

# The Secretary of School Choice

But is Betsy DeVos helping or hurting the privatization of schools?

By MIKE MAGNER and ERIN BACON

**ONE OF THE LEADING DISCIPLES** of the school choice movement, Jeanne Allen of the Center for Education Reform, asked an ominous question in an op-ed published in May: “Who is killing charter schools?”

Teachers’ unions are the main culprit, Allen opined, followed by politicians in states like West Virginia, where legislators tabled a bill to authorize charter schools in the wake of a statewide teacher strike in February. A compromise bill that would allow three charter schools every three years is currently moving through the state legislature.

“As advocates push districts to encourage innovative charter schools, opportunity

and all-around better education, some entrenched interests are pushing back — both in union halls and state capitols nationwide,” Allen wrote in South Carolina’s Charleston Post and Courier.

Allen’s seeming epitaph for a cause she has been promoting for decades was striking, coming at a time when the current national leader on education policy, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, is the most powerful advocate for school choice in her department’s short history.

Since her Senate confirmation in February 2017 on Vice President Mike Pence’s tie-breaking vote, DeVos’ almost single-

minded focus has been on expanding privatization of public schools through charters, vouchers that help poor families pay private school tuition and tax incentives.

She has had mixed success. Her department has shifted millions of dollars from traditional public schools to programs benefiting charters, though within limits imposed by Congress. But attempts to ease regulations for private schools, such as allowing public funds to be used to provide services in religious schools, have hit roadblocks in the courts.

Despite DeVos’ efforts, growth of charter schools nationwide has slowed significantly, both in enrollment and the number of

schools, compared to what it was 10 to 15 years ago when the choice movement was in its heyday.

This prompts the question: Is DeVos one of those who is “killing charter schools,” as Allen asked? Neither DeVos, through the Education Department press office, nor Allen, who was a department official in the Reagan administration before founding the Center for Education Reform in 1993, responded to requests for interviews.

But DeVos’ critics, of which there are many, and some of her supporters are more than willing to discuss the secretary’s impact on trends in K-12 education after 29 months in office.

Bob Tate, senior policy analyst for the nation’s largest teachers’ union, the National Education Association, argues that DeVos and President Donald Trump have perhaps not been the best promoters of charter schools.

“There were charter advocates who were wary when Trump and DeVos [took] their current positions ... who thought of Trump and DeVos as not helpful,” Tate says. “I think there was a recognition that policies of this administration are extreme.”

A spokesman for the teachers’ union in Michigan, where DeVos got her start in education policy by financing school-choice initiatives, agrees there has been a backlash against her.

“Betsy DeVos has been very helpful in stemming the tide we have been fighting against for-profit charters,” says David Crim of the Michigan Education Association. “Each time she speaks, and is unable to articulate a reasoned rationale for these corporate charters, it hurts her cause.”

The general philosophy behind charters was that parents needed a better choice when their only option was a neighborhood public school with poor facilities, inadequate staff and dismal academic performance, especially in impoverished inner cities.

The charter movement exploded in the 1990s and early 2000s, but in recent years growth has leveled off as groups

like the NEA have called for limits unless there is greater accountability in funding and performance.

National polls show a decline in public support for charter schools since 2017, and some states have taken steps to cap their growth out of concern they are draining funds from traditional public schools, which still educate about 84 percent of America’s children.

In the 2017-18 school year, there were 47.4 million students in traditional public schools, 3.2 million in public charter schools and 5.8 million in K-12 private schools, according to national data.

Growth in charter school enrollment has slowed to around 6 percent a year since 2015, about half the annual growth rates from 2005 to 2010, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools and the Department of Education say.

Establishment of new charter schools has also dropped to the point that an organization of state officials who oversee charter schools issued a report in March entitled “Reinvigorating the Pipeline,” assessing the recent trend of fewer new schools being proposed or approved.

Those trends began well before DeVos took office, so the question becomes whether her advocacy for charter schools is accelerating a decline or merely having little effect,

says Greg Richmond, CEO of the group that did the “Pipeline” report, the National Association of Charter School Authorizers.

“Certainly people know who DeVos is at a stunning level for an Education secretary,” Richmond says. “And then people have opinions about her. But in terms of translating to the person on the street — ‘What does Betsy DeVos think about charter schools?’ — they don’t know.”

### Democratic Resistance

Richmond says a bigger reason support for charter schools may be waning is the shift in the political winds. Barack Obama’s support for charter schools made it tough for Democratic politicians to strongly oppose them, even though teachers’ unions had been pushing hard in that direction for a decade, he says.

