

Serena Allen:

Welcome to The Policy Paycheck. My name is Serena Allen. Thanks for tuning in. The Policy Paycheck was born from the idea that all people should have access to factual and relevant economic evidence about the most controversial policy topics we hear about every day. While our intended audience is American high school civics classes, even policy experts may learn something from each episode. Ideally, listeners like you will walk away better informed to not only discuss but also form your own opinions about the policies as taxpayers we already pay for.

Today, Dr. Christine Beckman will speak about charter schools. Doctor Beckman is the Price Family Chair in Social Innovation and Professor of Public Policy at the University of Southern California. Thank you so much for being here today Christine.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

I'm glad to be here.

Serena Allen:

Let's just start with our first question here. What exactly is a charter school and how does it differ from public or private schools?

Dr. Christine Beckman:

Well, that's a really common misconception even in the question itself. So a charter school is a public school. It's not a private school, but what makes it different is it operates not within a district. It's generally a quasi independent school that has sort of local autonomy and is accountable to its performance but is really a public school, just not in a traditional district. So that's, I think, a really important point just even to start with because I think, I know you see rhetoric and you see things that say, support our public schools, not charters. Well, charters are public schools. I think that debate is around district schools versus charter schools, not really about public.

Serena Allen:

Interesting, and they're just often labeled as if they're different, even though it just depends on the district.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

I mean, it doesn't really depend on the district. They're funded the same way. So the dollars that come to a school are based on how many students you have, right, until you get a certain amount of money per student.

Serena Allen:

Okay.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

And that money comes largely from the state, but district schools and charter schools each would get that money and so depending on how many students you have, that determines how much money you get. Then there's some differences too, in whether you have students with high needs, high economic needs, so economics, special needs, English as a second language, right? So there's different categories where you might actually get more funding for those students because you need more resources in order to be able to teach them.

But it's the standard per student and type of student funding that is going to be the same for all public schools. Whether that's a district getting that money or whether that's a charter school getting that money.

Serena Allen:

Oh, okay.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

I don't know if that makes sense.

Serena Allen:

Yeah, definitely. How much of public education is funded by the federal government?

Dr. Christine Beckman:

Not a huge amount. About 10% roughly and that has been pretty consistent over a long period of time and the model really is education is a local issue and it's a state issue not a federal issue. And so you get money from the federal government for TitleOne and certain special programs targeted to support certain kinds of students, but largely education is a more local issue.

Serena Allen:

Where does the rest of this local funding come from? Because as far as a student may believe their school is free because they go in and they don't pay anything to enter and they go to classes and that's how it's always been for them.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

Yes, absolutely. So public schools are funded, like I said, 10% from the federal government, about 58% from the state and about 32% from local and property taxes. So in California, and this is for California in particular, but in California, about 22% of the revenue for school comes from the property taxes.

Serena Allen:

Oh wow.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

Then a big chunk comes from the state and it's changed a little bit in California. In 2013, they put in a new funding formula. It's called the Local Control Funding Formula. They tried to simplify it, because there were all these different block grants for different kinds of students who would get money. So they went for a much simpler model where there's a base amount of money per student that the school or a district would receive.

Then there's some supplements based on the economic need of the students. And so you probably, you get about 20% more for high need students than you would for sort of the average, the average student. And so the funding model is a combination from those different sources at each school or district, get the amount of money that matches the number of students and the needs of the students in that particular school.

Serena Allen:

Okay. Do you know if that differs greatly from state to state? So public education is about 10% funded by the federal government for all States.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

That's pretty much, that's all states, yeah.

Serena Allen:

So the other 90% has to come, no matter what state you're in, from a mix of state and local revenue, somehow to keep schools open.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

Right. So in California, you may know there was a big proposition in 1978 that changed property taxes. Proposition 13, and so what that did in California is it reduced the amount of money that was available from property taxes to go to school. So if you compare California to other schools in the country, we have a much lower money per student that we're putting towards public education. We rank around 40th in the nation-

Serena Allen:

Oh, wow!

Dr. Christine Beckman:

... for the amount of money that students that we put into public education so the national average is let's see, like I want to say 13,000 per student and in California it's more like 10,000.

Serena Allen:

Oh wow.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

And that's despite the fact that we have a very diverse student population with a lot of needs.

