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From School Choice Advocate to Charter School Mom

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I have been pretty clear that I think all children, not just those who can move or pay tuition, deserve the right to choose a world class education. As a professional, I have focused on how school choice will expand the number of high quality seats available to children across the country, how competition for enrollment will force all schools to perform better or close, and how creating more options will drive educators to be innovative in their models and methods.

I still believe all these things to be true. However, after recently dropping my daughter, Sophie, off at one of Saint Louis' charter schools, I also see the need for a focus on the "softer side" of school choice. Because school choice advocates are often so focused on counting the number of high quality seats the choice movement has produced, they occasionally lose sight of the fact that there are real families who are making decisions about where their children are going to go based on every interaction they have with a school.



Sophie headed to her first day of school

When my husband and I were choosing a school for Sophie, we wanted to stay singularly focused on the academic outcomes, and we wanted to ask only questions about how well the school was going to prepare her to tackle the problems of the twenty-first century. However, we

often found ourselves focused on things that as an advocate I would have called trivial, but found as a parent to be crucial.

After the first school tour, I started keeping a list of "non-academic" things that stuck out as we went from place to place. Now that we have her securely tucked away in a kindergarten where we know the teacher will hug her if she scrapes her knee, I can share those with you.

1. Customer service, customer service, customer service

In real estate, they will tell you it's all about location, location, location; but in choosing a school it is all about customer service. My husband and I must have toured or attempted to tour twenty schools (private, district, and charter) in our quest for the right place for Sophie.

What I learned from these experiences was that as a parent it did not matter how great the school did on standardized tests, how diverse it was, what credentials the teachers had or where it was located if there were no systems in place to ensure excellent customer service. I wanted to know the people working for the school wanted my daughter there and cared what my concerns were. I needed them to respect my time and my intelligence. Most importantly, I didn't want to hear "that's just the protocol ma'am."

The best example of customer service was at the Saint Louis Language Immersion School (no surprise this is where Sophie ended up). At SLLIS, someone answered the phone every single time I called. The online form for scheduling a tour was intuitive and it worked. When we arrived for the tour, the staff was happy to see us and they wanted to answer our questions. They were more than willing to allow us to bring Sophie to sit and observe a classroom and were prompt with all our follow-up questions and concerns.

2. Charter schools are a sector and should act like it

The most frustrating part of looking for a school for Sophie was the disjointed application process between and within districts, charters and private schools. Trying to navigate when schools were giving tours, when applications were due and which schools needed which documents was a real nightmare. I have been doing this work long enough to know that getting the district and private schools to participate in a common application process with the charter school sector voluntarily in most cities is a pipe dream. However, the charter sector would benefit tremendously if they would offered to work together as a sector to align their application timeline and processes.

3. Be transparent

I promise no charter or private school wants a family who does not want them. To that end, I encourage all the schools to be transparent with perspective families about their programs, their teachers, their expectations and most importantly about their results. All of these things should be included when families tour and they should be repeated over and over again until it is impossible for the families to be surprised on the first day of school.

4. Be friendly, welcoming and thinking about families' needs all the time

Everyone understands that schools have schedules, rules and a whole litany of laws and regulations with which the government makes them comply. However, I now understand that some schools have ensured these schedules, rules and laws/regulations do not prevented them from building a system that truly puts families' needs first. Charters were created so they could design their own structures that would set kids up for success--systems that are flexible enough to adjust to meet students' and families' needs, but firm enough to provide necessary structure.

Obviously, all sectors in k-12 education can and should be doing these things. I focus on charter schools because I have seen from experience that they can build these systems. I know that our laws in Missouri are flexible enough for them to design models that work for their target students. Most importantly, I know if those charters all over the country who are not good that these things do not figure them out, they will not survive. I also know our students need them to survive, because the number of high quality seats available still is not high enough.

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Conversations



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Richard Patel

So as long as the school puts on a good face (customer service), and act like a business, then a charter has accomplished your two most important factors?

That's dubious.

Also, you talk about that school choice opens up more "high quality seats", but that is wholly based on the assumption that all private and charter schools are better than the public schools ... that is not true. It may be true in some areas, but what my experience has told me is that if the public schools are poor, most of the private schools only tend to be a little better, because they only need to be a little better. In fact, since those private schools (and to some extent charter schools) start off with students who can already score well on standardized tests, there is little motivation to show improvement.

If charters and private schools were forced to show the same numbers public schools did (the improvement in test scores), I think a lot of private schools would balk.

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Steve Nelson · New York, New York

You may be a very lovely person, Kate, and your daughter is adorable, but this piece represents much of what's wrong in education reform and so-called "choice."

"World class" and "high quality seats" are meaningless and inaccurate phrases, used to advance charter/choice propaganda. As you may know, charters, on balance, do no better than the schools they steal from, despite having philanthropic and political support. Many charters also explicitly or deviously enroll students who are more likely to succeed, on a number of complex measures. There is abundant evidence that many charters (n... See More

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