

Is it bad if charters attract private school students?

PETER CALLAGHAN; Staff writer | August 30, 2012

When is good news bad news? When it doesn't fit your politics.

Example of the week? A RAND Corp. study (paid for by the libertarian Cato Institute) that discovered something that shouldn't be surprising: Some students who enroll in public charter schools come from private schools.

In one category of charter schools – those in “highly urban” school districts – the numbers are especially high. Nearly a third of elementary charter students, 23 percent of middle school students and 15 percent of high school students came from private schools.

Most of the reaction has focused on these numbers. But the effect is less significant in “nonurban” and “some urban” districts. Taken together, RAND found that between 2000 and 2008, 8.4 percent of charter school students transferred from private schools. Of those, 3.1 percent moved from Catholic schools, 3.7 percent from other religious schools and 1.6 percent from nonsectarian private schools.

Certainly public enrollment increases create burdens of funding, staffing and classroom space. But it sure beats the burdens that come from declining enrollment.

So isn't increased public school enrollment a good thing?

Sorry, no. It presents “a potentially devastating impact on the private education market, as well as a serious increase in the financial burden on taxpayers,” researcher Richard Buddin wrote.

Cato estimated the increased taxpayer tab nationally is about \$1.8 billion per year. Washington does not have charter schools yet and the fiscal note on this year's charter schools Initiative 1240 doesn't estimate how many private transfers would result. The state cost per student is \$5,800, however, and with a state Supreme Court decision on school funding hanging over the Legislature's head, lawmakers would have to come up with the money without reducing allocations to school districts.

One commenter on an education blog considered the transfers welfare for the rich, assuming parents who use private schools are all wealthy. This viewpoint

reasons that by returning their kids to public schools, these parents are benefiting from government spending they don't really need or deserve.

While some parents who enroll their children in private schools are wealthy, many are not. All private-school parents have one thing in common, though: They're taxpayers who pay local and state education taxes just like parents who send their kids to public schools, parents with no kids in school and people with no kids at all.

Besides, having more families –wealthy and less-wealthy – with a personal stake in public schools only strengthens public education.

Finally, Cato worried that charters weaken the private schools that educate about 10 percent of the nation's school-age children. That means "government sector" schools will have less competition and there will be less education innovation. This suggests that any improvements in public education that attract private school parents is a bad thing. But choice can't be a good thing when parents choose private schools but a bad thing if they choose public schools, including public charter schools.

Cato's concerns about the cost to taxpayers is interesting as well since it favors using tax resources for private school vouchers.

Recessions always cause a private-to-public transfer. John Steiger, director of the Washington State Caseload Forecast Council, says that movement usually is 5,000 to 10,000 students (out of a private school total of 70,000). The current decline has bottomed out, though, and Steiger expects a similar number of students to gradually move back to private schools.

I'm a product of both – six years in Catholic school and six years in public schools. Our kids went to public schools because we believed in public education.

Private schools play an important role, especially for parents who believe strongly in a sectarian education. Others see them as an alternative to underperforming public schools. That said, I'd be happy to see parents return if they see positive changes in public education, including public charter schools.

There may be many reasons why Washington voters oppose the charter schools initiative on its fourth try. That they might attract some private school students to public education should not be one of the reasons.