

Monday April 13, 2015  
The Kojo Knamdi Show  
DC Public Charter Schools  
Interview with Scott Pearson and Special Correspondent, Kavitha Cardoza

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**Kojo KNAMDI:** Charter school enrollment has been growing every year. Almost half of public school students are enrolled in charters but those numbers have leveled off. In a recent op-ed in the Washington Post, you and the Public Charter School Board Chair, John McCoy, said that the balance seems about right. What do you mean by that and what does current enrollment say about demand and what is the goal looking forward?

**Scott PEARSON:** It is interesting. Charter school enrollment has grown every year and actually it continues to grow by about 1500 students which is not so different than in the past but what is different is that charter schools used to grow and DCPS was shrinking at the same time. And now, that's changed.

Charters are growing and DCPS is growing as the overall educational quality in the city is improving and as a result what has not grown is our share of students. Last year we were at 44%. This year we're at 44% and the reason is that more families are coming to DC and they are choosing both charters and DCPS. That is something new.

What we were trying to say in our article was that we were essentially trying to assuage a fear of some that there is an agenda to ultimately take over the entire city and see all public schools be charter schools. What we have found is that that is not what people want. There are a lot of people who like their traditional neighborhood schools. They bring a lot of value to the families that choose them and in a funny way, charter are about choice. If traditional neighborhood-based schools went away, you would be taking away an element of choice away from families. We think the model is about right now whether that is 40%, 50%, or 60%. Somewhere balanced feels good to us and it's nice that families in DC are benefitting from so much choice.

**Kojo KNAMDI:** Kavitha, on the other end of enrollment there is graduation rates and they speak to performance. You had some questions about that.

**Kavitha CARDOZA:** The graduation rates at charter schools are much higher than traditional public schools but last year the charter schools had dropped 7 percentage points. It wasn't just the low performing schools. It was also the really high performing schools like Washington Latin PCS and KIPP DC. Why is this? It was really surprising. What are you doing to see that it doesn't happen next year because graduation rates is one of these key markers for how a school system is doing.

**Scott PEARSON:** Yes, it is. When we saw those numbers we were quite concerned as well and we've dug into them. What we found was that there were a few things at work. First of all, many of our schools, particularly our highest performing schools,

are saying to students, “you may not be ready to graduate in four years. You may need a fifth year.” And this is particularly as they’ve been looking at what happens with their graduates. Their concern is that not only do they graduate from high school but that they go on to college and graduate from college. They felt that many weren’t ready after four years so they had been asking them to stay a fifth year. When we looked at the five-year graduation rate as opposed to the four-year graduation rate from high school, we found that that was staying steady at about 80%. We also found that graduation rates fell very sharply in a couple of high schools that we closed. That told us we needed to pay closer attention to schools that are closing and in making sure that they don’t give up in their last year.

We’ve been working across the city with DCPS and with the mayor’s office on a project called Graduation Pathways that looks at ways to encourage students to stay in school. It finds that some schools with the same population produce dramatically higher graduation rates. We’ve been trying to learn about best practices at those schools and transfer them to others. We have also been finding that we need more schools for students who are many credits behind. If you are going into 11<sup>th</sup> grade and you’re told that it’s going to take you four years to graduate. It is discouraging and a lot of students don’t do it. There are some innovative programs across the country that finds ways to accelerate that so that students can earn credit more quickly. That’s been really in New York City and we hope to bring more of those to DC.

**Kojo KNAMDI:** In the past few years there’s been a push for more coordination and collaboration between public charter schools and traditional public schools. There is now a common lottery application process for example. What is happening under the new mayor and could you elucidate for us a little more on the collaboration between the two systems going forward.

**Scott PEARSON:** Well the collaboration has been strong ever since the day I arrived. I remember my first day on the job in January of 2012 I got a call from Chancellor Henderson who said, “Are you free to meet?” And I said, “sure, when?” She said, “how about today?” And I came by. That started a relationship that has continued and it’s a strong one and its really fueled the progress that we’ve made so far. You mentioned the common lottery. We used to have something called the charter school expo where we bring all the charter schools together so that parents could come and see all their choices. Last year, we turned that into the My School DC education festival and all the schools were there arranged not by charter and DCPS but arranged in alphabetical order. That collaboration has brought, I think, great benefits to the city.

