

Testimony of Jonathon Clark
Education and the Workforce Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
June 13, 2018

Good morning Reps. Foxx and Scott, and members of the committee.

My name is Jonathon Phillip Clark. I am a husband, the father of seven wonderful children and an Iraq War veteran. Currently, I am an assistant director at Mission City, a nonprofit organization in Detroit that provides mentoring and tutoring throughout the school year and an arts camp during the summer. I live with my wife, Dawn, and four of our children: Dannah, Elanah, Emily and Daniel. I also serve on the board of an organization called 482Forward, a group of parents and students that advocates for a high-quality, equitable education for all Detroit children. I make it a point to stay active and engaged in the community and city that I live in and love.

You probably think I have come here today to tell you how terrible charter schools are, and that we should shut them all down immediately. But that is not my message to you.

Of my seven children, three currently attend school in Detroit. This year, two are in the traditional public school district and one is in a private school. But in previous years, we have had children in public, charter and private schools all at the same time. And we have had good and bad experiences in all three. But there are a few experiences in charter schools that I want to bring to your attention as you make decisions about what the future of American public education should look like.

My oldest daughter, Dannah, attended a charter school called University Yes Academy for four years. The students attended school from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., with two hours of math and two hours of English each day and a weekly college seminar class for all of the high school students that would help them to prepare for college. The school also promised dual enrollment, where my daughter would be enrolled in college and high school at the same time.

For the first three years, the school kept its promises. During Dannah's 10th-grade year, the two hours each of math and English were reduced to 45 minutes a day. The college seminar class was reduced to a once a month meeting that took place after school and only some students were invited to attend. When we asked about the dual-enrollment program, we were told that our daughter, who had maintained a 4.0 since kindergarten, was not eligible because she had not scored high enough on her "practice" ACT test, and that that was one of the requirements. UYA had five principals in three years. An audit revealed that the school could not account for \$300,000 of spent Title I funds. The board canceled their contract with the management company, supposedly because the company no longer had the capacity to run the school, only to sign a contract with a new management company headed by the exact same person. A second new management company decided to close the high school a week before school started. When parents, teachers and students pressed for answers on the money or the turnover or the management company, we were ignored by the board.

You may be thinking that it's possible UYA was a unique situation. But around the same time, my other two daughters, Emily and Elanah, attended two other charters, Detroit Leadership

Academy and Detroit Innovation Academy that had similar problems. The management company that ran both of those schools left in the middle of the school year, firing the principals and some teachers, without notifying the parents. Friends of mine are struggling today at a school that has had five principals and two management companies in five years. The story is the same, over and over, almost everywhere we look.

With all of this management turnover, we had no confidence that those running the school had any interest in providing a good education for our children, nor any confidence that those allowing these management companies to run schools and leave in the middle of a school year cared at all about the well-being of the children in their care. Others will point out that we had a choice: stay or leave. This system of choice is premised on the belief that the threat of us leaving will incentivize schools to get better. But we didn't want to leave. Most parents don't. If you've ever had to figure out a transportation schedule for four kids at four different schools, then you'll understand what I'm saying. If you've ever had to watch your child struggle to find new friends yet again, then you'll understand what I'm saying. If you've ever gotten a different job just so you can accommodate your kids' school schedules, then you'll understand what I'm saying. We didn't want to leave.

When we, and other parents like me, tried to voice our frustrations and ask for stability in the management of the school and for the school to deliver what it had promised, we learned that there wasn't an elected board we could vote out. The charter authorizer we were supposed to go to was 350 miles away at Bay Mills Community College. And I want to be clear, this isn't about bad people; this is about a badly designed system. We have designed a system where the people who are in charge—the authorizers and, to a much lesser extent, the board members—have no personal relationship to the consequences of their decisions. These schools are not in their neighborhoods. Their children do not attend these schools. The children of their friends and neighbors do not attend these schools. And our only accountability mechanism as parents is to leave.

Ultimately, we did leave, along with many other families and teachers.

Michigan's lax charter authorization system has allowed schools to promise things and not deliver them, and to continue to take taxpayer money without providing Michigan's—and, in particular, Detroit's—students a quality education. And attempts by Detroit's business, community and education leaders to coordinate between the charter and traditional school sectors to improve accountability and transportation have been rebuffed by the Michigan Legislature.

It doesn't have to be this way. Massachusetts, for example, holds charter schools accountable for what they promise in their applications. The reforms that Congress included in the Every Student Succeeds Act contain similar provisions. But those requirements only apply to charters receiving the federal Charter School Program funds. Michigan state laws continue to allow an unaccountable system to flourish.

I encourage you as members of this congressional education committee to remain ever vigilant in holding Education Secretary DeVos and this administration accountable for the charter program reforms that ESSA enacted. Her influence over the charter sector is now nationwide, not confined to Michigan, and, based on my experience, I would not wish Michigan's charter policies on the nation.

The word “choice” sounds good. And, certainly, the opposite—being “trapped”—sounds unfair. But the system of choice that we live in requires my wife and me to drive around our city for hours to get our children to and from their schools. It requires us to attend countless open houses and be wooed by promises of after-school programs, dual enrollment in college, advanced math and reading, and state-of-the-art technology—but with no mechanism to ensure that we are given what we have been promised.

This is my children’s lives and their education. Like your children, like all children, they don’t get to do it again. What they deserve is a quality education. What we parents and community members deserve even more than a choice is a say in their education. What all of us citizens deserve is accountability—assurance that those who take taxpayer money to provide an education will deliver what they promise.

Thank you.