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Education Policy Research Unit

*****NEWS RELEASE*****

**from the Education Policy Research Unit (EPRU)
and the Education Policy Studies Laboratory (EPSSL)
at Arizona State University**

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Find the complete text of this report at:

<http://www.asu.edu/educ/epssl/EPRU/documents/EPSSL-0403-115-EPRU.doc>

**REPORT CAUTIONS AGAINST MOVING QUICKLY ON CITY-WIDE
CHARTER SYSTEMS**

TEMPE, Ariz.—While a plan promoting the creation of the nation’s first-ever charter school network in Buffalo, New York, paints an optimistic picture of the potential results, an examination of the record of charter schools holds out much less hope for the proposal, a new report from the Education Policy Studies Laboratory (EPSSL) at Arizona State University finds.

The report, *City-wide Systems of Charter Schools: Proceed With Caution*, was prepared for EPSL by Gerald Bracey, an independent education policy researcher and associate professor at George Mason University.

The report analyzes the rationale and evidence in *Creating a Network of Charter Schools in Buffalo*, prepared by the Education Innovation Consortium (EIC), a Buffalo think-tank, at the direction of the Buffalo School Board. The EIC's document supports the creation of the nation's first-ever district-wide network of charter schools.

The Buffalo experiment is likely to be closely watched in school reform circles, and could inspire similar proposals elsewhere. According to Alex Molnar, director of Arizona State University's Education Policy Studies Laboratory, "The Lab analyzed the Education Innovation Consortium document because of the potential national significance of the Buffalo experiment."

In *Creating a Network*, EIC poses and proffers answers to a series of questions about the possibilities of a charter network in the Western New York City, which has a population of 287, 698 and enrolls a total of 43,858 in its public school system. Those questions include:

- What does chartering bring to Buffalo school reform?
- Can chartering bring higher levels of accountability?
- Can chartering provide more quality choices for parents?
- Can a network of charters promote the transformation of the entire system?
- How do charters compare academically?
- Can charter schools adequately provide services to children with special needs?

Although the EIC proposal answers those questions favorably, the EPSL report finds research evidence paints a much less favorable picture.

For example, while the EIC document echoes charter advocates in contending charters offer "school-based decision making" and "curricular freedom," the EPSL report notes that between the limitations of the New York State Regents' performance standards and the requirements of the for-profit Educational Management Organizations (EMOs) that run most charter schools in the nation, charter schools, and the proposed network, could easily experience little or no school-based decision making latitude.

Bracey also observes that academic accountability remains an elusive goal for charter schools, in that few charters have been terminated for academic reasons. Moreover, he notes that charter school evaluators around the nation have remarked how similar charters are to traditional public schools and that they have not lived up to expectations that they would be "laboratories of innovation."

“Evaluations from Michigan, California, and Ohio find that charters, at best, are matching the performance of demographically similar traditional schools,” according to Bracey. At the same time many charters are doing less well than traditional schools.

Finally, the record of charters with special needs children is mixed, at best. While some charters cater to special needs children, the remainder has fewer such children than public schools, and those special needs students they do enroll have milder disabilities.

Bracey makes several recommendations. Chief among them is that Buffalo “critically evaluate the research and evaluation literature much more thoroughly than has been done in *Creating a Network of Charter Schools in Buffalo*.” The original plan “omitted many evaluation studies and uncritically and sometimes erroneously accepted the conclusions of those it did include.”

Bracey also recommends that the Buffalo School District and any district considering similar action:

- 1) Require agencies proposing charter schools specify clear and measurable goals.
- 2) Require charter school operators define their procedures in measurable terms that will clearly indicate whether or not goals have been met.
- 3) Require clear statements of accountability for attaining goals and consequences for not doing so.
- 4) Present charters as an asset to existing schools instead of a threat and provide a clearly defined mechanism by which charter schools contribute to the improvement on non-charter schools in the district.
- 5) Require prospective charter operators to furnish specific and adequate statements about administrative, personnel, and fiscal schools of those in charge of managing the school.
- 6) Require charter proposals to state specifically the school’s approach to special education.
- 7) Track the progress of and evaluate charters using the services of an outside, disinterested party.

The Education Policy Research Unit (EPRU) conducts original research, provides independent analyses of research and policy documents, and facilitates educational innovation. EPRU facilitates the work of leading academic experts in a variety of disciplines to help inform the public debate about education policy issues.

Visit the EPRU website at <http://educationanalysis.org>

The Education Policy Studies Laboratory (EPSL) at Arizona State University offers high quality analyses of national education policy issues and provides an analytical resource for educators, journalists, and citizens. It includes the Commercialism in Education Research Unit (CERU), the Education Policy Analysis Archives (EPAA), the Education Policy Research Unit (EPRU), and the Language Policy Research Unit (LPRU). The EPSL is directed by Professor Alex Molnar.

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