

## Viewpoint: Michigan's educational options are helping families access better schools

By Audrey Spalding

*The following is a letter to the editor that was sent to the Kalamazoo Gazette.*

In a recent MLive poll, nearly two-thirds of readers voted that school choice has “destabilized public education,” which “hurts everyone.”

This is a reflection of the narrative many media outlets have portrayed, rather than the facts. In truth, Michigan's educational options are helping students and parents access better schools.

In January 2013, Stanford University published the most detailed and far-reaching study of Michigan charter public schools to date. The study found that Michigan charter school students learn, on average, two months more of material every single year than their peers attending conventional schools.

It took MLive six months to report on that study.

AnnArbor.com lead its story on the Stanford University study with this statistic: “. . . 14 percent of the state's charter schools have below-average growth and below-average achievement in reading.” In actuality, the study found that 82 percent of charter schools posted above-average reading growth, and the authors noted that “These findings position Michigan among the highest performing charter school states [we have] studied to date.”

With this sort of coverage, readers could be forgiven for wrongly thinking Michigan charter schools produce worse results.

In comparison to charter school coverage, Schools of Choice — a program that allows students to enroll in conventional schools outside of their resident districts — is often overlooked. In the past year, there were more than four times as many mentions of charter schools than of schools of choice



*Courtesy photo*

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on MLive, despite the fact that 100,000 students throughout Michigan use the program.

It is unclear why the coverage of schools of choice is not as popular. After all, the same charges of increased segregation, marketing gimmicks and the need for “quality control” wrongly levied at charter schools could be directed toward this program. For critics of choice, it appears to be easier to point fingers at charter schools than at conventional districts that enthusiastically participate in this choice-based program.

In any case, the use of schools of choice has actually been quite positive. The Mackinac Center recently analyzed the decisions of those 100,000 students and found that they tend to choose districts with higher test scores and graduation rates. Michigan State University found the same result more than a decade. While trends and marketing gimmicks may change over time, it appears that what parents and students want broadly stays the same.

The main goal of Michigan's public education system is to benefit public school students. Thanks to public charter schools and schools of choice, students have more options, instead of having to attend a school determined by their home address. And Michigan-specific results show that students using choice are seeing higher rates of academic growth and are attending districts with better test scores and graduation rates.

A system that provides more options and better results is one to celebrate. Hopefully, news coverage will soon catch up with this reality.

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