Serena Allen:

Right. Definitely. I know that just the English learners population in California is huge just because we have such a huge international population in comparison to many states. How does charter school funding then differ per student from public school funding?

Dr. Christine Beckman:

Well, like we were talking about, it really doesn't in the sense that it is public funding. So it is... if you imagine a charter school as a district, they're going to get a chunk of money for however many students they have and the composition of that student just like a district would. So that's probably the simplest way to think about it as it is a mini district and there are some charter schools that operate a big network. So there are networks of charter schools generally called charter management organizations that are actually bigger than some districts in California. And so that group of schools would get the same based on the same formula that the district schools would get. Now, a couple of things would be different. One would be facilities. So there was a law passed in California that required all charter schools to get some sort of facilities.

But unlike a district school that isn't necessarily stable over time. So there is a lot of movement sometimes of charter schools from place to place and so that there's some extra costs that those charter schools have to pay for that you might not have if you were a district school. So that's sort of one difference is the facilities and how facilities work and that obviously has implications for funding.

Then the other difference is private fundraising, right? So you have the federal and the state and the local money coming in, but all schools can raise independent money and so think about your typical parent teacher association in a local public school, right? Those are associations raising money for their local schools. Well, that's happening in charter schools too and it has been a big philanthropic effort to put money to support charter schools and by different accounts, a half a billion dollars has been put into supporting charter schools over the last 15 years or so.

Serena Allen:

So then that half a billion would just go to the charter schools and specific schools.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

To specific schools, yeah. And so there is a lot of heterogeneity, like a lot of variety in what schools get. So that money has gone to a very few number of schools and some of those charter management organizations that I talked about, so that they are getting a disproportionate amount of that private philanthropy, but if you look on average, an average district school in an average charter school fundraises about the same amount. You know, \$571

is what a typical district school might be able to raise per student. \$552 is what a charter school student would typically get.

That data is from a Stanford Social Innovation Review article, but what that means is when you look on average, they're pretty comparable. The charter schools and the district schools are getting about the same amount of money per student. They're fundraising about the same amount. Charter schools actually get slightly less money from the state and the federal government just based on the details of what students they have and the facilities issues that we talked about, but it's largely equivalent but that's on average is, right?

Serena Allen:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dr. Christine Beckman:

When you unpack averages, you see that there's going to be inequalities in different places in that.

Serena Allen:

Right. So a lot of the fundraising then from the non-charter public schools are coming from things like, I remember when I was younger, I attended a non-charter public school, where you would do a fundraiser and you would take it home and maybe sell cookie dough, right?

Dr. Christine Beckman:

Absolutely.

Serena Allen:

And so that money then would go back into the school or something like Box tops maybe. Whereas the charter schools are the students not doing those same fundraising things and the philanthropic donations aren't bringing in that extra funding?

Dr. Christine Beckman:

I think it depends a lot on the school. So I don't know that I could say one way or the other. They certainly could be there'd be no reason that they wouldn't necessarily and so I think it's important to note that the philanthropic dollars going into those charter schools tend to be schools that are targeting low income students. And so the reason they're putting so much money into those schools is that they're trying to improve the educational outcomes for those less academically achieving students. And so they probably are doing less of that fundraising, but they're also in communities that don't have the resources that your local public-

Serena Allen:

May have had.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

... district school might've had.

Serena Allen:

Right. Definitely. So today we have a question from our high schooler of the episode, and this is coming from Kevin Stephenson at Quartz Hill High School in Lancaster, California. And this question is why do people be it parents or private funders, invest in private and charter schools instead of looking to better existing public schools for more students?

Dr. Christine Beckman:

Yeah. And so again, just to make sure we have our definitions right. So I think the question is really, why would you invest in a private school or a charter school rather than your local district school?

Serena Allen:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dr. Christine Beckman:

Because again, the charter school is a public school. I think partly the reason charter schools sort of came about really was sort of a really a desire to have more local control and more choice and so when you want to put effort into a school, sometimes the charter school that sort of is local to your community, maybe you feel like you have more input and you think maybe your money matters more.

I think it would be things like that around sort of local control. It's a different theory about how we can improve public schools, right? So we can focus on district schools and trying to improve outcomes for all the kids within districts. The charter school movement emerged as a way of saying, boy, that's not really working. There's some sort of endemic problems here. Maybe what we need to do is create a new kind of public school that is freer from some of those bureaucratic constraints and maybe those schools are going to be more nimble and more able to come up with new ideas and maybe that's going to give us, to help us find some better ways to improve education for all kids. And that was the theory at least, right. Whether that worked or not is a different question.

