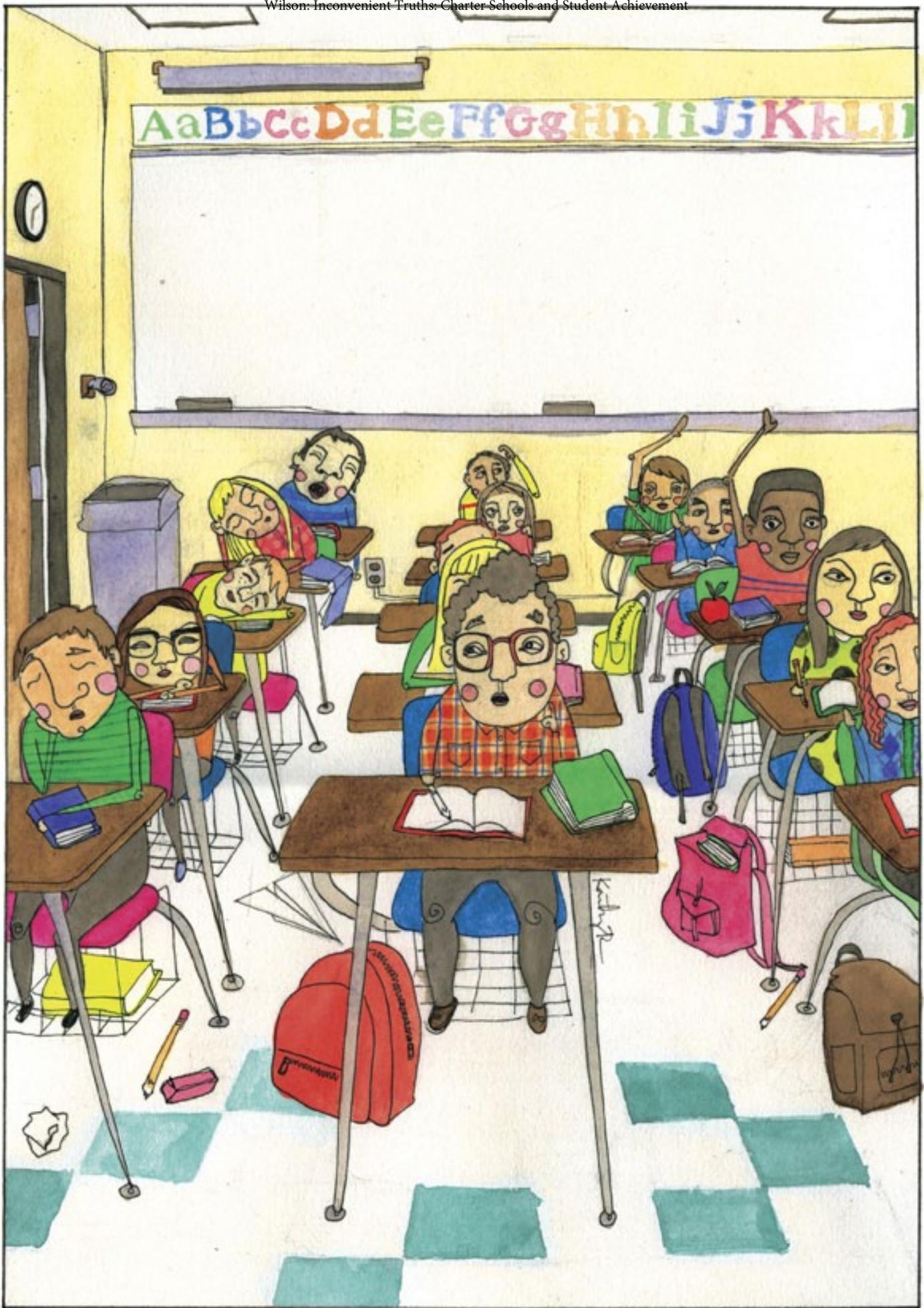
### Some Key National Research Findings

Much of the research about charter schools has suffered from issues of methodology and scale and thus general worthiness. But there are a few larger-scale, multi-state studies that have been conducted, and their results are both enlightening and mixed.

Betts and Tang (2008) reviewed the existing literature for value-added or lottery-based admission studies on charters.