“The rank-and-file Democrats knew their president was supporting this. Well, that’s gone now. They had the teachers’ unions pushing them and they don’t have the president pulling back. So there’s been an erosion of the middle on the Democratic side of the aisle.”

On the Republican side, there seems to be less enthusiasm for charter schools and more for “pre-market kinds of school choice,” such as publicly funded vouchers to pay for private-school tuition and tax-exempt education savings accounts, Richmond says.

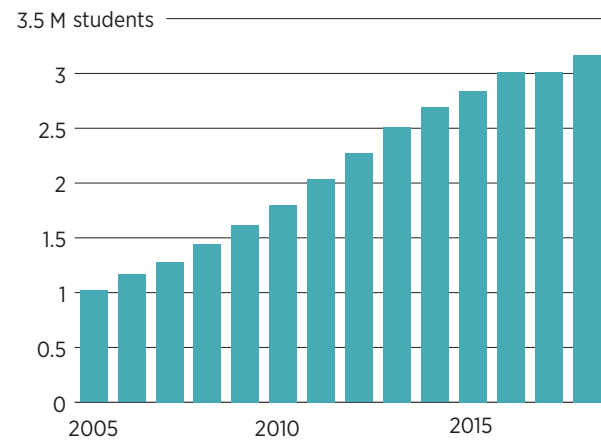
The changes in the political climate are reflected in the difficulties DeVos has faced getting her budget proposals through Congress, even when Republicans were in control of both the House and the Senate.

While she did get an increase in funding for charter school grants — from \$333.2 million in fiscal 2016 to \$440 million in fiscal 2019 — DeVos in her fiscal 2019 budget proposal had requested \$500 million and did so again in the department’s fiscal 2020 proposal. However, the 2020 budget plan put forward by House Democrats in May would cut charter grants to \$400 million.

The House (HR 2740) also wants to boost the overall department budget by \$11.9 billion more than DeVos requested, to \$75.9 billion, with much of the

### Student bodies

Enrollment in charter schools has tripled since 2005, but leveled off in recent years.



Sources: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, U.S. Department of Education  
Jason Mann/CQ Roll Call



Courtesy National Archives

proposed increase going to programs in traditional public schools that she wanted to cut, such as grants for teacher training and student support.

Meanwhile, a DeVos-backed plan to provide \$5 billion a year in tax credits for donations to private-school scholarships and development programs, introduced in March by Republican Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas (S 634) and GOP Rep. Bradley Byrne of Alabama (HR 1434), appears to be going nowhere.

“House Democrats will not waste time on proposals that undermine public education,” said Education and Labor Chairman Robert C. Scott of Virginia in a statement when the bills were unveiled.

Charter schools have also come under attack this year from Democratic presidential candidates, while Trump has said little on the subject, other than proclaiming May 12-18 as National Charter Schools Week.

Sen. Bernie Sanders, a Vermont independent seeking the nomination, announced in May that he would advocate a ban on for-

profit charter schools if elected in 2020. (The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools says about a third of charter schools have private managers, and two-thirds of those have nonprofit tax status, while the rest are for-profit companies.) And Sen. Cory Booker of New Jersey, a Democrat also making a presidential bid, has faced criticism from teachers’ unions for his longtime support of the school-choice movement, highlighted by his attendance at a 2012 event sponsored by a pro-charter group, the American Federation for Children, then chaired by DeVos.

### The Charter Boom

The idea of school choice had its birth in the South after the Supreme Court in its 1954 ruling, *Brown v. Board of Education*, found that segregated schools were unconstitutional. In the face of forced desegregation in the 1960s and ’70s, some Southern states put public funds into vouchers so students could attend all-white schools, though they also had the choice of going to integrated schools.

The movement blossomed in the 1980s as President Ronald Reagan advocated for greater privatization of many government services, including education, and a blue-ribbon commission established by the White House issued a report in 1983 called “A Nation at Risk” that fueled attacks on public schools.

The Clinton administration encouraged charter schools in the Improving America’s Schools Act in 1994, and the trend was further advanced by the No Child Left Behind Act passed during the first year of the George W. Bush administration and signed into law in January 2002.

Today charter schools have been authorized in 44 states and the District of Columbia, with Minnesota the first to open a publicly funded, privately run school in 1992. California also passed a law allowing charters the same year and now has by far the most — 1,275 charter schools in the 2017-18 school year attended by about 11 percent of the state’s K-12 student population.

