



New York Times Continues to Mislead About School Choice in Michigan

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Another day, another distortion from the Grey Lady on school choice.

In its quest to build a false narrative about Betsy DeVos, nominee for Secretary of the US Department of Education, the *New York Times* has continuously misled readers about the effects of charter schools in Detroit. The latest example comes from today's editorial:

[DeVos] has also argued for shutting down Detroit public schools, with the system turned over to charters or taxpayer money given out as vouchers for private schools. In that city, charter schools often perform no better than traditional schools, and sometimes worse.

The *NYT* editors based their claim on a (faulty) *Times* op-ed from November in which Douglas Harris made the following claim:

As one of the architects of Detroit's charter school system, [DeVos] is partly responsible for what even charter advocates acknowledge is the biggest school reform disaster in the country. [...] One well-regarded study found that Detroit's charter schools performed at about the same dismal level as its traditional public schools.

At the time, Ramesh Ponnuru of *National Review* called out Harris for misrepresenting the Stanford CREDO study he had cited: "Follow the link to that 'well-regarded study,' and the results of Detroit's charter schools do not sound nearly as helpful to Harris's case as he suggests."

Back in July, I highlighted the same report's findings to dispel a similarly misleading description in the *NYT*:

As shown in this table from page 44 of the CREDO report, nearly half of Detroit's charter schools outperformed the city's traditional district schools in reading and math scores, while only one percent of charter schools performed worse in reading and only seven percent performed worse in math.

To claim, as the *NYT* does, that Detroit "charter schools often perform no better than traditional schools, and sometimes worse" based on these figures is a highly distorted way of presenting the data. It's equally true to say "Detroit charter schools almost always perform as well or better than traditional schools." Of course, a news outlet interested in presenting unbiased facts would

have written that about half of Detroit's charters perform better than the traditional district schools, about half perform about the same, and a small number perform worse. That the *NYT* went with the first description is telling.

As Ponnuru notes, the 2012 CREDO study concluded:

Based on the findings presented here, the typical student in Michigan charter schools gains more learning in a year than his [traditional public school (TPS)] counterparts, amounting to about two months of additional gains in reading and math. These positive patterns are even more pronounced in Detroit, where historically student academic performance has been poor. These outcomes are consistent with the result that charter schools have significantly better results than TPS for minority students who are in poverty.

Likewise, the CREDO's 2015 nationwide study found that 60 percent of charter schools outperformed their district school competition in math and 51 percent outperformed them in reading. By contrast, the district schools outperformed only 8 percent and 4 percent of Detroit charters in math and reading, respectively. This isn't to say that the Detroit charters are performing *well* by national standards. They are not. But in a city plagued with all sorts of problems, the best evidence we have shows that they are outperforming the district schools.

Harris responded by shifting the goalposts by expressing skepticism of the very CREDO study he had previously described as "well-regarded" when citing it in support of his view, claiming that the positive "CREDO results may reflect cherry-picking" among other reasons why we shouldn't take these results "literally." For the record, I am not entirely persuaded that the matching efforts in the CREDO study were well done, but one cannot cite a study in support of one's view only to dismiss it when it is pointed out that the study's conclusion contradicts that view. As Ponnuru responded:

But in the original op-ed, the one in the *New York Times* that will be read by far more people than either my Corner post or his follow-up, Harris raised no concerns about the study. He leaned on it and called it "well-regarded." And the researchers themselves presented an interpretation. He is implicitly finding fault with it now, even if he is unwilling to come out and say so; but he did not find fault with it even implicitly in the *Times*. If he had written, "While one well-regarded study concluded that Detroit's charter schools had shown signs of success, there are reasons not to take its findings literally," I would not have criticized him. What he wrote instead was a misrepresentation of the study. And he is now covering his tracks.

How well Detroit's charter schools are performing is a question I will leave for others (although several of Harris's arguments on the point seem to me weak). Whether Harris can be trusted to present facts on this question fairly and accurately, on the other hand, has been established.

Whether the *New York Times* can be trusted to present facts on this question fairly and accurately has also been established.

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