By: Susan Pendergrass

Without a doubt, the question that I get most often about charter schools is, “But don’t they hurt the public schools?” The short answer is that charter public schools don’t hurt traditional public schools any more than other factors that can affect enrollment, but they may challenge them.

Charter schools, wherever they operate, are often accused of having a harmful effect on the traditional public schools in the area. The thinking seems to be that if parents choose a charter school, then they’re rejecting—and thereby hurting—their assigned neighborhood school. So, did the Honda Accord “hurt” the Ford Taurus, or did Sprint “hurt” AT&T because some people stopped choosing them? Or did they challenge them?

Charter schools do create change in the public school districts in which they open, and that change can take many forms. Charter school opponents tend to focus on one pain point: Charter schools take funding from the public school district. Before addressing this charge, I’d like to remind readers that charter schools are public schools and charter school students are public school students. When parents are given a choice over one of the most important aspects of their child’s life—their school—not all parents choose the public school assigned to them on the basis of their address. Many choose a public charter school instead. So, while their child’s public education funding stays within the borders of their public school district, it is no longer available to be spent by the local school board.
When a parent chooses to send a child to a charter school, the state funding that would have been sent to the public school district where that student lives is sent, instead, to the charter school the parent has chosen. Federal funding, such as that for low-income students or students with disabilities, also, theoretically, follows the student. Some, but not all, of the local funding may go with the student. The same is true whether the student chooses a charter school, moves to another school district, or moves to another state. The local public school district is no longer tasked with educating the student, so they no longer get the money to do so.

The rub seems to be that charter schools create a new school where one already exists, and when students leave, the existing school really can’t downsize—at least not quickly. Of course, the likelihood of a substantial number of students choosing a charter school is related to the perceived quality of the schools in the district. Prior to charter schools, parents in poorly performing school districts moved out if they could. Rising and declining enrollment can be challenging for public school districts. But the solution isn’t to prevent kids from leaving because the district can’t afford it, any more than it would be reasonable to prevent parents from moving out of the district.

Public school districts have some options when faced with the loss of students to charter schools. They can consider it a challenge and do what’s needed to bring parents back. They can collaborate with the charter school to better serve the needs of all students. They can move away from long-term fixed expenses to a more nimble way of doing business, similar to how many charter schools finance their buildings. If they don’t like any of those options, they can always complain that the world isn’t fair. But at the very least they should stop trying to protect a failed status quo

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- Charter Schools

**About the Author**

*Susan Pendergrass*

*Director of Research and Education Policy*

Susan Pendergrass was Vice President of Research and Evaluation for the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools before joining the Show-Me Institute. Prior to coming to the National Alliance, Susan was a senior policy advisor at the U.S. Department of Education during the Bush administration and a senior research scientist at the National Center for Education Statistics during the Obama administration. She earned a Ph.D. in Public Policy from George Mason University.

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Show-Me Institute

5297 Washington Place 3645 Troost Avenue
Saint Louis, MO 63108 Kansas City, MO 64109
Phone: (314) 454-0647 Phone: (816) 287-0370
Fax: (314) 454-0667

Email: info@showmeinstitute.org

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