Testimony

Raising the Bar: The Role of Charter Schools in K-12 Education

LISA GRAHAM KEEGAN | MARCH 12, 2014

Testimony from Lisa Graham Keegan, Board Chair for the National Association of Charter School Authorizers and AAF education expert, before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce.
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Thank you Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Miller, and members of the Committee. I am honored to speak with you today. I so appreciate all of your work and it is gratifying to be here to discuss the critical need and the real possibility for rapid improvement in the quality of all public schools.

I had the honor of serving as Arizona's House Education Committee Chairman when we passed our charter schools laws in 1994, and then as our elected state school chief for two terms as we implemented that law. It is now my privilege for to serve as the chairwoman for the National Association of Charter School Authorizers. NACSA is a nonprofit membership organization committed to developing and maintaining high standards for charter school authorizing. Our members are some of the largest charter school authorizers in the country and oversee more than half of the nation's 6,000 charter schools.

What I am most proud of at NACSA is our focus on excellence, and our partnership with authorizers around the country who are struggling to get this right.

Two decades worth of data on every student's performance in every public school has taught us so much. We have proof that any student is capable of graduating from school prepared for college or to make another life-sustaining choice. There are examples of excellence in every sector of public schooling – charter, district and magnet schools – and

for every type of student – those from homes with very low income, those in rural areas of the country, and students from among all of our ethnic and social groups.

So we know what is possible, but we are far from the moment that every individual student has access to an exceptional school. Creating and sustaining only excellent schools must be our focus. And much of the knowledge we now possess about how to do that has been gained in two decades of work on public charter schools.

Public charter schools were created specifically to advance achievement. They reflect the vision, the skills and the heart of the team that founds them. They are intentional schools, schools built to order, to meet a need known but not met, a possibility understood but not yet realized. Public charter schools were envisioned to be the place that we could find solutions for America's most intractable struggle to realize our children's potential. And they have been America's best public education innovation tool.

Until the advent of public charter schools in the 90's, new public schools were created when there was projected growth and when there was sufficient money in place – period.

Nothing in our traditional school development requirements spoke directly to quality. Certainly we have magnificent examples of excellence in traditional settings. But it is critical to recognize that the job state law gives school board members relates to numbers, not to quality. The rapid growth of public charter schools gives us the opportunity to rethink this process. Instead of planning a new school, boards can solicit offers to operate a new school to education leaders with a track record of excellence. Pre-approval of academic goals and contractual guarantees for progress can be a requirement for any public school.

The evidence we have says any school anywhere can be excellent. The mythology about schools being only as good as student demography predicts is dying a well-deserved death. Not only because of public charter schools, this truth is the result of decades of new data that reflects the work of all exceptional public schools.

But it's important to recognize the significance of this shift. The new reality for American education is that quality – the ability to succeed on behalf of students served –is a function of teaching, of teachers, of schools and school models. Unless school leaders can guarantee it, they should not be empowered to open or lead a school. And unless school boards and authorizing boards know the key features of what these intentionally excellent schools will look like, they can't bring them into existence, or support their sustained quality.

As the chairwoman of NACSA, I have been very proud to be a part of the One Million Lives campaign, whose goal is to work with authorizers to open and oversee only high quality schools, and to make the very tough decisions to close failing charter schools. By doing so,

we can get one million more children into 3000 high-performing schools over five years.

And we are on track to do so. Last year, we saw at least 450 new schools opened by authorizers that we know require rigorous professional review. During that same period and because of these demanding standards, 206 charter schools were closed. In the first few years of this campaign, we will experience a very difficult “cleanup” as a longstanding group of schools that simply cannot improve are closed. But that will be a short window. The emphasis of our work is on understanding excellence at opening, and as we open more and more schools with the skills to serve their students exceptionally well, the closure side of our campaign will subside. And we will improve not one million, but many millions of lives going forward.

The shift in our knowledge base over the past twenty years cannot be overstated: the advent of public charter schools and the authorizing function has drawn us into the research of what a new school will need in order to be excellent, and how an authorizer – or any governing board – can demand ongoing quality in all of their schools.

The advent of public charter schools combined with two decades worth of annual, per-student achievement data has given the entire public school system far more information about what constitutes a quality school than we ever had before. The challenge to all of us now is to make that matter for all students. And in fact, there are leaders on school boards and authorizing boards all over the country who are sharing this information and trying to understand how they might learn from each other.

Seeking to open only excellent public charter schools is an awesome responsibility, and I think it is with great relief that those of us who began this twenty years ago can now say we understand far more than we did a few decades ago what makes an excellent school – at the outset and in ongoing operation.

But this is also a moment that demands deep humility.

We cannot be satisfied with our current standards of practice or suggest universal regulations that uphold only what is already created. We know a lot. We don’t know everything we need to know. Our research into what matters most must continue.

For example, in the presence of many very large and successful charter school networks, the local school that is created by a community can go unstudied and its success may depend on an entirely different set of supports. And we understand this well in Arizona.

In Arizona, one of our strongest assets is a very diverse population, and a student population whose largest ethnic group is Hispanic. The charter school reforms we have had in place for

two decades in Arizona were the result of very strong bipartisan backing at inception and an ongoing support consistently led by statewide Hispanic leadership organizations. The struggle for public charter schools in Arizona has never been for political popularity. Our struggle continues to be achieving high quality in all of our public schools. The big divide in our education system is not between charters and district schools – it is between schools that are excellent, and those that are not.

When Arizona began our charter school movement in the mid-90's, we dealt with a massive demand for new public charter schools in high need communities. Many of those schools were opened, and many failed. Arizona was known as the "Wild West" and as a state that did not care about achievement. That was never true. But what was true was that we care a great deal about community initiation of schools.

With the advent of large school networks that very successfully serve low-income communities, we know what quality at opening can look like. And we have to be deeply grateful for these schools and their teachers. But the temptation is to rely only on those proven networks to operate, as we understand their quality and their consistency. Because the smaller, community initiated schools are a risk.

But those schools are often run by community leaders whose trust is held by the families they serve, and whose ability to truly transform their own neighborhood is strong. My favorite public charter school is in South Phoenix, and is one of these schools. Espiritu was an extremely low achieving school for a number of years before the staff were incentivized – by a risk of closure and a loss of their students to a new high quality charter school across the street – to become the A quality school that they are today. I have the same emerging love affair with a local district school that is leading its community, bucking the odds and after decades of low performance, will soon be an A quality school.

What these two schools have most in common is that the decision of their leaders has been not only to transform education for their students, but to transform their neighborhoods and communities. They focus on both simultaneously. We must spend as much time understanding the work of these local leaders as we do importing and supporting large national networks, or we risk losing the trust of the communities we are striving to serve.

We are learning every day what can be achieved by allowing excellent teachers and other education leaders to bring their ideas to public schooling. And it feels great to know a lot more than we used to. But I fear any assumption that says we know enough. I fear those who believe that we should codify today's knowledge and not tolerate future failed attempts at excellence. I'm no fan of failure. But our goal has to be excellence for all students, and we are far from there. Innovation must be allowed to continue. The critical balancing act by

authorizers and by all governing boards is to act on the best of what we know today, and to be open to learn what is possible tomorrow.

In the face of so much new knowledge, and in the presence of such inspirational and still early success, we can only be emboldened to move ahead. At NACSA, we are humbled to work with the leaders around the country who are doing just that.

Thank you, again, Mr. Chairman, for providing me the opportunity to testify before the Committee today. We at NACSA have greatly appreciated how both you and Mr. Miller have strongly supported the roles of quality and authorizing in the charter school arena. I look forward to answering your questions.