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# ‘Equal’ treatment of schools masks a double standard

Charters already follow the same transparency rules as everyone else in Michigan

By Molly Macek | June 2024

Legislators are calling on charter schools to report employee data that’s not required of conventional public schools. They’re touting “equal treatment” of public schools as their reason for subjecting charter schools to unequal reporting standards.

“It’s time for charter school companies to be required to have financial transparency that is equal to traditional public schools,” Sen. Dayna Polehanki recently posted on X.

But the senator’s claim about transparency is false.

She’s referring to private management companies that nonprofit, public charter schools contract with to operate some of their services, such as hiring employees, serving food or performing custodial work.

What lawmakers do not acknowledge is that conventional public schools also contract with private, for-profit companies for outside services. But it’s only the private charter companies that

are being targeted by legislators who push for new “transparency” standards.

House Bill 5269 is one of many recent attempts to place new regulations on charter schools only while allowing traditional public schools to escape them. (See also HB 5231-5234.) This law requires charter schools to make employee salary information publicly available. Supporters of the bill claim prospective teachers should be aware of a typical salary before applying for a position at a charter school.

If HB 5269 passes, charter schools will be subject to an extra reporting step that goes beyond what conventional public schools must do. Whether its teachers are hired by the school or by a private management company, they will be required to post the average salaries of new and veteran teachers on their website. But district schools that outsource services don’t face this same requirement.

All school districts have to provide links to their current collective bargaining agreements, which

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typically include teacher salary schedules. Since few charter schools engage in collective bargaining, most don't have anything to report for this requirement. Even so, salary schedules alone fail to inform prospective teachers of the typical salary for new and veteran teachers at a district school.

If legislators believe prospective teachers should have access to salary data, they should require it of every public school, not just charters. And some private companies should not be singled out on the basis that they contract with charter schools.

What is happening here is that lawmakers are going after one type of school (charters) operated in one type of way (managed by a private firm). But there's really no good reason for that.

Charter schools that are operated by management companies tend to perform better than their conventional public school counterparts, according to a recent Stanford University study. The same study found that students who attend charter schools in urban settings experience significantly greater learning gains than their peers at the local district

schools. This was particularly evident among minority and at-risk students. In Detroit, the best elementary and middle schools are charter schools – and most of them are run by private management companies. This is despite them receiving far less funding than the district schools for each student they enroll.

If lawmakers aim to treat every type of school equally, they should do so. That would mean equal funding, equal standards and the same transparency requirements. Legislators ought to take notice of the charter school models that produce stronger student outcomes, not place additional regulations on them under the guise of transparency.

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