Serena Allen:

Definitely. And I think you touched on it there that, but as far as I know, charter schools are a fairly new form of education overall. When did they become a thing and who are the main actors in creating it and how did it happen? Because as far as I remember all of a sudden one day they just kind of popped up and I'm sure that's not as easily as it went down.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

So the first charter schools were in Minnesota in 1991, so it is a relatively recent thing and California was the second state to pass charter school legislation and that was in 1992 with the Charter Schools Act. And it was really an interesting movement or effort and it's unusual in that it was really a combination of different political ideologies. On the right you had people that were really interested in choice and on the left you had people that were really interested in community and parent involvement and really the sort of localness of really being able to do your own thing.

And so that those two groups sort of came together in advocating for the charter legislation. I mean its goals were to improve opportunities for low academic achieving students, to create some new places for innovation and experimentation in schools, to provide choice and then to change the accountability to be more performance-based so that we would evaluate schools based on their test scores and not so much on just sort of what they look like. So very performance-based. So those four things were the components of the charter school law and it brought together people interested in very different things to gather to support this piece of legislation because charter schools take the same tests as all the district schools they... and what you do is you get authorized for five years to operate as a charter school and then you're evaluated based on those scores.

And if you're doing well, it gets renewed. Otherwise you can be shut down and you could of course be shut down at any point earlier if you're financially unsound or anything like that. So basically any group of parents, teachers, community members could say, we want to create a school. This is our model for what this school should look like. And you find a group of parents, a group of teachers are saying that they are interested in being part of this school and you submit a petition that sort of says what it is that you want to do and that gets approved or not approved.

And then you, you basically, depending on how many students you enroll, then you get that money to fund your school. So it is a very local community based sort of idea at its heart, which sort of brought all these different political constituencies together. I mean, that's fragmented over time in Los Angeles. We've had a lot of controversy in the last couple of years, which we can talk about as well, but at its heart, that's what it was. It was sort of this coming together.

Serena Allen:

Right, so the idea is if you and I for some reason or another did not think that the district school was going to meet the needs of our children, but at the same time didn't want to enlist them in a private school for maybe financial constraints, maybe something else. We could just kind of make our own school with something that might be different. I think overall it seems to be a great non-partisan policy in itself where different people are coming together with this type of community idea. What kind of students are attracted and enrolling in these charter schools?

Dr. Christine Beckman:

I think another important thing to point out is, so yes, we have all these individuals and sometimes they're business people, sometimes are community members, sometimes are parents, sometimes they're teachers with a different idea coming together to create a school. Then we're going to aggregate up and we're going to talk about charter schools as a thing, when of course the whole point of charter schools was to create a lot of variety and a lot of different ways of doing things that were meeting local needs. I'll talk about who are in charter schools, but I just think it's important to remember then we're talking about these averages that there was just so much difference across, because these are schools created in local communities for a particular... There are art schools, there are STEM schools, there are college prep schools, there are alternative schools.

There's just a lot of different schools within that same label. I mean, and in California, that's 1300 different schools-

Serena Allen:

Wow!

Dr. Christine Beckman:

... that enroll about 11% of the California K-12 population. That's not a huge amount, but California's a big state and so there are other States that have higher percentages of students enrolled, but we have the most in just sheer number just based on the size of our population.

Serena Allen:

Interesting.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

It's a little sidestepping of your question. Just make sure that when we talk about these averages, we remember that it's going to vary a lot.

Serena Allen:

Definitely.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

And one of the ways it varies a lot is that a lot of these schools tend to be often more segregated, right? So you might have a school that's 80% African-American so we can talk in averages and then it's going to just vary a lot.

Serena Allen:

Okay.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

So on average charter school, students are more likely to be white and they're more likely to be African-American.

Serena Allen:

Okay.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

Not in the same school necessarily, but about 29% of charter school students are white. Students 24% would be true in a district school, a traditional district school.

Serena Allen:

Okay.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

African-American, about 8% of the student enrollment in a charter school is African-American, 6% in a traditional district public school. The opposite is true for Latinos and Asians. So those numbers tend to be higher in the traditional district schools and lower in the charter schools, but the numbers are not huge, right? 54% traditional district schools are Latino versus 50% in a charter school. 9% Asian in a traditional public school versus 5% in a charter school.