Under this mayor, we hope to do more. One of the recommendations out of the commission last year about school boundaries was that there be a taskforce set up to work on such collaboration issues. And I know the mayor is working to form that task force. I think there is a lot of opportunity for further collaboration. One area in particular I’m excited about is to look at the delivery of other services to school.

There has been a real focus on stresses of our poorest children and the traumatic stresses that many of them suffer. We are not doing a good enough job as a city to make sure those students are receiving the mental health services and the counseling services that they need that really in many cases go beyond what any school is designed to provide. I'm looking forward to working across the city to do better for those children.

**Kavitha CARDOZA:** I have to say Kojo, I see a big difference in the last few years. I was talking to Scott earlier. I covered a school closing down a few years ago. It was closed down in the middle of the summer—A charter school. There were lots of kids with nowhere to go and no coordination. I had done an interview with someone from the board and they said, "Kavitha, you see the glass as half empty" when I asked that there were just two weeks to go and where these kids were going. DCPS was really overwhelmed on the first day. They had not planned for all these children to come. Last year a charter school closed. It was well in advance. The charter school board had even worked with DCPS on where these children were going to transfer. A lot of them went to a DCPS school. A huge improvement in collaboration I think.

*-Telephone Caller-*

**David, Potomac MD:** Thank you. This is a fascinating program. My question, although it is targeted at the district would also be applicable to probably any other school district in the country, certainly in the Washington area. That is how kids are going to charter schools I would presume, that for a variety of reasons, those kids are substantially better prepared and easier to education than those kids in public schools. I wonder what that does to the budget that's left for public school kids.

**Scott PEARSON:** That's a common complaint that's levied against charter schools. It is one that has a lot of merit in other parts of the country. In DC we have worked hard at the Public Charter School Board to ensure that our charter schools live up to their obligation to be public schools and to serve all students. And that's paid off. If you look at the statistics for example, students in charter schools are more likely to be low-income than students at DC public schools. They are about as likely to have disabilities. We serve the same percentages of students with severe disabilities. A higher percentage of students of color go to charter schools than traditional public schools. So of course it's difficult to compare one student to another but looking at those key demographic indicators, I'm confident in saying that charter schools are not serving more disadvantaged populations. I think they are serving a roughly equal population.

**Kojo KNAMDI:** You wanted to talk a little bit, Kavitha, about the difference between charter schools in DC and charter schools around the nation.

**Kavitha CARDOZA:** I was just thinking that whenever we talk about charter schools I think it's really important to drill it down to the local level because charter schools in different jurisdictions operate very differently and statistics are very different. So

if for example you look nationwide on Special education students and whether they are re educated in charters there is a big difference but if you look in DC that's not the case. The charter school board here is the only authorizer in DC. If you look at Ohio, they have about 70 or 80 authorizers and so it's called the wild west of charter schools. There are just a lot of differences. I really think a key difference with charter schools in DC is that, and I think Scott would agree, that they see themselves not just as authorizers but seeing it through. Are you maintaining high quality otherwise we'll close you down. And at different levels, they look and have meetings where they look at the data every month and what percentage of kids with special education are being suspended or expelled? What is happening in different areas? They look at the data and are much more hands on than I think several different places.

**Kojo KNAMADI:** Glad you brought that up Scott because we would like to talk about the role of DC Public Charter Board as an authorizer. Remind us of what that entails.