In the nation's capital, where public schools were falling apart in the 1990s as wealthier residents fled to expensive but high-quality private schools, the school choice movement took hold in 1996 when the first charter schools were authorized to provide competition in hopes of spurring improvements in the traditional public schools. The District went further in 2004 when it received assistance from the federal government in the form of vouchers allowing students from lower-income families to attend private and parochial schools. Today nearly half of all D.C. students attend charter schools, though the voucher program faces funding hurdles in Congress each year.

### The Michigan Experiment

Betsy DeVos and her husband, Amway heir Dick DeVos, were early players in the school choice movement as wealthy conservative activists in Michigan, where charter schools were first authorized under a law signed by Republican Gov. John Engler in 1994. The DeVos family financed a lobbying effort for the new law, and then as chairwoman of the Michigan Republican Party from 1996 to 2000, Betsy DeVos pushed to expand charter schools statewide, with the failing Detroit school system a top priority.

Now Michigan has a higher percentage of for-profit schools than any other state, with roughly 4 in 5 operated by for-profit management groups, says the Michigan Education Association's Crim, and the results are troubling to him.

"When I was growing up — I'm in my mid-

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50s — Michigan was in the top 10, sometimes the top five or six public school systems in the country, both in funding and student achievement," Crim says. Now the state ranks in the mid-30s in the amount of public revenue per student, he says.

"Campaign contributions that the DeVoses made paved the way for them to create this very wide-open, for-profit charter school law, which has drained now \$1 billion a year out of the K-12 budget, out of traditional, neighborhood public schools," he says.

The money isn't always giving students a better alternative to traditional public schools, either. The Michigan Department of Education regularly identifies the state's poorest-performing schools and assigns them to partnership agreements with the state to try to help them avoid closure. Charter schools make up a large portion of those schools.

All states with charter schools, including Michigan, include some where students do better than their peers in traditional schools, but also some that perform worse academically. The track record in shutting down weak schools varies widely, too: In Michigan, for example, 210 charters have closed since the law authorizing them was enacted in 1994, the Detroit News reported last year. But in neighboring Ohio, few charter schools were closed until a new law strengthening standards was passed in 2015, according to the Columbus Dispatch.

Some of the poor-performing schools in Michigan are authorized by state colleges, putting them in a tough spot. If they close a school to protect the university's reputation, they lose the revenues they receive from taxpayers to educate those students.

Central Michigan University is a prime example. CMU had 72 charter schools under its authorization in 2015 — one-fifth of all the charter schools in Michigan — and the overall performance of the schools was given a grade of "C" that year by Education Trust Midwest, an education policy nonprofit.

Several of CMU's schools were among the state's top-performing schools, but there were also four that were "severely underperforming," the group's report card on CMU said. The university also closed two schools that were ranked among the worst in the state in 2013-14, the report said, helping to raise CMU's score slightly in 2015.

## School Choice Means Shifting Dollars

In numerous studies on the financial issues associated with public charter schools, two conclusions are most prominent:

- Charters do siphon money from traditional public schools in their districts, and
- Charters on average receive less public money on a per-pupil basis than other district schools.

But the verdict from these two phenomena is less clear.

The financial drain from traditional public schools has become a focal point over the past year or so for teachers in places with the largest number of charter schools.

In Arizona last year, a six-day strike in April and May resulted in more pay for teachers, but also exposed concerns about the effects of the state's popular voucher programs on funding for traditional schools. West Virginia teachers held a statewide strike in February — one year after a walkout over pay — in protest of a bill to allow the first charter schools in the state. The bill was tabled after a veto threat from the governor.

And in Los Angeles earlier this year, teachers in the nation's second-largest school district forced the school board to seek a statewide moratorium on new charter schools until the financial effects of current charters are assessed.

A study of three California school districts last year gave some credence to the teachers' concerns. Professor Gordon Lafer of the University of Oregon's Labor and Education Research Center found that the presence of charter schools in Oakland, San Diego and Santa Clara County meant tens of millions of dollars were no longer available for programs in traditional schools.

California law doesn't allow local school boards to consider how a charter school might affect the finances of other schools, Lafer noted in his report. "However, when a student leaves a neighborhood school for a charter school, their pro-rated share of funding leaves with them, while the district remains responsible for many costs that those funds had supported," he wrote. "This intensifies fiscal pressure to cut core services like counseling, libraries, and special education, and increase class sizes at neighborhood schools."

