Why Indiana has charter schools and Kentucky doesn't

Posted on **August 28, 2015** by **stevehinnefeld**

Indiana has one of the most active charter school programs in the nation while Kentucky has no charter schools, not even a law that allows them. How did that come about?

Sociologist Joe Johnston attributes the divergence to perceptions of public schools in the state's biggest cities: negative for Indianapolis and generally positive for Louisville. And he traces those perceptions back to district boundary decisions made 40 years ago.

"It's become so common to think of urban schools as failing, as these places that can't possibly succeed," he told me. "It's interesting that, when you change the boundaries and have a different sort of school district, people can rally around that."

Johnston, an assistant professor at Gonzaga University, conducted research on the history of charter school debates in Indiana and Kentucky as a graduate student at Indiana University, where he received a doctorate in May. He presented his study Saturday in Chicago at the 110th annual meeting of the American Sociological Association.

Indiana adopted a charter school law in 2001 and has seen a rapid spread of charter schools. The National Alliance of Public Charter Schools ranks it as one of the most charter-friendly states in the country. But Kentucky, which is contiguous with and politically and demographically similar to Indiana, is one of a handful of states without charter schools.

To understand how that came about, Johnston conducted a detailed comparison of education policy development in the two states from 2002-12. He analyzed 2,200 newspaper articles, gubernatorial and mayoral speeches and school reform group documents.

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In Indiana, he shows, the push for cha argument that Indianapolis Public Schools were failir eporter covering the Statehouse during the charter deb untry, charter schools were sold as an alternative to .

But in Kentucky, there wasn't the sam sville were under-performing; there was nothing li directed at IPS. While Indiana and other states ru , Kentucky held out.

Even GOP officials in Kentucky were cher, governor from 2003-07, didn't mention them in S finally introduced charter school bills in 2011 funding the carrot and the libertarian Bluegrass Institute applying the whip. But the bills didn't pass.

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Another factor working against charter schools in Kentucky was the Kentucky Education Reform Act, adopted in 1990. The law increased and equalized school funding, boosted standards and provided technical support for schools. Although Louisville schools lagged behind the state average on test scores, KERA provided a sense that things were improving.

"When people were adopting charters all around them," Johnston said, "they had an alternative vision."

Johnston points to district boundaries as the primary reason perceptions were so different. Louisville schools merged with surrounding schools to create the countywide Jefferson County Public Schools district in 1975. The resulting school desegregation led to massive white resistance for a time, but eventually it faded and integrated schools were accepted.

Even after courts stopped worrying about segregation, JCPS adopted a voluntary plan seen as a national model. And after the Supreme Court ruled in 2007 that racial desegregation was unconstitutional, it moved to a system that balances schools by socioeconomic status.

Indianapolis went the opposite direction. Even though the city and Marion County adopted civil Unigov in 1970, and while other Indiana school districts were consolidating, Indy kept IPS and 10 township and community school districts in the county.

Under federal court orders, Black students from IPS were bused to township schools starting in 1981. But the one-way busing did nothing to reduce the racial and economic isolation of IPS. By some accounts, it may have helped push white flight to the doughnut counties.

Johnston grew up in Indianapolis and graduated from Warren Central High School on the city's east side. After college, he earned a teaching license via The New Teacher Project and taught math for three years at IPS Thomas Carr Howe High School, which the state took

over in 2011 as a result of consistently low test scores.

“In graduate school, when I learned about Louisville, that was so strikingly different,” he said.

The IPS model of a racially and socially segregated urban school districts seems to be the default in most big cities of the Midwest and East. But Louisville’s experience shows it was once possible to choose a different path.

“I think it’s really important, not just for urban education but for the way we interact with other people,” Johnston said. “Neighborhood segregation is a big problem, but schooling can be one way for people of different racial and class backgrounds to come together.”

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6 THOUGHTS ON “WHY INDIANA HAS CHARTER SCHOOLS AND KENTUCKY DOESN’T”



dolphin
on **August 28, 2015 at 9:48 am** said:

Reblogged this on Dolphin.



Jenny Robinson
on **August 28, 2015 at 9:51 am** said:

Steve, as always, this is very informative and useful. Just a quick note…in the last sentence of the paragraph that begins, “Johnston points to district boundaries…” don’t you mean, “The resulting school integration,” not “the resulting school segregation”?

> 
> stevehinnefeld
> on **August 28, 2015 at 10:23 am** said:
>
> Thanks! Fixed it.



inteach
on **August 28, 2015 at 12:46 pm** said:

I hate to admit it, but it looks like Kentucky has got one up on the Hoosier state.



Douglas Storm
on **August 29, 2015 at 4:43 pm** said:

Hey, Steve, very interesting. I contacted Joe and will do an interview with him for WFHB. Thanks!



ridelkagirl
on **September 1, 2015 at 12:32 pm** said:

VERY interesting, Steve! I thought every state had caught the charter epidemic. I'm glad to know that one of our close neighbors has managed to avoid infection so far! It will be interesting to see what happens over the next few years, comparatively