

## **A tale of two Federal Grant Programs and a tale of two types of schools—one the authentic public school and one a privately-operated charter school.**

The US Department of Education has separate grant programs that appear to be in conflict in terms of intended outcomes. One is for charter schools (in Ohio called Community Schools), and one is for real community (public common) schools. Jeff Bryant explains the difference between these two programs in a January 20 post. He also discusses the \$2 million grant the Cincinnati Classical Academy received.

It is ironic that the Cincinnati Public School District has been a pioneer and leader in the real community school concept (integrating health and human services resources into the traditional public school system) but received no current federal grant money, but the Johnny-come-lately Cincinnati Classical Academy (a charter school) received a \$2 million grant based on fraudulent information.

Jeff Bryant, in a January 20 [post](#) explains the federal grant programs.

### **A Tale of Two Federal Grants for Public Education**

The Department of Education has separate grant programs for funding either charter or community schools; the latter provides money for what schools and families really need, the former, not so much.

**BY [JEFF BRYANT](#)**

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Two education-related grant programs operated by the U.S. Department of Education—both of which dole out millions in federal tax dollars for educating K-12 children every year—present two opposing truths about government spending on public education: that it can be wasteful and misguided, or innovative and informed.

The first program enjoys the significant backing of industry lobbyists and wealthy foundations, and allows private education operators—some that operate for-profit—to skim public money off the top. It also adds to racial segregation in public schools, and squanders millions of dollars on education providers that come and quickly go, or simply fail to provide any education services at all.

The second program helps schools [expand learning time](#) and opportunities for students, especially in high-poverty and rural communities; promote [parent engagement](#); encourage [collaboration](#) with local businesses and nonprofits; and become [hubs](#) for child- and family-related services that contribute to students' health and well-being.

These strikingly different outcomes result from two different intentions: the first program's goal to promote a type of school that is vaguely defined versus the second's goal to expand a way of *doing* school that is supported by research and anecdotal evidence.

The first grant program is the [Charter Schools Program \(CSP\)](#), which funds privately operated charter schools and their developers and advocacy organizations. The program, [started](#) during the Clinton Administration and [greatly expanded](#) during the Obama years, gives money directly to charter schools and to state education agencies and charter school-related organizations to distribute to new, existing, or proposed charters.

In October, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, the nation's top lobbyist for the charter school industry, [hailed](#) the federal government's [release of \\$572 million](#) in taxpayer dollars from the CSP, calling the money "the most essential funding to enable the existence of public charter schools."

In New Mexico, local press outlets reported that a \$52 million CSP grant went to a charter industry advocacy group [called the Public Charter Schools of New Mexico](#), which in turn would award subgrants to individual charter schools. One reporter quoted the group's leader who said, "There was a large application with several requirements in there. And we were scored based on, you know, how well we met the requirements and a peer review process."

**CSP has wasted as much as \$1 billion on charter schools that never opened or opened and quickly closed.**

In Idaho, *Idaho Ed News* [reported](#) about the \$24.8 million CSP [grant](#) going to Bluum, which the reporter called "a nonprofit charter support organization." The grant is to be used "to grow and strengthen Idaho's charter school network," the article said.

Maryland's top charter school industry booster, the Maryland Alliance of Public Charter Schools, [celebrated](#) its \$28.7 million CSP saying it would provide "subgrants to open new charter schools and/or replicate and expand charter schools."

Not all CSP grants went to advocacy groups. The largest—totaling \$109,740,731—[went to](#) the Indiana Department of Education. According to *Chalkbeat*, [one out of three](#) charter schools in Indiana have closed since 2001.

A 2019 analysis [conducted](#) by the Network for Public Education, a pro-public schools advocacy group, found that over its lifespan CSP has wasted as much as \$1 billion on charter schools that never opened or opened and quickly closed.

Another CSP grant of \$37,579,122 [went to](#) the Minnesota Department of Education. In Minnesota, courts have [grappled](#) for years with the question of whether racial imbalances in public schools, [caused](#) to a great extent by the expansion of racially segregated charter schools, violate the constitutional right of students of color to receive an adequate education.

Other CSP grants [went](#) to credit enhancement for charter school facilities, essentially giving public money to real estate development firms and investment companies that finance and build new charter schools.

Real estate has become a successful strategy used by charter schools to become profitable businesses, according to a 2023 article in the *Bucks County Beacon*. The article's author, Peter Greene, draws on in-depth investigations, academic studies, and public school advocacy research to highlight "charter school companies that appear far more busy with real estate than education."

A third and final group of CSP grants went to "developers," which are mostly individual charters.