A 2016 study by Bruce Baker of the Rutgers University Graduate School of Education also said that charter schools inevitably shift funds away from traditional schools, but Baker said most districts figure out ways to cope. "District schools are surviving but under increased stress," his report said.

While critics of charter schools claim they drain money from traditional schools, Greg Richmond, head of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, has a different take. "They're really draining it from public control — it's not in the control of the district budget office," he says.

"New schools get built around the country all the time," Richmond says. "When that happens nobody pops up and says that new high



SEEING RED: Arizona teachers march to the state Capitol in Phoenix on April 26, 2018.

school is draining money from public education. They say, 'Terrific, we needed a new high school.'

"The implication is that we wouldn't have any problems in traditional public education if it weren't for charter schools," he adds. "It is really at the heart of a lot of the assertions in the teacher strikes in California. That, I think, is not accurate. But it's part of the rhetorical debate going on right now."

Pro-charter groups are quick to point out that on average nationwide, the per-pupil funding for charters is below the amount provided for students in traditional public schools.

In Florida, for instance, charter schools received \$7,307 in tax dollars per student in the 2015-16 school year, while other public schools received \$10,308 per pupil, according to the Florida Charter School Alliance.

An analysis of per-pupil funding in 15 U.S. cities for the 2015-16 school year found a similar pattern. On average, charter schools in those cities received \$5,828 per student, 27 percent less than their district peers, according to a report this year by Bellwether Education Partners, a national nonprofit group.

While some argue that increased funding for charter schools would help improve their academic performance, others point out that privately run charters often have fewer costs than district schools. In some states, charters have no obligation to provide bus transportation, for example, nor are they required to have lunches available on site as are other public schools.

In most states, charter schools also are exempt from mandates to provide special education programs, says Robert C. Bobb, a Washington consultant on school management.

"I do think charter schools have not done a good job accepting children with special needs," Bobb says. "The services to them are very expensive and the charter schools have not accepted them in a big way."

Bobb also points out that charter schools can more easily dismiss problem students, forcing them on traditional public schools. "If a child is disruptive, are they going to continue to work with that child as opposed to expelling them?" he asks. "If not, the public school system becomes the education system of last resort."

— Mike Magner



DEVOS LEGACY: Students gather between classes at West Michigan Aviation Academy in Grand Rapids, Mich., a charter high school at Gerald R. Ford International Airport founded by Dick DeVos.



**NEW ERA:** Students attend music class at the Encore Academy charter school in New Orleans, where more than 100 schools were damaged or destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. The district is now entirely made up of charter schools.

Crim says charter authorizers have a financial incentive to downplay poor performance by their students, because 3 percent of the approximately \$8,000 per student provided by taxpayers goes to the sponsoring organization.

“So their incentive to sort of police these schools for academic integrity is marginalized by the fact that they’re making money from them,” he says.

Robert C. Bobb, now a K Street consultant on education and city management, was appointed emergency manager for the Detroit Public Schools in 2009, when the system faced a \$219 million deficit. In his first year on the job Bobb closed 29 neighborhood schools that were replaced by privately run charter schools, but it wasn’t long before accountability issues began to surface.

“In some cases management brought in friends and relatives to serve on the board and there was really no hard oversight,” Bobb says. He began requiring training for all charter school board members in their fiduciary responsibilities, “so the management company isn’t enriching themselves,

*“We’re seeing here that these promises of lawmakers are really hollow promises and they were really geared at trying to underfund public schools and divert money away so that people can make profits off our kids.”*

Andrew Spar, Florida Education Association vice president

which has happened.”

The president of a pro-charter group called the Michigan Association of Public School Academies, Dan Quisenberry, says despite problems at some schools, charter schools are still popular in the state.

“There continues to be strong public support, parental support, for charter schools in Michigan,” Quisenberry says.

“Charter schools have never been about the number,” he says. “It’s been about meeting the needs of a community, meeting the needs of a particular population or a city and finding people that are interested in opening a school.”

Many charters provide unique programs not offered in traditional public schools, Quisenberry says.

“I can tell you there were 295 charter schools in Michigan this past school year, and there’s 295 different stories that fit that,” he says. Some of those schools, he says, focus on science, technology, engineering and math, and the needs of the business community — “a new education, project-based learning kind of environment. Well, tradi-

## Minority Report: Mixed Results

It’s fair to say that Robert C. Bobb, now a 74-year-old Washington consultant on city and school management, is the Forrest Gump of charter schools, having been a part of three major urban school districts heavily invested in publicly funded, privately operated schools.

