

Commentary

After rejecting charter schools three times since 1996, Washington State voters approved Initiative 1240 (I-1240) by a 50.69% majority in November 2012, potentially paving the way for charter schools here. While there are several problems with I-1240,¹ I have two major concerns. First, it radically redefines the “public” in public education. Under I-1240, while locally elected school boards can be authorizers, the state board for authorizing charter schools is appointed, and the governing boards of the charter schools are appointed as well. This structure is complicated by the fact that charter schools in Washington State will be funded by public school dollars following the students into charter schools.

This combination of appointed governance and state funds means that I-1240 functionally creates a separate charter school system, one using public monies but with no required mechanism for public accountability. This is a classic redefinition of public education vis-à-vis a business paradigm of school reform, and in this definition the public good equals consumption amidst deregulation. Thus, as the argument goes, charter schools will improve education through business-like production and competition. There are, however, significant problems with this paradigm:

1. Students are not manufactured like products or assembled like cars. Humans are complex beings who develop unevenly and under a diverse array of conditions. Similarly, schools are not businesses where “productivity” can be easily measured when it comes to human learning and teaching;²
2. The deregulation of public education and lack of public accountability within charter schools has been highly problematic in many states, producing

numerous instances of embezzlement, questionable accounting, and test score gaming, amongst other scandals;³

3. This same deregulation has contributed to charter schools consistently segregating students by only enrolling select groups, thereby not serving truly “public” populations of English Language Learners and students with disabilities;⁴
4. While some individual examples of success exist, charter schools have yet to deliver on promises of improving student performance relative to comparable public schools.⁵

My other major concern is with the Yes On 1240 campaign and what it says about democratic governance. One individual, Bill Gates Jr., disproportionately influenced what is supposed to be a democratic process. Of the \$10.9 million spent on the campaign, Gates Jr. himself donated \$3 million, and Gates Jr. connected donors, either through Microsoft or through ventures jointly funded with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), accounted for just over 76% of the total Yes On I-1240 campaign donations.⁶ Further, the four organizations that formed the Washington Coalition for Public Charter Schools and took credit for implementing the campaign were either funded by or have other BMGF connections. Overall it appears that one individual had an inordinate amount of power over I-1240, particularly compared to the average voting citizen in Washington State. In a political system that is supposed to function as a democracy, it is not clear to me that a single person should have so much power in the establishment of a statewide education policy.

Yes, we do need to improve and strengthen public education in Washington State, but this work requires at least two vital concepts not included in I-1240. First, efforts to improve public education must be grounded in a radically democratic process based on full community engagement. Instead of being driven by a handful of politicians, business leaders, and billionaire philanthropists, education reform should instead start with widespread participation of parents, teachers, students, and researchers. Second, these efforts require a full recognition of what the research tells us: While teachers and schools are necessary for student success, they alone are insufficient in the face of non-school factors associated with poverty. Successful systems of education require thoughtfully, purposefully, and amply applied resources to make sure that all kids have equal access to social, economic, and institutional opportunities. In practice this includes providing kids with wrap-around services that include important needs like healthcare and food. Transforming public education must be a part of a larger social and economic project – one that is within our capacity, if we decide to do it.

Wayne Au is an Assistant Professor of education at the University of Washington, Bothell and an editor for the social justice education magazine, *Rethinking Schools*.

-
- ¹ Au, W. (2012). Policy memo on Washington State Initiative 1240. Retrieved from <http://seattleducation2010.wordpress.com/2012/10/22/policy-memo-on-washington-state-initiative-1240/>
- ² Au, W. (2009). *Unequal by design: High-stakes testing and the standardization of inequality*. New York: Routledge.
- ³ Higgins, S. (2013). Charter School Scandals. Retrieved February 17, 2013, from <http://charterschoolscandals.blogspot.com/>
- ⁴ Simon, S. (2013). Special report: Class struggle - how charter schools get the students they want. *Reuters*. Retrieved from <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/02/15/us-usa-charters-admissions-idUSBRE91E0HF20130215>
- ⁵ Baker, B. D. (2013). From portfolios to parasites: The unfortunate path(ology) of U.S. charter school policy. Retrieved from <http://schoolfinance101.wordpress.com/2013/02/16/from-portfolios-to-parasites-the-unfortunate-path-of-u-s-charter-school-policy/>

⁶ Washington State Public Disclosure Commission. (2012). Washington State Public Disclosure Commission: 40 years of shining light on Washington politics: Cash contributions for Yes On 1240 WA Coalition for Public Charter Schools. Retrieved November 27, 2012, from <http://www.pdc.wa.gov/MvcQuerySystem/CommitteeData/contributions?param=WUVTIFdDIDUwNw====&year=2012&type=initiative>