

Voices from Rural Oklahoma: School Choice

In the report “Voices from Rural Oklahoma” we conducted a series of focus groups and interviews with students, parents, and business leaders throughout the state in order to understand their perspectives on public education. We spoke to more than 80 individuals living in 47 rural communities. Those we spoke with were often unfamiliar with charter schools; however, many were wary of the effect a new school could have on their communities.

Skepticism of School Choice

Rural community members have little understanding of charter public schools and how they differ from (and are similar to) district public schools. They asked many questions about charter schools and often characterized charter schools as private schools. When asked how it would affect their communities if a new school, operated by an entity other than the district, were to open in their rural community, participants shared several concerns:

- An additional school would drain limited financial resources from existing districts and schools
- An additional school could be seen as “elite” or “exclusionary,” which would hurt existing schools by taking their top students
- An additional school would make it more difficult for already-small schools to offer sports and other extracurricular activities

A handful of individuals had a deeper understanding of what charter schools are and how they work. These individuals sensed charter schools could create competition for existing schools, thus improving innovation and overall performance.

Opportunities for Sharing Information

As more rural communities begin to explore the idea of opening a charter school, like the one currently underway in Seminole, state policymakers have an opportunity to provide parents, community members, and business leaders with more information on charter schools. This information can help communities understand both the governance and legal structures of charter schools and the potential impacts on their communities, good and bad. Community members would benefit from straightforward, objective information on the following topics:

- The definition of a charter school
- The theory of change behind charter schooling
- How charter schools are regulated differently from district schools
- The funding mechanism for charter schools
- Enrollment policies for charter schools
- Student outcomes at existing charter schools

Oklahoma Education QUICK FACTS

- 1 in 3 students attends rural schools
- 390 of 513 districts are rural
- 18% of rural eighth-graders score proficient or higher on NAEP math (compared to 32% nationally)
- 27% of rural eighth-graders score proficient or higher on NAEP reading (compared to 33% nationally)
- 19% of rural families live in poverty (compared to 14% in Oklahoma City and 16% in Tulsa)
- 1999: State charter law passed
- 2015: Charter law amended to allow charters to operate outside of Oklahoma City and Tulsa
- 2016: First non-urban charter school opens in Carlton Landing
- 32 charter schools currently in operation statewide

Sources: National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2010-2014 five-year American Community Survey estimates, Oklahoma State Department of Education

CONTACT US www.bellwethereducation.org

juliet.squire@bellwethereducation.org, kelly.robson@bellwethereducation.org

BELLWETHER
EDUCATION PARTNERS