

Troubled Ohio charter schools have become a joke — literally

By [Valerie Strauss](#) June 12, 2015



(Andrew Harrer/Bloomberg)

Yes, some charter schools are great, but others are a mess — especially in Ohio, where academic results across the sector are far worse than in traditional public schools and financial and ethical scandals are more than common. How bad is the problem? The [Plain Dealer ran a story](#) this year that started like this:

Ohio, the charter school world is making fun of you.

Ohio's \$1 billion charter school system was the butt of jokes at a conference for reporters on school choice in Denver late last week, as well as the target of sharp criticism of charter school failures across the state.

The shots came from expected critics like teachers unions, but also from pro-charter voices, as the state considers ways to improve how it handles charters

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An example of a joke from the conference: “Be very glad that you have Nevada, so you are not the worst,” charter researcher Margaret “Macke” Raymond said of Ohio. Raymond, from the Hoover Institute at Stanford University, conducts research on charter schools and issued a report late last year that said Ohio charter school students learn 36 days less math and 14 days less reading than traditional public school students — conclusions she drew from crunching data obtained from student standardized test scores.

And the bad news just keeps on coming for Ohio charters, also called “community” schools, [which in 2013-14 educated more](#) than 120,000 students, or 7 percent of the total public school enrollment in the state.

Consider this:

No sector — not local governments, school districts, court systems, public universities or hospitals — misspends tax dollars like charter schools in Ohio.

That’s the first paragraph [of a story this month in the Akron Beacon Journal](#) about the newspaper’s review of 4,263 audits released last year by the state, which says that Ohio charter schools appear to have misspent public money “nearly four times more often than any other type of taxpayer-funded agency.” It says that “since 2001, state auditors have uncovered \$27.3 million improperly spent by charter schools, many run by for-profit companies, enrolling thousands of children and producing academic results that rival the worst in the nation.” One more thing: The amount of misspending could be far higher, it says.

You’d think that would be enough bad news for one week, but there was more, as we learn from Steve Dyer, a lawyer who is the education policy fellow at Innovation Ohio and was once an Ohio state representative, [in this post on progressive.org](#), titled, “Ohio Charter Schools’ Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Week.”

[\[Five key questions to ask now about charter schools\]](#)

In the same week that the Akron Beacon Journal published its story:

* The Columbus Dispatch, whose editorials have been supportive of charters, [ran an editorial titled “Open the books”](#) that said in part: “[C]harter-reform legislation should require companies paid to operate charter schools to disclose how they spend the tax dollars they’re given. To date, some large

companies have been paid millions of tax dollars and made no accounting to the public or, in some cases, even to the charter-school boards that hired them.”

* [The Columbus Dispatch reported](#): “Following the mass exodus of the board of a North Side charter school, the sponsor of Imagine Columbus Primary Academy says it might close the school.” This is the same school, Dyer notes, “that was found last year to be spending an exorbitant amount of money leasing the property from a subsidiary of Imagine Schools — a practice that was found to be illegal in Missouri.”

* [The Dayton Daily News reported](#): “A federal jury in U.S. District Court on Tuesday convicted three men of bribery and conspiracy charges connected to their work for Arise! Academy, a Dayton area charter school that operated from 2004 to 2010.”

* [The Beacon Journal reported](#):

“The Ohio Department of Education has taken control of eight charter schools and has initiated the process of closing four for poor academic performance, among them one enrolling about 138 children in Canton. ... Two in Cleveland — Villaview Community School and Cleveland Community School — failed to educate special-needs children despite the state working with the schools on the issue in the past.

“They just weren’t providing what they were supposed to be providing,” Charlton said.

The other two academically failing charter schools — Imagine on Superior Academy in Canton and Imagine Cleveland Academy — are operated by Virginia-based Imagine Schools. The for-profit company has been criticized for charging its schools what the state has called exorbitant rent. The rent, in turn, is used to pay back private investors who buy up the charter school property then lease it back to the school management company.

Dyer writes:

These stories all have been told before, though not as rapid-fire and in as quick succession. What they indicate is pretty clear: We desperately need real, substantive charter school reform. Now. The Ohio Senate is currently

considering SB 148, which would be a meaningful improvement on the current situation. However, it still doesn't make it easier for the state to shut down poor performing charters, nor does it fix a funding system that far too often forces local property taxpayers to subsidize the state funding losses to woefully under-performing charter schools.

To be clear, there are a few quite exemplary charter schools out there. And I want to see them thrive in more places around this state. So this is in no way directed at the Breakthrough Schools, or DECA or Columbus Prep, or the Toledo School for the Arts. This is about the more than three out of four charter schools that simply aren't cutting it.

Ohio has allowed charter schools to open and operate with virtually no transparency, leading to so many academic and financial problems that Gov. John Kasich promised real reforms this year. Ohioans are still waiting for the policymakers to decide whether they will really rein in the sector or pretend as if they are.