*“Not quite the educational concept that Shanker or Budde had in mind”*



They found only 14 in total with adequate information that cumulatively represented several states (even after follow up with the original studies' authors), and of those only 6 that included data on high schools. Their analysis found that elementary charter schools, or public school academies (PSAs), outperformed traditional public schools (TPSs) in reading while at the middle school, PSAs outperformed TPSs in math. But when it came to high schools, PSAs lagged their TPS counterparts, especially in math (p. 26). Betts and Tang concluded with a cautionary note for policy makers about the framing of questions for charter schools' research.

Asking "What does the typical study show?" in some cases produces quite different answers than asking "For the typical charter school studied, what is the estimated effect on achievement?"... When we give more weight to studies that include a greater number of charter schools, we tend to find less evidence of variation in the effects of charter schools. (p. 26)

In 2009, CREDO offered one of the most comprehensive, and methodologically interesting 16-state study of charter schools to date (Michigan was not included). The significance of their findings can be drawn from their statement that "this report presents a longitudinal student level analysis of charter school impacts on more than 70 percent of the students in charter schools in the United States" (CREDO, 2009, p. 1). But perhaps of greater importance was their creative methodological "twinning" (profile matching) of students in the PSAs under study with TPS counterparts who closely approximated their individual characteristics. By so doing, the CREDO study sought to strengthen the results of the data comparison.

For each charter school student, a virtual twin is created [in the public schools] based on students who match the charter student's demographics, English language proficiency and participation in special education or subsidized lunch programs. Virtual twins were developed for 84 percent of all the students in charter schools. (p. 1)

The study's analysis and conclusions occurred at multiple levels. They drew conclusions based upon aggregated data for charters by state and even by community (city). As one

might expect, the group portrait of charters reflected wide variation in performance when compared to TPSs.

[A] decent fraction of charter schools, 17 percent, provide superior education opportunities for their students. Nearly half of the charter schools nationwide have results that are no different from the local public school options and over a third, 37 percent, deliver learning results that are significantly worse than their student would have realized had they remained in traditional public schools. (p. 1)

A summary of the study's other major findings includes:

- Charter students in elementary and middle school grades have significantly higher rates of learning than their peers in TPS, but students in charter high schools and charter multi-level schools have significantly worse results
- For Blacks and Hispanics, their learning gains are significantly worse than their TPS twins However, charter schools are found to have better academic growth results for students in poverty
- English Language Learners realize significantly better learning gains
- SPED students have about the same outcomes
- States that have caps on limits on the number of charter schools realize significantly lower academic growth than states without caps
- Students do better in charter schools over time. (pp. 4-6)

The federal Department of Education (USDOE) in concert with the Mathematica Policy Research group reported in 2010 on their findings of 32 charter middle schools in 15 states. Eligible charter schools had to have been operating for a minimum of two years, and a lottery for admission was required. However, when compared to the national average for all charter schools, these schools had been in operation longer (7.0 versus 5.9 years) and served more advantaged students, meaning:

a smaller proportion of students were eligible for free or reduced-price school meals (44% versus 62%), came from minority racial or ethnic groups (47% versus 62%), or

scored below the proficient level on their state assessment at the time they applied to the charter school (for example, 34% versus 49% in math). (p. xviii)

And when compared to the TPSs that non-lottery winners were likely to attend, these charter schools were also smaller, had a longer instructional day, and were less likely to have a library. The key findings of the USDOE/Mathematica charter middle school study indicated that:

- Generally, these charter middle schools were neither more nor less successful than TPSs in improving student achievement, behavior, and school progress.
- Impact on student achievement varied. Across 28 sites (covering 32 schools), the effects on reading scores after two years were estimated to be greater than zero in 11 sites and less than zero in 17 sites...with 4 of the individual site estimates statistically significant. The estimated effects on math scores were greater than zero in 10 sites and less than zero in 18 of the 28 sites..., with 10 of the site estimates statistically significant. (USDOE, 2010, p. xvii)
- Also noteworthy was an exploratory analysis of data which suggested that there were implications for greater impact upon some students more than others:

[S]tudy charter schools serving more low income or low achieving students had statistically significant positive effects on math test scores, while charter schools serving more advantaged students—those with higher income and prior achievement—had significant negative effects on math test scores. (p. xvii)

## Some Key Michigan Research Findings

The Michigan DOE reports to the legislature annually on its public school academies. The 2010 report (MDE, 2011) identified the following key findings for the period 2007-2009 for the more than 110,000 students enrolled in the state's PSAs:

- Aggregate MEAP results for proficiency in both math and reading have increased. Aggregate MME results reflect the same improvement in both areas