He was born and raised in New Orleans and visits there frequently to watch his beloved Saints play in the NFL, so he’s paid close attention to the only school system in the nation that is now 100 percent charters.

After stints as a city manager in Kalamazoo, Mich.; Oakland, Calif.; and Richmond, Va., Bobb became Washington’s city administrator, deputy mayor and school board president from 2003 to 2009, as the city was in the midst of expanding the private role in its troubled public schools.

And then, after losing control of the D.C. schools to upstart Mayor Adrian Fenty, Bobb was appointed emergency manager of the financially drowning Detroit school system, a job that kept him busy for two years closing dozens of neighborhood schools and replacing them with charters.

New Orleans, Washington and Detroit also happen to be majority black school districts, and the results of the school choice movement in those cities reflects what is happening in communities across the country — some good, some bad and some not making much difference at all in closing the seemingly intractable gap between white students and minorities in academic performance.

In New Orleans, all 86 public schools are now charters after the system was reconstructed following Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Overall the result has been improved academic performance, according to a number of assessments, but the Urban League of Louisiana says there is still a racial divide: Minorities, who make up 93 percent of the total enrollment, are often the entire population in schools with the worst grades while white students primarily attend schools with A- and B-ratings, the group reported in 2017.

About half the schools in Washington are now charters, and low-income students have more opportunities to choose better-performing private schools thanks to a federally funded voucher program. But Bobb says he was disappointed this spring when the D.C. Charter School Board authorized five new charter schools and only one will be located east of the Anacostia River, the area of the city with the most disadvantaged students.

The decision raises a question that charters face nationally, he says. Are minorities being served as well as white students?

“The charters will make the argument we serve all children, no matter race, creed or color or where their ZIP codes are,” he says. “It’s up to charter schools to prove it’s true. ... Take the state of Michigan and the enrollment of charters — are the successful ones serving children of color? I would pull from a sample of the major urban areas that have a large population of children of color and then determine whether those charters are equalizing their services.”



Bill Clark/CO Roll Call

Robert C. Bobb

Among charter schools in Michigan, some of the lowest test scores in the state show up in the Detroit schools, and minority students rarely have alternatives because they live too far from the best-performing schools in a city with poor transportation services, according to a recent investigation by the Detroit Free Press.

A study published in March by researchers at Harvard and Stanford universities made a distressing finding: The gap in academic performance between advantaged and disadvantaged students has hardly closed at all in a half century.

“On the positive side, the country has launched multiple compensatory education programs, including Head Start, school desegregation, federal

aid to districts with low-income students, special education programs and court-ordered reductions in fiscal inequalities across school districts,” Stanford economist Eric Hanushek said in a statement issued with the study. “On the negative side, we appear to have seen a decline in teacher quality that has had particularly dire consequences for low-income students.”

All public schools, both charter and traditional, are struggling with “the geographic segregation and achievement gap between students of different racial, ethnic and income groups,” a nonprofit research organization, Bellwether Education Partners, wrote in a report on charter schools earlier this year.

The NAACP is so concerned by the lack of progress that the prominent civil rights organization issued a call in 2017 for a moratorium on charter school expansion “until there is accountability and transparency in their operations.” The report said there is particular concern about for-profit charter schools because they have an incentive to keep operating even if performance is dismal.

Bobb says he agrees with the NAACP that there is an accountability issue with charter schools. And that applies to all of them, even if they claim to be nonprofit, he says.

“Some charter schools say they are not for-profit but at the end of the day they are for-profit,” and it shows up in the higher compensation usually given to charter managers compared to their peers in the traditional public schools, he says.

