

Michael Bloomberg Wants To Spend \$750 Million On Charter Schools. It's Not A Great Idea.

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Peter Greene Dec 10, 2021 *Forbes Magazine*

Michael Bloomberg is not a fan of public education. Like Betsy DeVos, [he has said](#) the system is “failing” and “broken” (and like DeVos, he believes that teachers unions are a big part of the problem). So he has [announced his intention](#) to spend \$750 million on a “proven alternative,” charter schools, over the next five years and across twenty metro areas. Bloomberg lays out his reasoning in a [Wall Street Journal op-ed](#).

He starts with the statistic that two-thirds of U.S. students could not read at grade level even before the pandemic; though oft-cited, this figure is incorrect. It is based on the results from the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation’s Report Card. [Those results show](#) roughly two-thirds of students scoring below NAEP “proficient,” but as [noted elsewhere in NAEP materials](#), “NAEP Proficient achievement level does not represent grade level proficiency as determined by other assessment standards.” In other words, scoring below proficient does not mean scoring below grade level. The 2019 NAEP does not show two-thirds of students reading below grade level.

Bloomberg asserts that public schools are handing out meaningless pieces of paper, and that other nations are rising to this challenge and racing ahead (though he does not say which ones or how). He criticizes the head of the Los Angeles teachers union for saying, “There is no such thing as learning loss.” And he asserts that a failed education system will “doom our most vulnerable to a life of poverty,” as if there are no other factors involved.

He holds up Success Academy as an example of a real time example of what works. It is a tricky example to use, because while Success Academy charters undeniably get excellent test scores out of their students, part of the secret of their success is tight control over which students they choose to teach. Robert Pondiscio’s *How the Other Half Learns*, written after a year inside the charter chain, delineates the school’s successes. But he also makes it clear that a series of hurdles insures that only students with supportive, committed parents get to be SA students. There is also the infamous [“got to go list”](#) of students to be pushed out, as well as the standard charter practice of not admitting students either mid-year or partway through their school career. Bloomberg’s example of what works is a model at odds with the mission of public schools to accept and educate every student.

Bloomberg cites the huge uptick in charter enrollment during the pandemic, but the [largest part of that was in cyber schooling](#), problematic because of [cyber charter’s poor record](#) in educating students. And he overlooks multiple studies that show that charter schools, once one corrects for their difference in student populations, [get no better results than public schools](#). In short, his assertion that charter schools are a “proven alternative,” is, at best, open to considerable debate.

There are other reasons to be skeptical about Bloomberg’s plan. Nobody elected him to be in charge of American education, and this kind of giving is arguably a way to circumvent democratic processes. Carol Burris, a former award-winning principal in New York and current leader of the Network for Public Education offered this critique via email:

It is difficult to imagine why Mike Bloomberg believes that 150,000 spots in charter schools are the needed fix for an education system of 50 million students. Does he know that more than one in four charters close before year 5? Does he care about the hundreds of scandalous reports regarding charters each year? He is just pulling from the same anti-public school, anti-union playbook he used when he was mayor of NYC. It was constant turmoil as he imposed one business reform after another on schools. More charter schools were one of his favorite strategies. It appears that he has no new ideas.

It is also possible that Bloomberg is also out of step with his fellow school choice supporters; most of the action in 2021 around school choice has involved the creation and expansion of voucher programs, and not in the charter sector. Charter school growth has been stalled for several years, and with too little regulation, the charter world has always been ripe for fraud and abuse, not to mention a great deal of instability. And as noted by Matt Barnum at Chalkbeat, many of the urban areas that Bloomberg would like to target have soured on charters. Bloomberg may be making a very large bet on the wrong horse.