



Al Fan

Al Fan: Super schools, not Superman

By Al Fan

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The impact of 'Waiting for Superman' is unlike anything that has occurred in the education and charter reform movement over the last two decades. It is a full-fledged cultural phenomenon. The movie has ignited the debate about the role of charter schools in closing the achievement gap.

Critics of the movie point out that no district school was represented in the film or that one of the schools mentioned, Green Dot in Los Angeles, a charter group that now manages several schools, is fully unionized under a separate and very different collective bargaining agreement from the one with LA district teachers.

Of course charter schools are not the only answer, and a 2009 national study indicated that students in only one in five charters demonstrated academic gains that were significantly better than their peers in district schools.

Whether it is charter, district, self-governed or magnet schools, we now know what works to close the achievement gap. Study after study shows that every successful, high-achieving school shares similar characteristics. They include:

- High quality principals and teachers in every school and the ability to replace ineffective ones.
- More instructional time, with an extended school day and year.
- A commitment to using data to strengthen teaching and effectively provide differentiated instruction that recognizes students' strengths and weaknesses.
- A culture of high expectations; a whatever-it-takes/no-excuses attitude for success.

But I am a passionate advocate for high-quality charter schools because those schools that have closed the achievement gap or shown significant progress toward this goal - both nationally and in Minnesota — are primarily charter schools or schools that have charter-like qualities. It is simply a fact and it just makes sense: schools that have the flexibility and freedom to implement new policies, new curriculum, replace ineffective teachers and serve the specific needs of children have a better chance than organizational structures without this flexibility.



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And it is no longer just a few schools with unusually charismatic charter leaders that are succeeding. Nationally, we now have dozens and dozens of these closing-the-gap schools, with the numbers poised to increase rapidly given the philanthropic commitment and public interest focused on replicating success.

Groups like KIPP, Achievement First, Harlem Children's Zone, Idea Public Schools, Yes College Prep, Green Dot Schools, Uncommon Schools, Aspire, Concept Schools and Noble Street are doing this great work — against all odds. And recently, there is some exciting news coming from the front lines in Minneapolis and St. Paul schools. Some homegrown versions of these national models are starting to show significant results.

Recent "Beating the Odds" and "Closing the Gap" scorecards from several sources, including Charter School Partners, illustrate that eight of the top 10 schools successfully serving populations over 85 percent low-income are charter schools. These include Global Academy, Higher Ground, TiZA, Hiawatha Leadership Academy, Harvest Prep/Seed Academy, Cedar Riverside, Rochester Math and Science and Concordia Creative Learning Academy. The district schools that made the list - Dayton's Bluff Elementary, Riverview Magnet and Jackson Magnet — have charter-like qualities with more flexibility than traditional district schools to implement their programs.

Yes, Minnesota consistently ranks tops nationally in state tests and ACT scores. However, while white, middle- and upper-income students in Minnesota do pretty well, we continue to have the second highest achievement gap in the nation; 40 and 50 percentage points separate those kids, as a group, from our lower-income students of color in math and reading tests.

"Waiting for Superman" has supercharged the education reform debate. Let's make sure debate turns into constructive action and we stay focused on the goal of delivering to every child, no matter his or her background, a high-quality education that honors their potential and gives them the tools for productive life options.

Al Fan is executive director of Charter School Partners (charterschoolpartners.org), a nonprofit whose mission is to improve academic achievement in Minnesota's charter schools.