- Aggregate MEAP and MME results are below the state averages
- While aggregate MEAP results have increased, 33% of PSA students had their achievement decline in Math while 39% declined in Reading and approximately 25% in each showed no improvement
- MEAP performance of African-American students in PSAs is slightly better than their African-American counterparts in traditional public schools (TPSs) and statewide, while White students' performance is almost identical to their counterparts, but Hispanic students' performance is considerably lower (5-6%)
- Aggregate MME results significantly lag the state average by 30 percentage points in Math and 24 percentage points in Reading. It is important to note that of the 237 charter schools in Michigan, the significant majority are elementary or K-8. (MDE, 2011, pp. 6-7)

The aggregated results of the state's charter schools tend to suggest underperformance. But, as with all generalizations, geography, grade and test content matter. However, the Michigan Association of Public School Academies (MAPSA) has taken the initiative by framing the charter school narrative with press releases extolling their members' relative success.

Charter schools located in major urban school districts including Flint, Grand Rapids, Lansing and Detroit produced student proficiency rates significantly exceeding the traditional public schools in those districts on 8 out of 8 reading and mathematics tests. Michigan's public charter schools' statewide student proficiency rates exceeded their traditional public school rivals in similar districts on 16 of the 18 MEAP tests taken between grades 3 through 9. (MAPSA, 2011)

More specifically, the charter school association has also argued that PSAs in Grand Rapids have outperformed their local district schools.

- Students at charter public schools in Grand Rapids achieved an 81.1 percent proficiency rate on MEAP reading tests, 15.7 points higher than the proficiency rate produced in the traditional Grand Rapids public schools.

- Charters in Grand Rapids produced an 83.2 percent proficiency rate in mathematics, 14.4 points higher than the proficiency rate produced by their traditional public school counterparts.
- Proficiency rates among African-American students in charter public schools across the state, including Grand Rapids, were 6 points higher than the statewide average in traditional public schools.
- African-American students have scored higher proficiency rates at Michigan charter public schools than in traditional public schools statewide in each of the last six years. (MAPSA, 2011)

It is beyond the scope of this article to offer a protracted comparison between charter schools and traditional publics in those cities or to address each of MAPSA's claims. But, it would not be unreasonable to argue that some PSAs have provided a valuable educational alternative for their students in those urban centers if state test scores are evidence. A glance at the MEAP results for Math and Reading for 2010 and 2011 with the new cut scores applied would appear to support the claims from the charter school association of higher proficiency percentages than many of those cities' district schools. For example, in both 2010 and 2011, of the charter schools in the Kent ISD, all but one or two had higher percentages of Math proficiency at each grade 3 through 7 for all students aggregated compared with the district-wide results for the ISD's largest district, Grand Rapids Public (GRPS). For the 8th grade, all but 4 charters had higher proficiency levels in Math in 2010 and that dropped to 3 in 2011. And this trend of greater numbers of students achieving proficiency was extended into Reading as well where once again only one or two charters at each grade level, approximately 10%, fell short of the levels achieved by GRPS.

It would seem, though, that the larger issue for the charter schools is not their comparison with their immediate

competition. While their markets are the neighborhoods of some of the state's poorest performing schools, simply being better than those proximate buildings is probably not a long term sustainable strategy because, for instance, when the Kent ISD charter schools are compared to the statewide MEAP proficiency averages in 2010 and 2011, their performance is markedly different. So in Math, where 85%-87% of the charter schools outperform GRPS's district-wide proficiency levels on a grade by grade basis, on average only 50% of those same charter schools surpass statewide proficiency averages. Proficiency levels of the Kent ISD charter schools that fall below the state's proficiency average by grade range from as few as 33% to a high of 73% falling short on the 2010 5th grade test (i.e., anywhere from 5 to 11 buildings fall short depend-

ing upon the grade). While the 5th grade proficiency levels of Kent ISD PSAs improved considerably in 2011 compared to the statewide average, approximately 43% of those charter schools still remained below the state proficiency average in Math at that grade. Generally, the higher grades have been witness to lower PSA proficiency levels compared to the state average, and 2011 was no different as the number of Kent ISD charter schools that failed to achieve

comparable statewide proficiency averages in 6th and 8th grades in Math reached approximately 57% and 60% respectively. Important to this brief analysis is the understanding that achieving state proficiency levels for a given grade and test, and meeting statewide proficiency averages for that grade and test are different matters. Proficiency cut scores set by the state for its tests are typically lower than the proficiency averages achieved by its public schools. So while a percentage of the students in School X may be declared proficient in Math, they could still be below the majority of schools and students in the state in terms of achievement in that subject.

