The Truth About Charter Schools

I was a teacher at a charter school for a year. Here's why you shouldn't believe the hype that Betsy DeVos is trying to sell.

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I was an English teacher at a New York City public school from 2005 to 2009 — until I got burnt out and decided to quit.

The education reform movement had revved up, with its testing craze, useless paperwork, and disregard for teachers' input. The school where I'd worked had started spiraling downhill, and so did my joy for teaching. I had loved being a teacher when I'd had the freedom to be creative and to engage with my students in a meaningful way. But this was no longer the case. To top it all off, the growing cultural contempt for teachers that blamed us for all of society's ills only further pushed me out and soured me on the profession.

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I didn't think I'd ever teach again — but then, I started hearing the buzz about charter schools.

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Charters, which are publicly funded but privately managed, are booming across America because of bipartisan support for education reform and school choice. They're considered the panacea for failing public schools, predominantly serving children of color and often popping up in lower income neighborhoods. They're advertised as academically superior and physically safer than public schools because of their "no excuses" approach to schoolwork and discipline. Movies like "Waiting for Superman" tell us they're thriving and have waitlists. Because most of them aren't unionized, they argue that one major "appeal" is that they can also fire bad teachers — and due to their looser regulations, they can give good teachers the freedom to be innovative.

I was hooked, and even toyed with the idea of starting a charter school of my own. But first, I wanted to get into a classroom.

On August 2, 2016, in sunny Los Angeles, I interviewed with the amiable principal of a charter school. A former teacher herself, she founded the school with an attorney friend to give middle and high school kids a college preparatory program that offered AP courses, sports, and the arts. The teachers at her school had a voice, she said, and the close rapport between students and staff made it feel "like a family." I was inspired by her passion — and despite the fact that the school was moving for a third time in three years and had lost its co-founder and a few teachers (all of whom had resigned), I signed a non-union contract on the spot.

But I soon realized there was a gulf between charter school hype and reality.

Every day brought shocking and disturbing revelations: high attrition rates of students and teachers, dangerous working conditions, widespread suspensions, harassment of teachers, violations against students with disabilities, nepotism, and fraud. By the end of the school year, I vowed never to step foot in a charter school again, and to fight for the protection of public schools like never before.

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On August 15, my first day of work, I dashed into the school's newest home, a crumbling building on the campus of a public middle school in South Los Angeles. Greeting my colleagues, who were coughing due to the dust in the air, I realized most of us were new. It wasn't just several people who had quit over the summer, but more than half the faculty — 8 out of 15 teachers. Among the highly qualified new hires were a seasoned calculus teacher; an experienced sixth grade humanities teacher; a physics instructor who'd previously taught college; an actor turned biology teacher; and a young and exuberant special education teacher.

When the old-timers trickled in, they told us there'd been attrition among the students, too: 202 of 270 hadn't returned, and not all their seats had been filled. Because funding was tied to enrollment, the school was struggling financially.

When I glimpsed at my schedule, my jaw dropped further. Like my colleagues, I was carrying a crushing course load — six distinct classes across grades 7, 9, and 12 — three more than I was told I'd teach when I was hired. But that paled in comparison to what was heaped onto the special education teacher. The law tops the caseload at 28 SPED students per teacher, but he was given all 43 at the school. SPED is a highly specialized and stressful field that requires individual attention between teacher and student — which is a

big part of why this law is in place. (It has also always been litigious, but is becoming even more so as authorities crack down on charters' violations against students with disabilities.) He was stunned.

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Though this wasn't what us newbies had signed up for, we went full speed ahead, motivated by the old-timers who worked 60-hour weeks comprised of lesson planning, sports coaching, club running, and lunch monitoring, despite having spouses, toddlers, and ailing parents waiting for them at home.

The working conditions made it a test of endurance. The contract with the district that called for our school to get cleaned twice weekly wasn't honored. The frazzled janitor only had time for us after he was done with the co-located middle school, which was almost never. I watched pieces of pepperoni decay on the stairs and globs of feces dry up on the bathroom wall over several weeks. During a lesson, my smart, sweet ninth graders were distracted by a roach striding across the floor, victoriously waving a cookie crumb in the air with its pincers. Needless to say, the lesson went to the insects.

When a heat wave scorched the city, temperatures in our classrooms topped 102 degrees. Two kids collapsed of heat exhaustion during the school day, but teachers were kept for an additional hour after class to plan "Spirit Day," where we'd perform cartwheels, electric slides, and chicken dances the next afternoon.

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But the biggest threat was to our safety. We were in a gang-ridden, drug-infested area — but there was no security guard or emergency plan in place. And even without outside factors, it was quickly becoming a climate of terror *inside* the school, as well. When a senior grabbed a teacher's ass, the principal didn't expel him (she couldn't afford to lose more students) — so he continued sexually harassing her, and it felt like there was nothing we could do to stop him.

Despite the safety issues, which plague charters nationwide, the principal kept recruiting students in order to stay afloat. A month into the school year, we got kids from a charter school that suddenly closed because of enrollment and facility issues, leaving kids scrambling for schools and teachers scrounging for jobs.

Last year, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos quipped that picking a school should be as easy as choosing Lyft, Uber, or a taxi. In California — the Wild West of the charter sector because of the schools that pop up indiscriminately — it *is* that easy. The result is chaos: Schools struggle to establish themselves, teachers quit, and kids bounce around from school to school at a head-spinning rate. One of my seventh graders had attended seven schools over the course of seven years.

