

School Choice

Gilbert and Anne have a five-year-old, Fred. Anne and Gilbert were the first of their families to go to college and want to make sure that they give Fred as many advantages as they can. They have been reading to him since birth and have spent a great deal of time working with him on numbers and letters. Fred is very bright and is well-prepared to begin school soon.

When deciding where to send Fred for kindergarten, they toured a local traditional public school and a nearby publicly-funded charter school. There were clear differences between these schools. The charter school had computers for the students, a great music program, and an enriched science program—even the kindergarteners had a science lab! The traditional public school, in contrast, did not have any enrichment programs—its classrooms had little beyond books and desks. The differences did not end there. The charter school classrooms had fewer students. As a result, they received a considerable amount of individual attention. These students generally seemed engaged and motivated. Gilbert and Anne also noticed that there were a number of parents helping in the classroom, suggesting that parents were highly involved. In the traditional public school, in contrast, the classrooms were crowded. The teachers seemed dedicated but overworked. While there were additional teaching assistants present, they were primarily there to help kids in need of additional behavioral support. There were no parent helpers to be seen.

Given what they saw, Anne and Gilbert believe that Fred is likely to get a better education if they send him to the charter school. However, they are torn about whether this is a good enough reason to take him out of the traditional public school system. Anne and Gilbert are strong supporters of public education. Even though traditional public schools are often far from perfect—especially in lower-income communities—Anne and Gilbert believe that a strong public education system is vitally important for society. They worry that charter schools are undermining this socially-critical institution from within. For instance, they are concerned that charter schools often divert funding away from traditional public schools that are already stretched thin financially.¹ Additionally, while lower performing students do better in classrooms with higher performing students, it seems that higher performing students are leaving traditional public schools for charter schools at higher rates. While Anne and Gilbert want what is best for their child, they do not want to contribute to these trends that they see as problematic. They don't want to participate in something that they believe could ultimately hurt other children and leave them further behind. At the same time, they know that these are systemic problems, and one child is not going to have a large effect—so why should they limit their child's educational prospects if their choice ultimately won't make much of a difference when it comes to these larger trends?

STUDY QUESTIONS

- (1) In what ways and to what extent (if any) is it morally (in)appropriate for parents to put their child's interest first, over the interests of other children?
- (2) What is the value of having a strong public education system? Do charter schools undermine or strengthen it? Explain.
- (3) How should one feel about participating in larger social trends that one finds morally problematic, when opting out would not likely have made a significant difference to those trends?

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2017/01/09/a-disturbing-look-at-how-charter-schools-are-hurting-a-traditional-school-district/?utm_term=.1277fe5e63c8