

AT-RISK STUDENTS AND ARKANSAS CHARTER SCHOOL EXPANSION, PT. 1

“The students who go to charter schools are not those of great need but have support at home and are relatively high achieving.” Little Rock School Board Member Baker Kurras (“Little Rock Board Resisting 6 Charter Schools,” *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, Sept. 28, 2007)

(October 2007) The role of at-risk students in the creation of Arkansas charter schools is generally overlooked. Critics continue to perpetuate the stereotype that charters are established to benefit the children of privilege. Yet all three expansions of the Arkansas charter statute occurred after legislators concluded charters serving at-risk students¹ serve an important role.

Two charters serving at-risk students have played important roles in this process: Wesley Elementary in Houston, Texas and the KIPP Delta College Preparatory School in Helena, Arkansas.

Wesley Elementary & Arkansas Charter Expansion

The Arkansas charter measure was enacted in 1995. The act established significant barriers for charters, leading Policy Foundation analysts Allyson Tucker and Donna Watson to observe:

“Charter schools, as they are known, are increasingly championed on both sides of the political fence and few political leaders have been more vocal about their promise than President Clinton. But in the President’s home state or Arkansas, highly restrictive charter school legislation...has so inhibited the creation of these bold new schools that none currently in our state.” (Arkansas’ Weak Charter School Law, Winter 1996)

The charter act was not amended in the 1997 session. But an educational process afterward brought policymakers into contact with Dr. Thaddeus Lott, principal of Houston’s Wesley Elementary. *The Democrat-Gazette* (October 10, 1998) described Dr. Lott’s work as follows:

“Enter Thaddeus S. Lott. Just two years ago, the third-graders in his school scored in the top 7 percent of Houston’s 182 grade schools. The students qualify for federal grants, and almost all are black or Hispanic. These were the kids least likely to succeed, according to conventional wisdom. But all it took was a charter school to show they can succeed.”

¹ The at-risk student encounters significant obstacles to completion of an academic program.

The Democrat-Gazette noted Dr. Lott spoke to Arkansas educators about his philosophy of education:

"It's a myth that if you're born in a poor community and your skin is a certain color that you can't achieve on a higher level. All children can learn. It just depends on if we want to put forth the effort to teach them."

Key Arkansas policymakers journeyed to Texas to tour Wesley Elementary, leading to expansion of the charter act in 1999. Policy Foundation official Michael Watson explained the measure "removed the mandatory approval of charters by teachers." It also eliminated "the requirement that only existing public schools could convert to charter status, which had served as a clever way of prohibiting "start-up" charters by non-profits, corporations, and any other group or organization outside the traditional school structure." (*Arkansas Review*, June 1999) The 1999 expansion allowed up to 12 charters, with a restriction of three in each of Arkansas's four congressional districts.

State senators Jim Argue, D-Little Rock, and John Brown, R-Siloam Springs played roles in this process. Sen. Brown, Mr. Watson noted, "stepped up as the state's chief architect of a less restrictive charter bill" while Sen. Argue traveled outside Arkansas to study charters:

"Senator Argue did not come to the case for charter schools quickly. Intrigued by the concept from the beginning, his interest was tempered by his legitimate concern for how charters might affect the traditional public schools in Arkansas' districts. And so, in his thoughtful style, he studied the concept, read policy briefs, consulted the Internet, and carefully listened to all sides. He even went out of state to tour charter schools, choosing to see firsthand how the concept translated to reality in the schoolhouse."

Wesley Elementary, composed primarily of at-risk students was one of the schools policymakers visited prior to the 1999 charter expansion.

Wesley Elementary in Academic Literature

The peer-reviewed academic literature on Wesley Elementary is explicit in noting the school serves at-risk students, not the children of privilege. Sharolyn Pollard-Durodola, in "Wesley Elementary: A Beacon of Hope for At-Risk Students," (*Education and Urban Policy*, November 2003) <http://eus.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/36/1/94>

The abstract for Durodola's article, which includes a review of other literature on the topic states:

"Academic success of at-risk, African American students in inner-city environments is not due to chance but is the result of a culmination of factors. This study describes the characteristics of Wesley Elementary that are supported by research on effective schools. The researcher, formerly a Title I Coordinator/Reading Specialist at Wesley, interviewed three teachers who had taught at Wesley along with the former principal, Dr. Thaddeus Lott. An educational consultant who assisted teachers in the writing process from 1991-1992 was also interviewed to verify the perspectives of those interviewed that the school's success was due to specific factors. Implications for future research, instructional practice, and professional development are also discussed."

Conclusion

Critics continue to perpetuate the stereotype that charters are established to benefit the children of privilege, overlooking charters serving at-risk students. Wesley Elementary in Houston, Texas played a key role in the first expansion of the Arkansas charter act in 1999.

-- Greg Kaza

Part 2: The KIPP Delta College Preparatory School in Helena.