



Democrats Dodge a Charter Question —and for a Reason

IT TOOK UNTIL THE THIRD HOUR of the third Democratic presidential debate—the first of the 2020 cycle to gather all top-tier candidates on the same stage—for education policy to make an appearance. What ensued over the next 14 minutes in response to ABC correspondent Linsey Davis’s query about charter schools was a remarkable exercise in dodging the question.

Why were the candidates reluctant even to discuss one of the cornerstones of the last Democratic president’s education agenda? Results from 2019 *Education Next* survey, reported in this issue, provide a likely explanation.

Davis directed her question to entrepreneur Andrew Yang. Yang, as Davis reminded him, had once said that Democrats seeking to limit the growth of charter schools are “jumping into bed with teachers’ unions and doing kids a disservice.” Yet Yang did not mention charter schools in his response.

Neither did the five candidates who spoke subsequently. Pete Buttigieg, whose husband teaches at an Indiana private school, talked of the need to “Respect teachers the way we do soldiers and pay them more like the way we do doctors.” Elizabeth Warren, Kamala Harris, Bernie Sanders, and Joe Biden joined Buttigieg in calling for higher teacher pay. They touched on everything from universal preschool to debt relief for student borrowers—everything, that is, except the issue about which they’d been asked.

It fell to Julian Castro to remind his peers of the question, which he did in order to bust the “myth that charter schools are better than public schools.” His language obscured the fact that charter schools are public schools. While claiming not to be “categorically against charter schools,” he said that he “would require more transparency and accountability from them than is required right now.”

Only Cory Booker, whose deep involvement in a charter-heavy turnaround effort as Newark mayor leaves him little alternative, proved willing to offer a positive word. “We closed poor-performing charter schools,” said Booker, “but damn it we expanded high-performing charter schools.” The results of this approach in Newark, he claimed, “speak for themselves.”

That Democratic candidates would rush at any chance to call for paying teachers more is no surprise. Our survey confirms that it is an issue that at once unites their base and has crossover appeal. Seventy two percent of Americans express support for increasing teacher pay in their state, including an overwhelming 83 percent of Democrats and fully 60 percent of Republicans. The conversation also served as an opportunity to curry favor with the teacher unions, which remain among the most potent forces in Democratic party politics.

Our data also reveal that support for charter schools is flagging among Democrats. Forty eight percent now oppose “the formation of charter schools,” with just 40 percent expressing support. That marks a stark reversal from 2016, the last year of Barack Obama’s presidency, when Democrats favored charter schools by a 45 percent to 33 percent margin.

Yet if Democrats are turning against charters, why aren’t the candidates leading the charge? Bernie Sanders has in fact called to end public funding for charter growth and a ban on “for-profit” charters. But the more common strategy, as illustrated on the debate stage in September, has been to avoid the topic altogether.

The answer may lie in the breakdown of our survey results within the Democratic Party. It shows that the decline in support for charter schools has been driven entirely by white Democrats. While a plurality of white Democrats supported charters in 2016, they now oppose charters by a 57 percent to 33 percent margin. Black Democrats, in contrast, support charters by a 55 percent to 29 percent margin. The balance of support among Democrats who identify as Hispanic is narrower but still positive, at 47 percent to 42 percent.

In short, while candidates who vocally criticize charter schools may find favor with the white progressive left, they would risk alienating black and Hispanic voters, plenty of whom have seen their communities transformed by the expansion of high-quality charter schools in urban centers. And those voters comprise a large share of the Democratic electorate, especially once the contest moves on from Iowa and New Hampshire into more racially diverse territory. The safer course of action, the candidates seem to have decided, is to remain silent.

That may be low risk as a political tactic. The downside, though, is that if any of these candidates do find themselves in the White House, they won’t have prepared the ground if they do decide to push to advance charter schools. A Democratic president, once in office, would have the option of seeking political cover and validation from predecessors like Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, all charter school proponents. That option, though, exists now, too.

Martin R. West

MISSION STATEMENT In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.
