

Doubling number of charter schools would be good for L.A.: Guest commentary

By Larry Sand

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Establishment forces are furious over a philanthropist's plan to double the number of charter schools in Los Angeles.

The rumblings started in early August — rumors that billionaire philanthropist Eli Broad and some others were planning to invest millions in charter schools in Los Angeles. The actual plan came to light weeks later when a leaked memo wound up in the hands of the L.A. Times. According to the document, Broad and other wealthy charter advocates want to invest a half-billion dollars to create 260 new charter schools and enroll 130,000 students over the next eight years. Other philanthropists named in the plan include Kirk Kerkorian, David Geffen and Elon Musk, and the Gates, Bloomberg, Annenberg and Hewlett foundations are mentioned.

The responses to the memo have been wildly disparate. While L.A. school board members Monica Garcia and Ref Rodriguez were quite enthusiastic, board president Steve Zimmer and Scott Schmerelson were anything but. An angry Zimmer claimed that the plan “represents a strategy to bring down LAUSD...” Not surprisingly, these two are mostly tied to the United Teachers of Los Angeles, whose leader, Alex Caputo-Pearl, was infuriated by the news. He blasted the plan with accusations that deregulation doesn't work, and charters will “create inappropriate competition.”

But the union president is wrong. Charter schools are mostly publicly funded and are quite regulated, though not as heavily as traditional public schools, with their additional layer of red tape due to the bulky union contract. But the real reason why UTLA is threatened by the potential move is because most charter school teachers are not unionized.

Something that Caputo-Pearl fails to address is that wherever charters emerge, parents flock to them. There are 40,000 kids on charter school wait lists in Los Angeles, unable to enroll because there aren't enough slots. Broad's proposal will assuredly delight those families.

Caputo-Pearl also doesn't know (or maybe doesn't care) that not all educators share his view of charters. The California Teachers Empowerment Network conducted an internal poll in 2013 and found that 82 percent of teachers favor the existence of charter schools, with just 18 percent opposed. Andrew Blumenfeld, a teacher at Crown Preparatory Academy, told me, “I love teaching at my public charter school because we are afforded the flexibility we need to meet the diverse needs of our kids. It is exciting to work on a team that can and must be agile and innovative to best serve our community.”

A closer look at many of the naysayers' complaints about the plan reveal not so much anger about billionaire involvement in education, but envy that Broad doesn't want his largess to go to the traditional public schools. But why would he do that? Those schools receive plenty of money. The official per-pupil spending in L.A. is \$13,490, far more than the national average.

And just what kind of return-on-investment does L.A. get? Very little, if the recently released California Assessment of Student Progress and Performance (CAASPP) scores are an indication. The test results showed that only one-third of L.A. students performed up to their grade level in English and one-fourth did so in math. Not surprisingly, L.A. charter students far outpaced their counterparts who went to traditional public school schools.

Some opponents claim that a half-charter district would leave some children behind. The experience in New Orleans contradicts this allegation. After Hurricane Katrina devastated the Crescent City, a much more vibrant all-charter school system sprang from the catastrophic floods. The percentage of failing schools fell from 62 to seven, while those performing at or above grade level increased from 35 percent to 62 percent.

As for L.A. school board chief Zimmer's comment that more charter schools are going to "bring down LAUSD" — hardly. If nothing else, an uptick in the number of charter schools will push the underperforming LAUSD to try a little harder to compete for students. Broad and his philanthropic partners deserve our deepest gratitude for giving many parents an opportunity to escape from a leviathan school district that has lost its way.

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