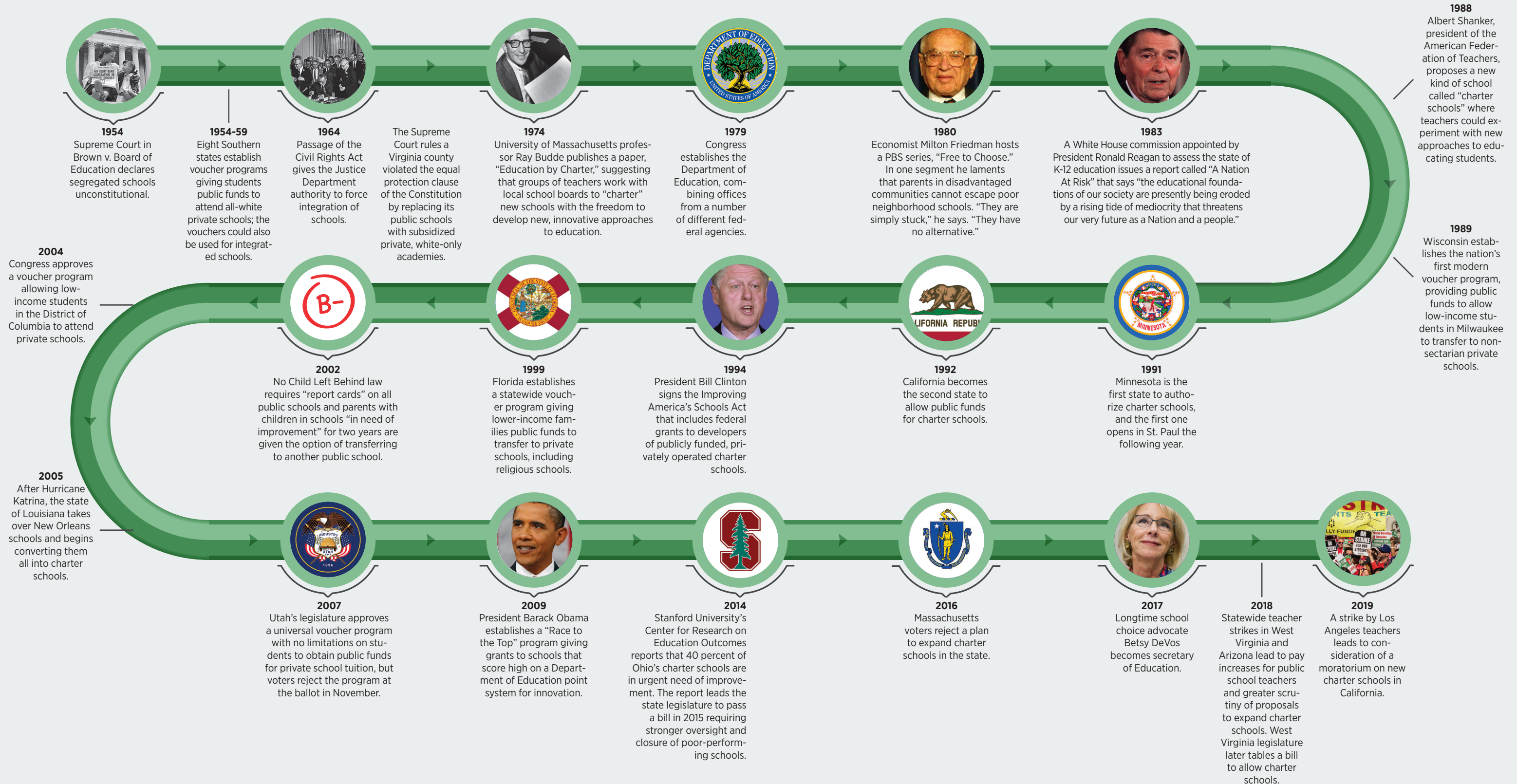
Does Bobb believe the K-12 education system in America has become too politicized?

“It would be naïve to think there’s not politics involved one way or the other,” he says. “But here’s the thing, and I just keep harping back to it. We have charter organizers, unions and politics, but what about the parents? Let’s focus on giving the parents the choice.”

“It’s hard to take the politics out of it. But at the end of the day if I’m a parent, I want to send my child to where they’re going to get a great education, where they’re going to be in a safe environment, and where they’re going to be in a caring and nurturing system. And you find that in very good public schools and in very good charter schools.”

— Mike Magner

# Key Events in the School Choice Movement



tional schools can do that too, but the ability to create a school that addresses those specific things from scratch is more doable in some ways [in charter schools].”

**Performance Questions**

Many studies have been done comparing academic performance in charter schools with that of traditional schools and the results have been decidedly inconclusive.

A report released in January by Bellwether Education Partners, a national nonprofit focused on improving education for underserved children, concluded that about a quarter of charter schools perform better in both reading and math than traditional public schools, while 31 percent perform worse in math and 19 percent perform worse in reading. The rest were about equal in performance.

Stanford University researchers in 2015 analyzed academic performance at charter schools in 41 metro areas, and found that “urban charter schools on average achieve significantly greater student success in both math and reading, which amounts to 40 additional days of learning growth in math and 28 days of additional growth in reading.”

And a University of Arkansas study re-

leased this spring said students from charter schools in eight major cities ended up with about 44 percent greater lifetime earnings potential than students from traditional schools.