Serena Allen:

Interesting, and these numbers are just for California? Correct?

Dr. Christine Beckman:

These numbers are just for California and this is 2015, 2016 so I'm sure it's changed a lot over the last few years. Another way to think about this is also about, we talked a lot about how the funding changes based on who your population of students is. There tend to be fewer English learners in charter schools than traditional district schools and also less economically disadvantaged. So the numbers again are small. So 57% are economically disadvantaged in charter schools versus 59% in traditional public schools. But those are statistically significant differences given the numbers that we're talking about.

Serena Allen:

Why do you think we're seeing fewer English learners and fewer low income in charter schools?

Dr. Christine Beckman:

Well, remember if you go back to that general idea that these are people saying that the school in my local neighborhood isn't meeting my needs, that I'm going to create a school. That's a lot of work.

Serena Allen:

Right.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

And that's a lot of effort. And so you tend to have... so you might have an art school, like I said or a STEM school that we're a group of parents but think about the knowledge, the resources, the time that you have to put towards that.

Serena Allen:

Right.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

So that I think probably explains it a little bit on the English learner side, so what kind of knowledge you need to have of the system and how it works.

Serena Allen:

Community organizing, all of those.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

Yeah. And I think the reason it's probably as close as it is on the economically disadvantaged is you do have a large number of charter schools that are focused very explicitly on those students and are predominantly students of color that are economically disadvantaged, but the counterpoint is all of the schools that are the opposite, right? Which are in communities where they just want an alternative to the district school and maybe more affluent.

Serena Allen:

Interesting. Let's say I'm interested in not creating my own charter school, but maybe having my student attend a charter school instead of a public school, is there something I have to do to be a part of that school then? Because I know that if the school you go to generally is decided based off of where you live. So let's say now you want to go to charter school, what does that process look like for a parent to change your kid over?

Dr. Christine Beckman:

Right. So they are open to all students. That's part of the... if it's going to be a public school and you're not neighborhood based, you have to be open to all. And I mean, there are some schools that are very, very popular and they have more students that want to attend them than, then they can accommodate. And those schools do lotteries. So you would put your name in the lottery and if you get in, you get to enroll in that school. Otherwise, you would go to another charter school to a district school.

So that the process, it's supposed to be a hundred percent public, a hundred percent open and then when you get too many kids, those are the kinds of things they turn to like lotteries to-

Serena Allen:

Interesting.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

... deal with that. That doesn't happen with our large number of schools.

Serena Allen:

Right, just the more popular ones.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

Just the really, really popular ones.

Serena Allen:

But you have to have some type of parent involvement to be involved in a charter school then.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

Well, so you have to have parents that know enough to know that they want to look into a charter school, right, because it says default is the neighborhood school that's there. And so it's not that you have to be necessary... There are some charter schools that have requirements for volunteering and things like that. That's also true in district schools. My kids went to a public district school and they... I mean what can you, it's all in quotes, "required volunteering."

But really strongly encouraged parents to be involved. So I think that can happen in both schools. I think the more important difference is having the knowledge that you would want to look for something else and then you would sit and know that these charter schools would even exist and figure out which one you want to send your kid to. The other real difference is there's no busing, and there's no transportation, so if you're not in the neighborhood school, you have to figure out how to get your kid there and then that's not part of the funding that charter schools have access to. So that is that. That can be a deterrent.

Serena Allen:

Right? Definitely. Yeah. If you can't get your kid to the school, then of course you're going to go with the school that's either closer in a walking distance or has a busing program.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Serena Allen:

What are also some of the results we're seeing from the charter school system? Are students responding better to the smaller school systems?

Dr. Christine Beckman:

There's a lot of research on this and it's mixed. It's sort of inconclusive. The one that I looked at most recently, basically and ended up... is this the average charter student? Is this the high need students, are they doing better or worse? It's pretty mixed and in the same way that there are good and bad district schools, there are charter schools that are performing incredibly well and some that are performing incredibly poorly.

I would say that the most research would say it's a wash, on average it's not that different. The most recent research on charter schools in California looking at the high needs students finds that they do, and all of those students do worse than the average, but in math, there's really no difference between the charter and the district. For the high need students on English, the charter students do slightly better.