> *The loose regulations had emboldened administrators to cross legal and ethical lines.*

Due to this school-hopping culture, only 16 seniors remained of the 43 freshmen who had enrolled at our charter in 2013. And though the school was advertised as "college preparatory," only eight seniors were heading to four-year colleges. LAUSD loses over $500 million a year because of students who enroll in charters, but even at Alliance College-Ready Public Schools, which send 95 percent of their kids to college, the vast majority eventually drop out. The stats are similarly dismal in DeVos' home state of Michigan — which

loses a billion dollars *a year* in funding to charter schools — and across the country: Only about 23 percent of charter students persist through college. When the goal of college attainment fails so miserably, it's hard not to wonder if the divestment from public schools is worth it.

We were given another reason to be anxious when the humanities teacher was laid off because sixth grade was under-enrolled — and that was just the tip of the iceberg. As she was packing her belongings into boxes, the physics teacher was having a nervous breakdown. The grading and lesson planning that kept him up until 3 AM — when he had to be awake at 6 AM — had sent him over the edge. Meanwhile, the special education teacher with the unlawfully large caseload was falling behind on students' Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). The stress aggravated his colitis, which had been dormant for years.

> *Nepotism abounds at charters across the country.*

It seemed to me that the loose regulations had emboldened administrators to cross legal and ethical lines in other ways, too. The assistant principal's son was in my seventh grade class, where he bullied an autistic boy, even though bullying people with disabilities is illegal in California (and unacceptable everywhere). She never suspended him, despite the fact that she handed out suspensions to other kids like Halloween candy. This wasn't out of the ordinary, either: Nepotism abounds at charters across the country. When I investigated her son's behavior, the assistant principal filed a grievance against me. I wouldn't back down, so in order to intimidate me, she sat in the back of my classroom for an entire period, shooting me dirty looks, texting on her phone, and laughing.

By January 2017, more kids had fled, so it looked like we may not make it to June, let alone next year. Now the goal was to save the school at all costs, and

the lawlessness intensified.

The principal enrolled five kids who didn't speak English and weren't being properly taught, since only one of the three English teachers held the required certificate, and all three of us had ESL students in our classes. She also pressured us to pass the seniors — including the kid who'd grabbed his teacher's ass — so they'd graduate, and pushed us to submit phony AP syllabi to the College Board for accreditation. When I refused, she said she'd override it.

But her efforts were in vain: In February, the senior who grabbed the teacher's ass stalked into her classroom and pounced on her. She struggled to get away, but he blocked both doors. Thankfully, she managed to escape — and the student was arrested and, finally, expelled. In March, another senior dropped out, bringing the graduating students down to 14.

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Eventually, the principal managed to get a grant that ensured our survival until June, but it didn't include money for a guard. One morning, there was a shooting outside a nearby school. The gunman was on the loose, but no measures were taken to lock us down. When I locked my classroom down anyway, I was reprimanded for stirring panic.

The laid-off humanities teacher never found a new job for the 2016-17 school year. The physics teacher had three nervous breakdowns in total. The special education teacher's colitis landed him in the hospital, so he quit in January. After being publicly excoriated by the assistant principal for butting heads with her son — the umpteenth person to do so — the biology teacher resigned, too. In April, the calculus teacher quit, as well — the third newbie to go before

the school year's end.

By this point, I had insomnia and panic attacks, so coming to work was excruciating. I kept going for the kids, but, in desperation, I bared my soul to two sympathetic officials. They told me they'd been aware of the school's violations and were considering rejecting its charter, which was up for renewal. I also learned that our teachers had tried unionizing in the past, part of a national trend among charter teachers. When their efforts were blocked, some quit, and one launched a nonprofit that fosters wellness in teachers.

On June 30th, our school was shut down, joining the 50 other charters that were shuttered in the 2016-17 fiscal year in California and the 200-300 charters that are closed each year across the nation because of poor performance, financial issues, low enrollment, nepotism, violations against students with disabilities and English language learners, and fraud.

During her disastrous interview on "60 Minutes" this week, Education Secretary Betsy DeVos made the false claim that charter schools make public schools better — but if my story is any indication, this is simply not the case.

While I never had strong feelings about unions before, I now understand that when teachers aren't unionized, they're exploited — and when teachers suffer, so do kids. Not only does teacher turnover harm student achievement, but according to a 2016 Penn State University research brief, "When teachers are highly stressed, children show lower levels of both social adjustment and academic performance."

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My colleagues and I often lost our temper due to stress. This triggered kids misbehaving and getting rampantly suspended. One student was suspended

18 times in six months — something I'd never seen in public schools. Even more importantly, suspensions don't actually help to improve behavior — but they have been proven to feed the school-to-prison pipeline.

Public schools aren't perfect, but they're a vital part of our democracy and worth saving. I attended public schools all my life; they're the reason I went from Soviet refugee to Ivy League graduate. And as a public school teacher, I propelled my immigrant students to college. Even luminaries like Colin Powell, Oprah Winfrey, and Matt Damon have said that were it not for their public school teachers, they wouldn't have achieved their American dreams.

If they are to continue, charter schools need to be better regulated so that they don't become cesspools of corruption. Furthermore, it makes no sense to defund public schools, which 85-90% of kids attend, for the benefit of the 5 percent that attend charters, when only a handful perform better than public schools, while most do the same — or worse.

And there are reasons to be optimistic about the future of public schools. In July, the NAACP called for a moratorium on charters until they increase their oversight and accountability. And charters are losing support across the country even as President Donald Trump and DeVos push for more of them.

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I've never felt more emboldened to fight for the protection of public schools and teachers than I do today. Americans aren't ready to give up on public education just yet, nor should we be. This fight has never been more important, and we *have* to keep fighting — for our teachers, for our students, and for our kids.

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