

In Arizona, a laboratory for charter schools yields mixed results

Study finds that gains fall short of success in regular schools

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SCOTTSDALE, ARIZ. -- Here, where suburb meets desert, students are clambering amid the cacti to dig soil samples and take notes on flora and fauna. In an old movie complex in nearby Chandler, others are dissecting a Renaissance tract on human nature. On a South Phoenix campus with a National Football League connection, still others are learning how to pass a basket of bread and help a lady into her chair.

These are just three charter schools among a multitude in the most wide-open public education market in America.

Arizona's flourishing charter school movement underscores the popular appeal of unfettered school choice and the creativity of some educational entrepreneurs. But the state also offers a cautionary lesson as President Obama pushes to dismantle barriers to charter schools elsewhere: It is difficult to promote quantity and quality at the same time.

Under a 1994 law that strongly favors charter schools, 500 of them operate in this state, teaching more than 100,000 students. Those totals account for a quarter of Arizona's public schools and a tenth of its public school enrollment, giving charters a larger market share here than in any other state.

But a Stanford University research institute reported in June that Arizona charter students did not show as much academic progress as their peers in traditional public schools. Charter backers dispute the study's methods and findings but agree that schools vary widely in quality.

"There are some excellent, excellent charter schools in Arizona," said Margaret Raymond, director of the Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford. "There's a good, strong cluster of really high-performing schools. There are a whole bunch that are mucking around, and a big cluster that are not doing well."

The District of Columbia, with 28,000 charter school students, has a booming charter market. Maryland's is modest but growing. Virginia has a handful of charter schools, none in the D.C. area, but Gov.-elect Robert F. McDonnell (R) hopes to add many more.

'Wild West of charters'

With public funding, independent management and no teachers union contracts, Arizona's charter schools educate every which way: from the Montessori method to what might be called the No-Method method, from math academies to arts academies, from

distance learning to hands-on learning. They pop up in strip malls and abandoned churches. They compete for enrollment in suburbs and barrios and on Indian reservations.

"We're the Wild West of charters, aren't we?" said John Wright, president of the Arizona Education Association, a teachers union. "You can find just about any type of charter in Arizona."

A spin this month through the charterland of metropolitan Phoenix found a school for the homeless shoehorned into an old Volkswagen dealership downtown; a new high school in Tempe that gives laptops to students so they can work on campus or off; a K-8 charter next door that escaped bankruptcy a few years ago and has hoppedscotched from site to site; and an accelerated math-science school on an old University of Phoenix campus in Chandler that caters to the high-tech community.

In this affluent suburb, Basis Scottsdale is a top choice for parents and students who can't get enough Advanced Placement. The school of about 600 in grades 5 through 12 requires all students to take at least six AP tests by the end of junior year. It pays for the testing and counts AP scores in final course grades, which is unusual.

Cindy Ivy, 48, an occupational therapist, said she learned about Basis through a newspaper story pointed out by her son Calvin, now in seventh grade. "Why would I not check this school out?" she said. "It's free. It's ranked so high."

Across the road, teacher Harrison Stratton tramped with his eighth-grade environmental science class through a patch of desert. He showed students how to stake out, with string, a one-meter-square section. Their task was sampling soil; his goal was teaching scientific methods. The class would climb a nearby mountain soon to do the same thing.

"It's a lot of footwork," he said, "taking data in a range of environments." Many of his students will take their first AP tests next spring.

Regular public schools nationwide are gravitating toward AP. But this one and a sister school in Tucson, more than most, make the college-level program a centerpiece. Andrew Shabilla, 17, a senior, said he has taken and passed 11 AP tests and relishes the fellowship of a small academic community. "It's a special place, an oasis for learning," he said.

Multiplex academy

To the southwest, Chandler Preparatory Academy is tucked into a former model home showroom and what used to be a 10-screen movie house near a Target. Its 530 students, grades 6 through 12, are immersed in Western culture, from Homer to Dostoevski. The girls in red-and-black plaid skirts and boys in khakis, all wearing red or white knit shirts, convey a preppy ambience without the five-figure tuition and entrance exams.