While Math comparisons between the charter schools of Kent ISD and the state might be more instructive

*“It would seem...that the larger issue for the charter schools is not their comparison with their immediate competition.”*



contextually than comparisons with GRPS, perhaps a more pertinent comparison would be with the aggregate scores of all the public districts that comprise the Kent ISD. On average, approximately 60% of the charter proficiency levels by school and by grade in Math in 2010 and 2011 were lower than the comparable aggregate score for all the districts of the Kent ISD with 5th, 6th and 8th grades representing the area where the greatest number of charter schools achieved less than the aggregate of their traditional public counterparts. And while the MEAP comparisons in Reading with both the state proficiency averages and Kent ISD aggregated district proficiency averages are slightly better than those in Math, the trend remains essentially the same. Perhaps of greater concern for Michigan parents should be the average proficiency levels achieved by the state's students, irrespective of their school type. Statewide, Math proficiency averages have been in the mid to upper 30s for the past two years, and Reading percentages in the low 60s. While the state did recently increase its test cut scores to more accurately reflect desired achievement levels, and these in turn, depressed prior proficiency levels, having nearly two-thirds of the state's K-8 students at less than preferred Math proficiency levels should cause some consternation. Of note is the fact that in February, the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) submitted a request to the U.S. Department of Education for waivers of several ESEA requirements established by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. This request included allowing flexibility in the Act's 2013-14 timeline for Michigan achieving required annual yearly progress (AYP) targets.

## Closing Remarks

Determining school quality is an imprecise science. Comparing different schools is perhaps trickier still. Most studies of significance have chosen standardized test results as their measure, since it is the one thing that the PSAs have in common with their TPSs. The question as to whether

those state tests really tell us the measure of students' knowledge and ability, their preparedness and readiness for the future, remains open to argument. Nevertheless, state tests have become the yardstick and charter schools, as an aggregate group, generally do not outperform TPSs. Yet, averaging and aggregating data masks the outliers on both sides – those PSAs that outperform TPSs and conversely, those TPSs that outperform PSAs. However, more recently, some PSA supporters appear to have narrowed their achievement comparisons to the neighborhood TPS (the school that PSA students would otherwise have gone to). And this argument is becoming more common. For the 2010 and 2011 MEAP results for Michigan's major urban centers it may well have some validity (e.g., MAPSA, 2011). But ultimately, such comparisons ill-serve charter supporters and their schools. Being better than a poor neighborhood school may be a first step, but presumably long term viability requires a different marketing strategy.

There are other issues related to reform and charter schools that have not been adequately addressed here, some with significant political implications attached to them. They are worthy of a brief remark or two in closing. The passage of NCLB in 2001 garnered bipartisan support (i.e., the Democrats), in part, because the original language pertaining to the use of vouchers to fund private (i.e., for profit) educational alternatives was stripped out. Some would argue that charters operated by for-profit Educational Management Organizations (EMOs) (e.g., Edison, K12 Inc., NHA) represent vouchers by another name. Michigan is the state with the highest percentage of charters schools operated by for-profit EMOs (Molnar, Miron & Urschel, 2010). And recent legislation would see the caps on charters lifted. Furthermore, that discussion includes the increased employment of virtual charters, a possible online education alternative for students with some of the weakest time management and organizational skills, two criteria critical to success in online education, if not educa-

tion in traditional face-to-face classroom environments as well. It is instructive to note that the Michigan Virtual Charter Academy produced some of the weakest MEAP results of all the Kent ISD charters, underperforming both the Kent ISD district-wide and state proficiency averages at every grade 3 through 8 in Math in 2011. In some instances, that underperformance was by a few percentage points, and in a number of instances it was 30%-50% lower. Its 8th grade proficiency level for math was also less than that of GRPS district-wide levels. The Virtual Academy MEAP proficiency results for Reading in 2011 were comparatively better than those in Math, but the school still underperformed the state and Kent ISD district-wide proficiency levels in all grades except 6th grade, though the levels were much closer.

Finally, the expansion of PSAs in Michigan has the potential to complicate matters going forward for the state's public universities. Many of these universities have their own pre-service and graduate education programs to train prospective teachers. Universities supporting the expansion of PSAs by awarding an increasing numbers of charters, while simultaneously seeking practicum placements in the traditional public schools for pre-service students, seems a potentially precarious situation for universities to place themselves.

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