Students in Boston’s charter schools are showing both higher test scores and college entrance rates than their peers in traditional public schools, according to a study released in May by the National Bureau of Economic Research based at Harvard University.

But there is a downside: According to the Boston Globe, as more students move to charter schools, state aid is shifting to them as well.

Boston is set to receive \$220 million in state education aid this year — about \$167 million for charter-school tuition for 10,000 students, and a little more than \$50 million for the city schools’ 55,000 students, the newspaper reported in January.

The financial drain from traditional schools has been so great in Massachusetts, which has some of the top-performing charters in the country, that state voters in 2016 turned down a ballot proposal to allow more charter schools in the state, even though proponents of the issue far outspent the opponents. (See related story on page 21.)

Public school teachers in heavy charter states have become profoundly aware of

the drain, and are bringing it to the attention of lawmakers and parents alike.

Statewide strikes by teachers in West Virginia and Arizona last year brought new scrutiny to the impacts from charter schools in a “Red for Ed” campaign that has spread nationwide, with teachers wearing bright red shirts saying “The Educators Strike Back” and other slogans.

Los Angeles teachers won concessions toward a cap on charter schools after a strike this year, and California leaders are now considering a statewide moratorium on charters. “It’s clear in Los Angeles that there is widespread awareness that charter growth does not come without a cost,” says the NEA’s Tate.

**The Florida Experience**

Under a string of Republican governors starting with Jeb Bush in 1999, Florida has gone all in on school choice, and 10 percent of the state’s 2.8 million K-12 students now attend charter schools. In May, Gov. Ron DeSantis signed Florida’s fifth school choice law, creating a \$130 million Family Empowerment Scholarship program that will provide 18,000 students with vouchers to attend private schools this fall. Families with up to \$77,250 in annual income are eligible for the vouchers.

The Florida Education Association says the program represents a further drain on traditional public schools, already “one of the worst-funded school systems in the nation,” says the group’s vice president Andrew Spar. Teacher salaries are so low that the state Education Department expects 10,300 vacancies will need to be filled this summer.

“And so that whole disinvestment in public schools, and putting out there that panacea that charter schools and vouchers are the answer, has not materialized,” Spar says. “We’re seeing here that these promises of lawmakers are really hollow promises and they were really geared at trying to underfund public schools and divert money away so that people can make profits off our kids.”

Spar says the same scenario is playing out nationally.

“You have someone in Betsy DeVos who has no education credentials whatsoever,” he says. “That doesn’t necessarily mean these are bad people per se, but it does mean that they don’t understand what’s needed for kids to be successful. And they push an agenda,

both here and Florida and at the national level. What you’re seeing is this push to privatize public education.

“And we see attempt after attempt to try to make this myth that charter schools are the answer more appealing, and again, I don’t think parents are buying it. And they shouldn’t. Because when you really look at the research, the research shows that charter schools are not accountable to the same levels as the public schools. They don’t have to answer to parents.”

A spokesman for the Florida Charter School Alliance, Ralph Arza, has the opposite view.

“All charter schools in Florida are nonprofits, number one, and they only exist because parents choose to send their children to these charter schools,” Arza says.

In fact, while all charters must be governed by a nonprofit board, they can contract with for-profit management companies to handle day-to-day operations.

The fact that Trump formally announced his re-election campaign in Orlando on June 18 — a week before Democratic candidates held their first debates in Miami — suggests that K-12 education issues will be prominent in the 2020 elections, Arza says.

“What’s happening is Florida is ground zero in the political landscape going into next year,” he says, adding that opposition to charters primarily comes from the teacher’s union and the League of Women Voters.

“What they don’t understand is they’re not attacking charter schools, they’re attacking those moms and dads who choose to send their kids to charter schools,” Arza says. “It’s like if the taxicab industry got mad at everybody that rode in Uber.”

**Charter All the Way**

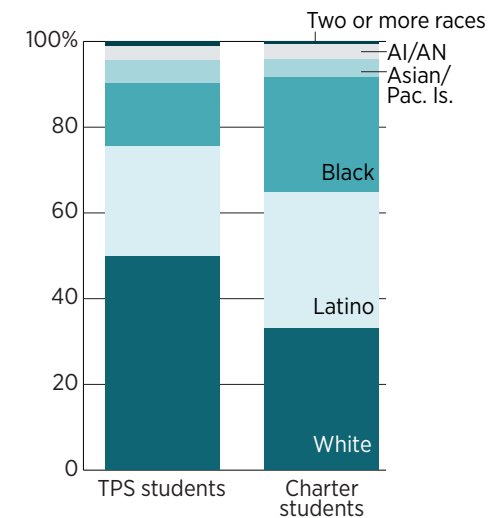
After Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in 2005, the state of Louisiana took over the school system and rebuilt it with charter schools, a process that was completed in December when the last traditional high school was turned over to a private manager. Most reports say the schools have improved, with 61 percent of the system’s high school graduates in 2017 going on to college, compared to 37 percent in 2004.