One of those grants—[nearly \\$2 million](#) given to Cincinnati Classical Academy (CCA) in Ohio—caught the attention of Carol Burris, the executive director of NPE and a critic of the charter school industry and CSP.

In the “Answer Sheet” blog of *The Washington Post*, Burris [noted](#) that the school—which is affiliated with a private religious college in Michigan—“asked for the grant on the basis of its claim that it was closing the achievement gap and serving disadvantaged students, never reporting that only 16 percent of its students are economically disadvantaged and that 2 percent are Black—a starkly different student body from the overwhelmingly disadvantaged and majority-Black Cincinnati Public School students, who, CCA says, it wants to save from poverty.”

Burris added that getting the grant money requires each applicant to complete “extensive applications in making the case for why their schools deserve the funds,” confirming what the charter lobbyist in New Mexico claimed.

But Burris found that information applicants submit on their forms doesn’t appear to be subjected to a careful review by CSP officials. For instance, CCA claims to be closing achievement gaps and serving high poverty students, but the school is “located on a cul-de-sac in a leafy residential suburb of Cincinnati called Reading,” its students are overwhelmingly white, and it enrolls much fewer English language learners, low-income students, and students with disabilities than schools in the surrounding district.

(An email *The Progressive* sent to a Department of Education director who oversees CSP asking how the Department checks to ensure applications are factually accurate and how application reviewers are chosen did not receive a reply.)

Contrast those questionable gifts from CSP to awards given by another federal government grant program for [Full Service Community Schools \(FSCS\)](#).

Community schools [take a more holistic approach to education](#) by [turning](#) public schools into community hubs that provide child- and family-centered services alongside their academic programs. Schools that have chosen to follow the approach, [according to](#) the Education Department, “collaborate with local non-profits, health providers, private partners, and other agencies to coordinate and deliver services like health care, mental health and nutrition services, after-school and summer programming, and high-quality early learning programs.”

What’s initially striking about the difference between the two grant programs is their size, with the CSP wielding \$572 million in cash annually, nearly four times the amount, \$150 million, provided by FSCS. But the difference in the nature of the awardees is also worth examining.

**Congress—which appropriates money for both—should reconsider which program is the best use of taxpayer funds for education.**

Whereas recipients of CSP largest grants are state agencies and charter advocacy groups, FSCS’s [largest grants](#) go to universities and local nonprofit service organizations and partnerships. While charter schools are eligible for, and [do receive](#), FSCS grants, local public schools aren’t allowed to apply for CSP money, which is an obvious outcome when federal money is being used to expand a way of doing school versus promoting a type of school.

That critical difference between the goals of the two grant programs also leads to grant applications that are very different from each other in terms of the goals put forward and information provided in the applications.

Take the grant application from the Ohio charter, Cincinnati Classical Academy, that Carol Burris critiqued, and compare it to a FSCS grant application coming from Ohio State University for two schools in the Columbus City school district.

While Cincinnati Classical Academy's application emphasizes helping to "close the achievement gap for economically disadvantaged students," there's no real explanation of how a school that is 82 percent white, as Burris points out, is going to do that. "The application does not discuss the need to increase the number of English language learners, homeless children, students with disabilities, or students who get free or reduced-price lunches to level the enormous gap between the school's proportions and the greater Cincinnati area," she wrote.

The [application](#) from the Ohio grantee that received money from FSCF, on the other hand, is specific in how it intends to help two Columbus schools, Hamilton STEM and Windsor STEM Academies, that are using the community schools approach. The funds, the application states, are to be used to "meet students' social, emotional, and academic needs through multi-tiered systems of supports, new and expanded pipeline services, and strengthened cross-agency coordination and community engagement to advance systemic change." The application goes into great detail describing the various student and family services and partner organizations the grant money will help to fund as well as the indicators that will measure how well the grant money is helping the schools reach improvement goals.

It's also interesting to note that Cincinnati Classical Academy's application generally hides the demographic nature of the student population it serves, while the application for Hamilton STEM and Windsor STEM describes the demographics of the students they serve in detail—in this case, overwhelmingly Black and economically disadvantaged. Also, that description squares with the state's data for [both schools](#).

Here again, this is the predictable outcome of one program's vague goal to create and expand "promising new public charter schools" and "replicate high-quality" ones—whatever those descriptors mean—versus FSCS's goal to expand a particular way of doing school that is based on something that has [been shown to work](#).

This is not to say that FSCS is entirely successful. An [analysis](#) of thirty-two FSCS funded proposals from 2010, [reviewed](#) by the NEPC, "raises questions about how well school districts are planning for the model."

But, given the different results of these grant programs, Congress—which appropriates money for both—should reconsider which program is the best use of taxpayer funds for education, and the Department should review its track record for how well it is administering those funds.

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