

A Case for Charter Schools, But Not from the NAACP

By Archon Victor Woolridge, Beta Sigma Boulé



When it comes to education, I am ambitious and broad-minded, especially for black youth in urban communities. As an alum of the Upward Bound program, a founding board member of Veritas Charter School in Springfield, Massachusetts, where I live, and as the immediate past chairman of the Board of Trustees of the University of Massachusetts system, I have enormous passion for expanding educational opportunities that lead to proven pathways that achieve academic success for students. I share this deep passion with Archon Frank Robinson, also of Beta Sigma Boulé and charter school founder of Baystate Academy in Springfield, along with other Archons in my member-boulé who have served in top leadership positions at charter schools in our city. So when charter school expansion was announced as a ballot measure for the election this past November in Massachusetts, I became even more determined

to support such a move with my personal advocacy, logical thinking, and “yes” vote.

During the weeks leading up to the election, voices that opposed the expansion of charter schools grew louder and stronger. In fact, three weeks prior to election day, the national board of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) voted to ratify a resolution adopted at its 2016 national convention calling for a moratorium on the expansion of charter schools. *The Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) headlined its report on the NAACP’s action as “The NAACP’s Disgrace: The civil-rights group votes to keep minorities trapped in poverty.” The WSJ article went further and characterized the NAACP’s statement to the “equivalent of opposing *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954” and as “out of touch.” Since I was in agreement with the WSJ’s position, I penned an Op-Ed in my local newspaper to give voters additional perspective and an important view that is contrary to that of the NAACP.

The argument *against* charter schools would be effective were it not for two pesky problems: (1) charter schools are doing a better job of educating urban students, and (2) both parents and students are demanding better choices.

On the first point, a 2015 Stanford study on urban charter schools reported 40 more days of learning per year in math and 28 more days of learning per year in reading. The results were equally impressive when measured for black students enrolled in urban charters, with 36 and 26 more days of learning per year in math and reading, respectively. The study also showed that most urban charter schools outperform their local traditional public schools and that charters with larger learning gains outnumber those with smaller learning gains two-to-one. Compelling research from the Brookings Institute, the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools, and other reputable sources also show similar results when it comes to charter school performance in urban areas. According to a Brookings Institute report issued in 2016, in Boston, 59% of charter students attend a four-year college as compared to 41% at traditional public schools.

On the second point about demand, there are nearly one million students nationwide on waiting lists for charter schools, which provide smaller class sizes, a structured environment and committed educators all working together and producing results. In Boston, one-third of public school students apply to charters and there are over 32,000 students on the wait list. About a third of those on the wait list have applications to several schools according to the Massachusetts Department of Primary and Secondary Education.

The NAACP’s position, unfortunately, is a very sad moment in history for the venerable organization. Its board endorsed the concept of educational gradualism (“a pause”), a concept once rejected when well-intentioned clergy admonished Dr. King during the civil rights movement, rather than demanding that the vaults of educational justice be thrown open to parental choice and self-determination. When

the NAACP had the opportunity to answer the question "How long?" must we wait for better options, instead of saying "Not Long," they responded, "A lot longer."

It's unseemly to suggest that charter schools are the equivalent of the modern day version of separate but equal. Over the past 40 years, public school districts have demonstrated their dedication to delivering a continuing lower quality of education to our children while consuming more and more of the public's tax dollars. Meanwhile, the NAACP finds itself held captive by the promise of the system's largess and has developed a type of Stockholm syndrome in its affinity for legacy school districts. I support their argument for advancing high quality public education because that's what charter schools are. These are public tax dollars, subject to governmental oversight and standards, supporting public students in an educational environment dedicated to student success. The NAACP's well-known history of sacrificial bravery to chart new and bold courses for the uplifting of communities of color has, in this case, been suborned by conciliation and compromise in a way that turns its back on the demands of its traditional constituency.

We can talk about failed charter schools, which are quickly closed when they fail; and we can talk about failed public schools, which are typically allowed to limp along year after year. We can talk about union versus non-union teaching staffs, and student teacher ratios, or the number of English Language Learner (ELL) students; and we can argue about the student selection process at charter schools, but these are all statistical flash points cited to focus us on the money flowing away from school districts and toward charter schools. The one statistic that is often minimized are student success rates of school districts versus charter schools, and where their character is best developed. This is what matters to parents: *Will my child get a good education, in a safe environment, and have the opportunity to succeed in a rapidly evolving economy?*

The time for studying and evaluating the charter school model is over. Now is the time for leaders to deliver proven options to parents and students whom I have seen shed tears of joy after being accepted into a charter school. They have waited long enough. How long must they continue to wait for better options? I say, "Not Long!" Sadly, I am in the minority with the NAACP and among the voters in Massachusetts where the public vote was 62% "no"/38% "yes" for charter school expansion. This makes it crystal clear that the Boulé must absolutely continue to find new and creative ways to inspire our youth to succeed.

Archon Victor Woolridge is Vice President for Debt Placement & Syndications at Barings Real Estate Advisers LLC. He is also Chairman of the University of Massachusetts Building Authority and the immediate past Chairman of the Board of Trustees for the University of Massachusetts.