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Michigan's model for charter schools works

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In recognition of National Charter Schools Week, we are pleased to provide an update on how Central Michigan University's Center for Charter Schools is proving the promise of charter schools for students and families in Michigan.

Since passage of Michigan's charter school law in 1993, Central Michigan University — the nation's first university authorizer

— has been a leader in developing comprehensive oversight and accountability standards that drive school performance.

The Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University released a study in early 2013 which tracked 85,000 Michigan charter school students and their demographic peers for six years. This study confirmed that students in Michigan charter schools are experiencing nearly two additional months per year of learning gains in math and reading — three months of additional learning gains in Detroit — which is significant when compared to their peers in traditional public schools.

According to CREDO, 35 percent of Michigan's charter schools are outperforming their traditional public school counterparts in reading, while only 2 percent of charters underperformed, and 42 percent of charters outperformed traditional districts in math while only 6 percent underperformed. Impressive learning gains were reported for blacks, Hispanics, students of poverty, urban, suburban, and rural charter students. Growth gains increased significantly when measured by years of enrollment in a charter school and whether the school had contracted a management company.

The fact that Michigan is among the highest performing of the two dozen states CREDO has studied to date is exceptional news for the 130,000 students and families enrolled in the state's 276 charter public schools. You may be wondering what makes things so different in Michigan.

The Michigan model is built on strong statewide authorizers — specifically, public universities — that are independent from the traditional K-12 education community; board members who are well vetted prior to appointment; the freedom for boards to select

management structures to meet the unique needs of the school; and an emphasis on hands-on, personalized oversight rather than simple, hard-line rubrics.

Additionally, the center has been a pioneer in the use of state-of-the-art computer-adaptive testing to measure proficiency and student growth to better inform classroom instruction. We publish annual performance reports that provide clear, concise and consistent academic, fiscal and operational assessments to improve school performance. We've developed innovative technology tools to streamline reporting and compliance operations, allowing schools to focus on student performance rather than paperwork. And we provide ongoing training and support for board members and other stakeholders on academic, governance, finance and operational issues.

The center's oversight and quality standards are rigorous, and the recent state law expanding charter opportunities requires that increased academic achievement for all pupils must be the most important factor in charter renewal. Ultimately, schools that fail to deliver a better quality educational environment than their neighborhood public schools will be closed.

As schools of choice, parents vote with their feet and make the conscious decision to continue enrolling their students in our charter schools. The dramatic increase in charter school enrollment, coupled with the fact that a majority of charter schools have waiting lists, makes it clear parents see something unique and positive in our approach to public education.

We agree there is still much work to be done to improve public education in the Michigan, since too many students are behind grade level and only one in five high school graduates are college or career-ready.

But CMU is proud of the role we've played, and continue to play, to ensure quality, accountability and better choices in public education.

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