Serena Allen:

Interesting.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

You know, it's so hard to talk about a charter school performance in this because there's just so much.

Serena Allen:

Right. It's difficult to average it when it's so different.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

There's so much hidden in there. It really is a school by school and we should be thinking about the... and again, right, if you remember that these charter schools were created to create some innovation and create some new ideas and so some of those ideas are gonna work really well and some are not. And I think what we need to be better at is figuring out how two things, right? How to shut down things that aren't working and not let them go on too long and then how do we take the good ideas and spread them?

Because the idea was that this would improve education for everybody, right? We'd come up with some new ideas and we wouldn't become all charter schools, but we would find the best new ideas and we'd share those with public education and then all students would benefit. And that's really hard to do and there's not really very good mechanisms for sharing those ideas and unfortunately the politics has made it very much charter schools versus district schools, which is not conducive to sharing new ideas. And so I think the ultimate goal of

improving education for all kids, which was the motivation I think for this legislation, the first bite is sort of fallen short because of the political dynamics that have sort of emerged.

Serena Allen:

I'm glad you brought up some of the politics behind this because that's something I wanted to focus on as well. Although it doesn't seem to be a very partisan issue or perhaps as compared to other topics that we're talking to on this podcast federally as focused. I think locally it's one of the most tense issues, particularly obviously for parents who are thinking about their kids.

They're obviously very protective. People have very strong opinions on charter schools, whether they dislike them or if they like them and maybe for a lot of our listeners, they have a certain opinion just because they maybe attend water another or their parents have an opinion, but eventually our listeners are going to come of an age, perhaps have children of their own and perhaps develop their own strong opinions. What are some of the controversies? Why do some people swear that the charter schools are the worst thing to happen to America and some swear it's the best thing?

Dr. Christine Beckman:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah, I think it's a really good and important question and you're right, the public opinion has pretty split really almost down the line between in favor and opposing. It creates a lot of and some strong opinions as well. So what are some of the controversies and what are the important issues that we should be thinking about? Well, what I mean, so you mentioned this earlier. So one of the issues is about money and because the charter schools are getting money for each student that they have.

That means that if they have 150 students, the district that they are located in has 150 less students in their schools. And so they have 150 times 10,000 less money to use in their schools, so there is this feeling that the district is losing money because of the charter schools and really they are because they're losing students. And because we fund based on students, that means when a charter school operates and enrolls this number of students that the district school by definition has less money. In Los Angeles, for 2014-2015 school year, that was about 500 million.

Serena Allen:

Wow!

Dr. Christine Beckman:

And so this is a big chunk of change and if you think about all the infrastructure that the district has and needs to support, that is challenging for them, so there is a concern that it sort of hollowing out our districts and not that they don't have enough resources. So that's part of that debate and it's part of that controversy is around that funding issue.

Now, I think the charter school operators would say, well, these kids weren't being served in the district, this is why they chose to come to this school and that is the choice that is right. That is sort of the mechanism by which-

Serena Allen:

Right, brought them to the charter school in the first place definitely.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

In the first place right? So it's not like I'm stealing it from you, but these are students that didn't want to go to your school. They wanted to come to my school so... but that's very difficult, right? So that's one controversy. Another is the issue of philanthropy that we talked about before and how much private money could go into charters and whether that's a good thing because it means there's actually more money for public schools or whether that's a bad thing because you have people basically helping decide what ideas are going to take off and which ones aren't. So there's a lot of talk about corporatization and I guess on that one, philanthropists are going to put money into things that they think are important.

I mean they're putting it into charter schools as a public school that they think can... that they'll be able to move the needle more than they would in a district where they just have less leverage because those districts are bigger, more bureaucratic. So, it's harder to change a district than it is an individual school.

Serena Allen:

Right.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

So those are two controversies. I mean, another one is unions and so 90% of charter schools, if I had my latest numbers right, are not unionized.

Serena Allen:

Oh wow.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

There are some that are a green dot and L.A. being one example. It's not a... it has to be a thing, but it is an issue that has gotten a lot of attention. The teachers union is very anti-charter for that reason. So that's a big controversy as well. Then the outcomes, which schools are doing better or not and how do we actually measure it, right? Because if you remember that we have, in order to be in a charter school, the parents have had to decide that they want to send their kids to this charter school.

