

Don't Defend the Chicago Charter Experiment

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An October 13 article in [Chicago Business](#) cites a report alleging that the Chicago “experiment” with increased utilization of chartered public schools is a [flop](#). Fearing generalized guilt by association, school choice advocates are pondering a defense/refutation, including questioning the author’s methods and objectivity.

But what school choice advocates need to do is assertively make the case that small, restriction-laden programs deserve low expectations. First of all, because of huge waitlists for most chartered public schools, nationwide, charter laws mostly create school chance, not school choice. And even at its current best, chartering suffers [serious debilitating limitations](#), including, especially the accountability-to-customer-destroying waitlists that result from ‘pricelessness’; that is the government specifies a ceiling on what charter instruction can cost, and specifies that the cost to customers is zero. The Illinois charter law is ‘[in-name-only](#)’. The Center for Education Reform gives the Illinois charter law a score of ‘19’ out of 55; a given grade of ‘D’. So, the Illinois charter law is not very charter friendly. Illinois outcomes are no basis for a generalization about the usefulness of chartering as it currently exists in most other states. We do not want to argue for more widespread adoption of Illinois-style charter laws; quite the contrary.

Differences between ‘A’ states and Illinois amount to an argument for charter law improvement, AND/OR an argument that charter laws, despite significant differences, [have serious shortcomings in common](#). Charter law also has serious potential to become a transformation catalyst. That needs to be the objective; reform of charter law to make it transformational. Price decontrol through the potential for shared financing (not free ONLY; still likely mostly free) would massively enlarge and diversify the menu of schooling options. And it is CRITICAL to remember

that chartered schools that can get people to pay fees would not be readily available, or in existence at all, without the possibility of public-private shared financing. 'Not readily available' means that it (an instructional approach) is present in an existing school, but waitlists for schools using it are so long that the probability of gaining access to it is quite low. [Allowing fees](#) can't create inequitable access to instructional approaches that would not be readily available without the additional funding made possible by the fees.