**Scott PEARSON:** Sure. There are 112 charter schools in Washington DC and they are run by 61 separate school organizations. Some school organizations run just one school and others run multiple. Each one of those schools is independent. They have a legal status of a school district. They have an Executive Director. They have a board of trustees, which comprises mostly DC residents and every board has to have 2 parents. So those schools make their own decisions about curriculum, about hiring, etc. Our job at the Public Charter School Board is to oversee those schools. We are really in essence a regulator. We, first of all, decide which new applicants get permission to open a charter school. We oversee them while they are operating to make sure they are complying with the law, to make sure that they are acting as public schools and are open to all students. And then we look really carefully at their quality and when a school is not performing well, we have to make that difficult decision to close that school. Over the last three years, we've closed 18 schools. Its never easy but the result is that thousands are now attending our highest performing schools and thousands fewer attending our lowest performing schools.

**Kojo KNAMDI:** You have five charter school applications before the board right now. What is the process the Board goes through when considering a new charter?

**Scott PEARSON:** The applicants all submit extensive applications. Usually they run several hundred pages in length. First of all, they need to justify that there is a need for their school. That's very important. Is there a need? Second of all, they lay out their educational plan and then they include information about the team, budget, etc. The PCSB staff and our 7-member board read these carefully. The staff then conducts what we call a capacity interview, where the team comes in and we spend 90 minutes drilling them on questions we have about the applicant. If the applicant is from out of town, we will go and visit the school. We will pull the information if the applicant has any prior experience. We'll pull information about their track record in other places. Then the Board conducts a public hearing. In fact our public hearing is coming up this Monday where each applicant is asked questions in public

and we offer the opportunity for members of the public to provide testimony to us. And then they consider all of that and the next month the Board votes.

I run the staff of the Public Charter School Board. We make a recommendation to our 7-member board. It's ultimately up to them to decide. And all seven of them are appointed by the mayor, confirmed by the city council, and bring a wide range of expertise to the job.

**Kojo KNAMDI:** To talk about location going into the big one. The goal we heard a lot about years ago is identifying underserved areas and addressing those needs. It's a criticism we've heard to level the charters. They are clustered in areas like Columbia Heights and Petworth and how relatively few are located in higher poverty neighborhoods where the traditional public schools are not as good. Last year, for example, a public charter school focused on science and technology opened up in northeast Washington across the street from Langley Elementary, a traditional public school with the same focus. How is the charter board addressing those questions?

**Scott PEARSON:** Well it may have been the case years ago that there weren't any charter schools in the highest need parts of the city but today that's certainly not the case. We have over a dozen public charter schools in Ward 7 and another dozen in Ward 8 and it's heartening that those are some of our highest performing schools. KIPP has a large campus there. Friendship Southeast is doing extremely well. Center City Congress Heights is one of our highest performing schools. Achievement Prep. All of Ward 8, just to site one Ward. There are a lot of schools going in there that are there that are doing very well.

The situation with the school that located across the street from Langley highlights a real challenge with charter schools, which is that facilities are really hard to come by. In this case, the school knew they were given permission to open a year in advance. They scoured the city. That location wasn't necessarily their first choice but that was the only place available. In fact, I think they didn't sign their lease until June or July, which was quite difficult timing in terms of enrollment. So one of the things I also hope that comes out of this collaboration process across the city is to come up with a better way of allocating buildings. There's nearly 2 million square feet of public school buildings that are currently sitting, essentially unoccupied, in the city. And for example, if Harmony had been allocated one of those buildings they wouldn't have had to open across the street from Langley.

**Kojo KNAMDI:** I'm assuming you're looking for a way to encourage schools to open in areas where there would be less overlap of charters with traditional schools.

**Scott PEARSON:** Well, not necessarily. I think there's one school of thought that says you should spread schools apart so that none of them are too close to each other. That certainly benefits the families from a walkability standpoint. But many charter schools are essentially see themselves as citywide schools and for those schools they

want to be close to major transportation hubs or close to a metro. It may make sense to have many that are close by.

There are other advantages to schools locating close to each other. They can better collaborate and share best practices. It is easier for the city to deliver health services and other sorts of services to their students. So I would not say that we take it as a given that it's a bad thing for one school to be located close to another.