There are still some issues, though.

An elected Orleans Parish School Board now has oversight of the system, but each school is considered autonomous and has

**Student makeup**

Nationwide, charter schools have a higher percentage of minorities than traditional public schools.



Source: National Center for Education Statistics Jason Mann/CQ Roll Call

full control over its operations, making it difficult for parents to have a voice when they have concerns about a school’s management. Some of those parents recently formed a coalition called Erase the Board, which says on its Facebook page that the mission “is to Elect School Board Members who will follow the Louisiana Constitution which requires them to run and operate schools.”

One of the coalition organizers, Ashana Bigard, explained the goal in May to a writer for the Hechinger Report, a nonprofit news service that covers education.

“So when stuff happens, like if there’s a security guard or dean of students that’s constantly beating or harassing kids, they can put that up so that the public can be aware and we can put pressure on the schools to get rid of that person,” Bigard said, adding that currently at Orleans Parish School Board meetings, “Our voices literally have no weight.”

Another concern about the New Orleans schools, exposed this spring in a nationwide report on waste in the federal grant program for charter schools, is that the parish has received \$23.8 million for 110 charter schools since 2006, but 51 of those schools are either closed or never opened.

Overall, nationwide more than \$1 billion in federal grants have gone to charter schools that never opened or have been closed, according to the report by the Network for Public Education, which says its mission is “to preserve, promote, improve and strengthen public schools for both current and future generations of students.”

In the summary of its report, recommending an end to the department’s Charter Schools Program, the group said: “Our investigation finds the U.S. Department of Education has not been a responsible steward of taxpayer dollars in its management of the CSP. Based on what we found, we believe it is likely that one billion dollars of federal ‘seed money’ has been wasted on charters that never opened or shut their doors. We were equally dismayed to find that many of the CSP-funded charter schools that survived did not fulfill their stated mission, especially in regard to enrolling proportionate numbers of disadvantaged youth.”

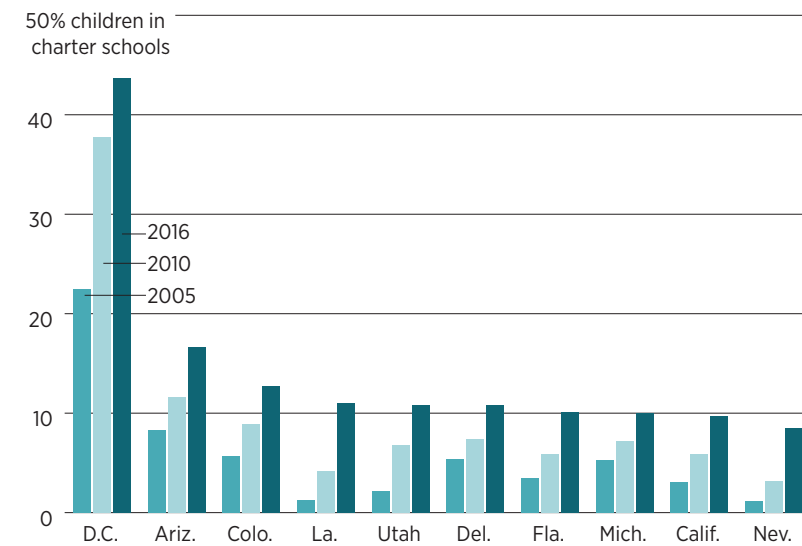
Asked about the report at back-to-back House and Senate hearings in March, DeVos had just one answer: “We need more charter schools and not less.” ■

*“Charter schools have never been about the number. It’s been about meeting the needs of a community, meeting the needs of a particular population or a city and finding people that are interested in opening a school.”*

Dan Quisenberry, president of the Michigan Association of Public School Academies, a pro-charter group

**Choice movement**

Led by D.C., the share of public school children enrolled in charter schools has jumped in many states on a per capita basis.



Source: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, U.S. Department of Education Ryan Kelly/CQ Roll Call