So if you think about that versus that's not your average parent. That's a parent that's pretty involved and has a pretty... is working hard to be educated around the education opportunities for their kid and so are the kids then doing better in charter schools because the

charter school is teaching them better or because they got students whose parents were more engaged in their kids' education and we know that that's important for educational outcomes.

Now some of the best studies try and account for that, right? We talked about the lotteries and we talked about how if you apply to the school in the lottery and you don't get in, right? So we could then track two kids, one that got into the lottery and one that didn't get into the lottery and we could compare their educational outcomes over a period of time to see who did better and that's where you start pretty much see a wash, but just looking on the surface, if we were just going to pair the test score of this school and this school, there's so many things that go into that, that are not having anything to do with what's happening in the school itself, that it makes it hard, but those outcomes become really controversial.

One of the things I've heard is about special needs kids and that the charter schools aren't as good with special needs kids. The data in California doesn't really bear that up. You know, we talked about the different composition and there's really no difference between the traditional district schools and the charter schools on special needs kids, but I have heard that as something people talk about. Facilities end up being controversial and then credentialing, right?

So there's actually a new law that has just been passed basically saying charter schools have to have credentialed teachers for all subjects. It used to be that they only had credentialed teachers for the core subjects: science, English, math, but that's actually changing, so that one will sort of even out and all teachers will be credentialed in all subjects including music and art and foreign language.

Serena Allen:

Oh great. Interesting. I know going back to a little bit of the philanthropy versus bureaucracy type of controversy here. I read an article recently that was saying basically somebody who is very anti charter school. Just an opinion article saying that because the charter schools don't operate under a district and they just operate as their sole monitor I guess that there's a lot more room for corruption I guess in that some of the philanthropic donations that are coming in are never actually being seen given towards the students and towards the betting of the school but just ending up in the top Poncho's pockets kind of, is this type of thing something we see in a lot of charter school systems since there's not the extra level of monitoring coming from the district? Or is this just kind of a one person strong opinion that this is happening?

Dr. Christine Beckman:

Well, so it certainly there are examples of it having happened. Do I think it happens with any great frequency? No. I mean, but there is less transparency and so I think it's reasonable to think about having more clarity about where that money goes, but I don't think it's a huge issue. I mean really the people creating these schools, the education entrepreneurs I've met, they want to make, they want to help kids. They want to help them learn. If you were out to make a quick buck, this really wouldn't be the right way to go about it.

Serena Allen:

Probably wouldn't be a school system definitely.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

Yeah.

Serena Allen:

You also mentioned, so just the \$500 million in L.A. alone that went to charter schools away from the district schools. How does that, I guess to some of the people who believe that that's being taken from the schools, if the students are also leaving the schools, wouldn't that then make their overall costs go down in 500 million or is there just a difference in pricing per student? Or maybe they're also paying for transportation? Why do they view that almost as theft instead of just as a fair transfer?

Dr. Christine Beckman:

Right. I think because there's a lot of fixed costs that are hard to manage and so you know, your class size goes down, maybe you don't need as many teachers, the district offices still have the same number of people, so you basically have the same infrastructure to just serve fewer students.

Serena Allen:

Oh, interesting.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

Although in theory, yes, you should downsize, you should eliminate some of those services. It's hard to do in real time and certainly in a year to year basis, it would require some really big shuffling. So I think it's just that there's just some... you then have to fundamentally rethink, do we need this many teachers? Do we need this many people in the district? And that is difficult.

Serena Allen:

Right, so if you're getting a budget for, I guess that's like getting just a random number here, \$100,000 a year or something, and you're serving, let's say eight to 12 kids and all of a sudden that 12 goes down to eight while you still have the same needs and within that eight to 12 kid budget, but then now you're receiving that much less of the money, so that's where it's kind of coming in there.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

Right, and I think really the problem in California is that we don't put enough money into public education, so if we weren't 40th in the nation for funding public education, we might not be fighting as hard about this student versus that student because we have so little to start with

and it's really, it's not enough. All of these schools are struggling to educate kids with the money that they get. So I think that's part of it too, is it really, rather than fighting each other, I wish we'd fight for just more money for public education.

