

# A Coordinated National Effort to Decimate Public Schools

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Late last year, after news was leaked about a well-funded plan to convert half of all public schools in Los Angeles to charters within eight years, the education community balked. The intentions of the plan's architect — the Broad Foundation — were put into stark relief.

It wasn't a plan to use charter schools as innovation incubators, as the late AFT President Albert Shanker and other early charter proponents envisioned them — schools that would work side by side with neighborhood public schools, sharing successes and learning from setbacks. Nor was it about charters having a place in a robust and dynamic public education system offering multiple pathways to meet individual students' needs. (These were our goals when, during my tenure as president of New York City's AFT local, the United Federation of Teachers, the UFT and Green Dot Public Schools co-founded University Prep, a charter school in the South Bronx. Now in our eighth year, 98 percent of students graduate and almost all go on to college. Many AFT members who work in charter schools in cities across the country have similar stories.)

**The Broad plan, and others like it, funded by groups such as the Walton Family Foundation, are instead part of a coordinated national effort to decimate public schooling by rigging the system against neighborhood public schools and the students they serve.**

Here's how it plays out: Politicians slash public education budgets, remove local control, implement flawed educational practices, and then sanction and

shame the schools that have been put through this crucible. Invariably, education “reformers” follow, pushing charter schools as the “solution” — with the predictable press releases highlighting long waiting lists as proof that parents want charters.

But rather than solving the underlying challenges, excessive charter expansion undermines public school systems. Traditional public schools — already suffering from devastating budget cuts — lose even more resources as students depart for charters, taking essential public funding with them. To make matters worse, many charters cherry-pick their students, leaving cash-strapped public schools with higher populations of students with special or high needs, further tipping the scales.

Despite the rhetoric of wealthy backers (like hedge-fund billionaire Daniel Loeb, who just raised \$35 million for the Success Academy charter chain), the charter industry has a mixed record of student achievement and a reputation tainted by a string of scandals—hardly a record that justifies the massive expansion. A well-regarded Stanford University study found that charter school students were doing only slightly better in reading than students in traditional public schools, but at the same time doing slightly worse in math. At the same time, a report tallied more than \$200 million in charter industry fraud, waste and mismanagement in just 15 states.

That has not stopped wealthy donors and their political allies from pushing unaccountable charter growth in urban centers while stripping communities of a voice in their children’s education.

- In Detroit, tea party extremists and billionaire donors are fighting a deal to save the district from bankruptcy, in part because the democratically elected mayor wants district and charter schools to be unified under one system of transparency, accountability and funding.

- When local officials in Chicago tried to close three failing charters, the state charter authorizer, which was envisioned and funded by the Walton Family Foundation, stepped in and stopped the city from closing the schools.
- In Newark, N.J., a 20-year state takeover allows the state-appointed superintendent to ignore the democratically elected school board. In 2014, voters in Newark elected Ras Baraka mayor in an election where local control of public education was the primary issue. Yet even after this groundswell, Gov. Chris Christie vowed to “run over” Mayor Baraka to open more charters in the city.
- In Philadelphia, the charter sector is plagued by fraud, and charters are draining millions of dollars away from traditional public schools and leaving behind students with the most needs. Both Gov. Tom Wolf and Mayor Jim Kenney want a new system that ensures a level playing field for students and schools, but tea party activists, groups funded by the Walton Family Foundation, and the charter industry have fought to continue the state takeover and the status quo.

**We all have a stake in ensuring that all students have the schools they deserve and that communities are leading this effort, not being left behind. To do that, we must challenge unchecked charter expansion and the forces driving it. The public agrees that charter operators should play by the same rules as traditional public schools when it comes to transparency and accountability.**

Rather than state takeovers — which remove local control and accountability — as the go-to solution for troubled districts and schools, strategies like student-centered education, including project-based instruction, and wraparound services focused on student and family well-being, should be deployed to fix struggling schools and stabilize neighborhoods. We should promote sound policies that limit the ability of irresponsible charter

operators to commit waste, fraud and abuse, from land-grabs to inflating enrollment numbers.

The public also deserves a more level playing field when it comes to students served by charters and the financial impact of charter expansion. We've seen a growing number of proposals by legislators in states, including California, Illinois and New York, to help ensure charters actually educate a population that reflects the communities they serve. That means admitting and sticking with more students with special needs and English language learners, and putting limits on charter schools' ability to push out students who are struggling. In Rhode Island and Michigan, efforts are underway to see that charter expansion doesn't come at the expense of the education of students in the rest of the system.

The public education landscape is enriched by having many options — neighborhood public schools, magnet schools, community schools, schools that focus on career and technical education, and even charter schools. Perhaps one solution is for states and school districts to require the equivalent of an environmental impact statement, so local leaders, communities and families can understand the full impact a new charter school will have on the existing educational “ecosystem.”

One thing is certain: It's up to all of us to stand up for public schools as a public good, not vehicles for cynical ideological pursuits or financial gain.

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