Past the old popcorn stand, classrooms occupy movie halls. The marquee above one doorway announces that Room 505 is "The Thinkery." Inside, 10th-graders in a class called "Humane Letters" grappled with Francis Bacon's 17th-century work "Novum Organum," with minimal intervention from the teacher.

"The idols of the tribe are flaws in humanity as a whole," one girl offered. "And the idols of the cave are individual flaws."

"Maybe he's saying, in a more sophisticated form, that man tends to think about himself, not the greater good," said another. Chandler Prep has no AP test chase. Instead, students build toward a senior thesis they defend orally.

Advocates say charter schools such as these have influenced regular schools for the better. Critics call those claims overblown. Arizona State University education professor Gene Glass said he could show a visitor "exciting stuff" in at least 50 regular public schools.

Through test scores, Arizona rates about 24 percent of charter schools as "excelling" or "highly performing." About 37 percent of regular public schools win those marks.

"There's nothing to learn from these charter schools," Glass said. "There's so much mythology about this."

Obama contends that there is much to learn. His \$4.35 billion Race to the Top education reform competition aims to lure states to expand the number of high-quality charter schools, which the president said in July would "force the kind of experimentation and innovation that helps to drive excellence in every other aspect of life."

It remains unknown whether states will heed Obama's call, though some have taken modest steps to ease charter restrictions. Eighteen years after Minnesota passed the first charter law, 4,700 charter schools are in operation nationwide. But 10 states have no charter laws, and many have caps on charter schools or give authorizing power to local school boards, which are often reluctant to approve a competitor.

The rapid growth of D.C. charter schools shows their appeal in urban areas where regular schools often struggle to lift the achievement of disadvantaged students. Arizona is an example to states such as Virginia and Maryland that good charter schools can compete anywhere. But weeding out weak schools and boosting underperformers can be tricky.

Dropping and flunking out

Arizona has revoked four charters since 2007, one for academic problems and the rest for management issues. Two dozen other charters were surrendered for various reasons, some academic. Now the State Board for Charter Schools, which oversees the sector, is preparing for the first round of charter renewals in state history.

Much is at stake. Charters in Arizona last 15 years -- longer than it takes a kindergartner to earn a high school diploma. Renewals last 20.

In South Phoenix, NFL YET (for "youth education town") College Prep Academy is preparing to apply for renewal next year. Latino community leaders launched the school in the mid-1990s. They sought to create a safe harbor in what co-founder Armando Ruiz recalled as a dangerous neighborhood of junked cars, vacant lots, tire dumps and dilapidated apartments.

The school won a \$1 million grant from the NFL when the Super Bowl came to Phoenix in 1996 and an additional \$1.5 million when it returned in 2008. The grants funded an academic building, two athletic fields and a campus expansion.

Self-esteem and character education are big at this school of roughly 300 students in grades 7 to 12. The word of the week, written one afternoon on whiteboards, was "moral." Some of the uniformed students study leadership in addition to taking honors classes.

"How many of you have eaten in a restaurant where there's a basket of bread?" the leadership teacher asked in a lesson on manners. "What do you do? Where does it go?" She followed up: "You have a little bowl of little balls of butter -- what do you do with that?"

Frank Duarte teaches pre-calculus and aims to start what would be the school's only AP class within a year. "My job is to get to know them and to hook them," he said. "After that, I don't let 'em breathe. It's bam-bam-bam: 'You are going to learn. You can learn.' "

"People don't think we can do as much because we're from the Southside," said Samantha Gardiner, 17, a senior who aspires to attend Northern Arizona University. "That's what's good about this school: They tell us, 'Even though you're from the Southside, you're going to do great things and change the world.' "

For all the zeal of teachers and students, Ruiz acknowledged that the school he leads hasn't lived up to ambitions. Its key state test scores are below average and stagnant, its course offerings less than challenging.

"We got off track," Ruiz said. "Why? The hard thing to maintain is the intensity of excellence. About three years ago, we accepted average as being excellent."