Serena Allen:

Right. Interesting. Yeah. And I think that leads nicely into our next question. Yeah, it is a very heated issue where people are kind of pitting themselves against each other, maybe even against... Throwing the private schools out there. What's your opinion on how we could better approach education from a non-partisan lens to better allocate American tax dollars? This isn't just coming from the federal role, but also the very local and personal role that education plays in American families.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

I think thinking about what are our policy goals? Right. So one thing we haven't talked about or, we've sort of touched on it, is that a lot of the charter management organizations that they are not super well-integrated. They're targeting a population of students that is not been academically achieving well and trying to help them, so if our policy goal is education quality and sort of improving the educational outcomes, that's great. But another policy outcome could be integration, right? And that was a policy in the US for a while.

It probably had busing and things like that. So I'm associated with the Centre for Social Innovation and we had a speaker in December, Rucker Johnson from Berkeley, and he was talking about schools and I think in his mind he would say, really our goal should be to better integrate the district schools that we have and to get parents involved in those and that's actually going to improve outcomes for everybody, but that's a different goal that if integration is your goal, then charter schools sort of don't really achieve that.

There are some charter schools that try and tackle it, but it's not the norm, right? So I think being really clear about what our goals are is important and just sort of when this might be tangential, but you know, I'm thinking about who goes to charter schools, right? And so at the high and the low ends, like the really affluent kids are not in charter schools and the really poor kids are not in charter schools.

Well, charter schools have done as sort of carved out a pretty big section of the middle, but really carved out places for the people in the middle to sort of go and that then creates some polarization in those district schools that I think is partly what some of that controversy is about because the worst off kids are probably even more worse off than they were before charter schools, but there's a whole group of kids that were maybe bad off before and now in charter schools are better off. So how do we decide how we're going to value that?

Serena Allen:

Definitely. It's a complex issue.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

Yeah.

Serena Allen:

So with the kind of not exactly clear the washed outcomes, would you say that the charter school system has been an overall success or is it just like a starting point for changing and bettering American education policy? Or do you think that it's maybe we need to go back to our old model? Where do you think we are in creating the most ideal education policy system for our country?

Dr. Christine Beckman:

That's a big question. I think it's really hard to innovate and try to do new things. I sort of appreciate what the charter school legislation, the charter school movement has been trying to do, right? Which is to create new ideas, and to spread those ideas it's really hard to do for a couple reasons. One is, so we innovate, we have a new idea. Well, one of the things we know is that it takes a little while to figure out new ideas and to make them work, but these are kids and they're only going to school once and so, so there's a real tension between, this may be a great new idea that once we get it right is going to have tremendous impact and be really good, but what about those kids that were there at the beginning and it wasn't great then?

Serena Allen:

Definitely.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

How long do we wait and how long do we wait before we decide, oh no, this isn't going to work, we should shut it off. This isn't just for schools. This is for all innovations in general.

Serena Allen:

Definitely.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

Right? But it's hard when the subjects are kids and so that's partly, I think what has been hard in practice is figuring out how do you draw that line. So I think it's the right idea. I think we do need innovative ideas. We need to try out different things, but how do you do that given that the kids only get to go through school once and given that there's limited resources and it's going to lead to this infighting, it's going to lead to sort of people protecting their own turf rather than sort of really educating all kids, figuring out how do we share ideas.

So I'm not really sure other than to say I don't want to demonize charter schools because I think they do a lot of good, but I also understand the concerns that, I don't know that

it's going to change the system and so how do we get to the point where we actually can change the system and make it better for everybody. I don't think we've figured that out yet-

Serena Allen:

Still on the path.

Dr. Christine Beckman:

... but just to scrap all the charters seems like, to cut off your nose to spite your face, but how do we encourage more sharing, more diffusion, accruing benefits to all the kids? I don't know how to do it, but I think that would be my hope for where we would go.

Serena Allen:

You just heard Dr. Christine Beckman talk about the complexities of charter schools. Thanks for listening. If you currently attend a charter school, local district school, or private school, I'm sure adults in your community have strong opinions about the charter school model. No matter the opinion, I hope you learned more about what charter schools are and some of the controversy surrounding them. I know I did. If you enjoyed today's episode on public education, be sure to check out our other episodes and share this one with a friend.

To learn more about what the charter school system is or what Dr. Beckman does, please go to bedrosian.usc.edu/paycheck. Where you can also provide feedback or request topics for future episodes. The Policy Paycheck is sponsored by the Bedrosian Center, an applied research center with the Sol Price School of Public Policy at the University of Southern California.

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