**Kojo KNAMDI:** Kavitha, in terms of more strategic focus on where charters open, you recently reported on the challenges of children in military families and the role that charters might play. Could you talk about that?

**Kavitha CARDOZA:** It was interesting because I attended some meetings at the military base and they were talking about starting an elementary school because often-military families move in the middle of the year so they miss the charter lottery. They have to travel really far if they have to travel from Southeast to Northwest to attend Wilson. I mean that's a hike. Sometimes their trips can take two hours or more. So they were talking about this elementary school and the next time I went back for a meeting, they were like no we pulled the community and they love Lecky Elementary, which is a DCPS school. They don't want an elementary school on base. They do want a middle school and eventually, hopefully, a high school because the traditional public schools are about 20% proficient in reading and math. And what is really interesting to me is that Scott had kind of gone through the same scenario in Chicago.

**Scott PEARSON:** Yes, my former job was working for President Obama at the US Department of Education and one of my areas was military children and there was a naval base in North Chicago that was having trouble attracting trainers. This is a base where every sailor comes in for basic training. They were having trouble attracting the best people to be trainers because they didn't have a good school for their children to go to. So we worked with the state and senators there to put in a charter school into that base. The way it was structured was that half of the seats were set-aside for children from the base and the other half from children in the community.

There is currently a similar bill that Councilmember David Grosso has introduced that would create a similar structure here. So it would allow them to open a charter school on the base to set aside about half the seats for base children but also to open it up to children in the surrounding community.

**Kojo KNAMDI:** I got an email from John in Washington who says that charter schools often open in facilities that are not designed to be schools and they often lack playgrounds and gyms. How do public charter schools ensure students receive adequate physical education?

**Scott PEARSON:** It's a great question. We have charter schools open in church basements. We have a charter school open located above a CVS in Columbia Heights.

They struggle with having enough outdoor space. One school uses a park across the street and I want to say the Department of Parks and Recs has been extremely helpful in accommodating schools that don't have their own fields to allow them to use public parks. It is a problem and it is a problem that can certainly be solved if more traditional buildings, that are currently empty, that usually do have gyms and fields and auditoriums and those sorts of amenities be made available.

**Kojo KNAMDI:** What's the problem with those unused schools being made available?

**Scott PEARSON:** Well it depends on who you talk to. In some cases there is a fear that a charter school opens close to a DCPS school and compete against them. In some cases, as I mentioned earlier in the program, DCPS is growing and so they're starting to look at a future where they may need to serve 10 or 20 thousand students so there is a desire to hold some of those buildings on reserve.

**Kavitha CARDONZA:** I was at a meeting with the Chancellor and she was talking about enrollment projections and young families coming into the district and they project that they will have a boom in enrollment and so they want to hold on to those facilities.

*-Telephone Caller-*

**Lisa in Washington DC:** Good afternoon. I have deep concerns about the charter schools and the model that often it is a privatized and private sector model. Its been demonstrated as recently in the CREDO study by Stanford University, that the charter schools have not made any more progress than often in elementary schools. Often what you really see is the cherry picking of the students. Meaning, the students with behavioral issues are sent back to the public schools and the money is often not go back to the public schools. Meaning, if you have a student enrolled in a charter school and the funds are going with them and then in the middle of the year there is a behavioral issue, when they are let go they go back to the public schools but the money does not follow.

The other issue of course is just the model, the privatization model in general. I think it is a perverse incentive. The Washington Post came out with an article recently that discussed charter school compensation. You have schools that have principals earning 90K-350K. They are not tracking the money and they have what they call consultants that they call in so they can have highest employees.

The simple fact is that the privatization for the for-profit model really means the goal is to pull as much money out of the system and put it into private hands.

**Scott PEARSON:** Thanks. It is a concern I hear frequently and its one that is more valid in some other parts of the country. In Washington, DC by law, every charter school is held by a nonprofit corporation. You may call it privatization but these are non-profit organizations not for-profit organizations that hold the charters. The

typical leader of those organizations makes something around 110 to 120 thousand dollars a year. So people are not getting rich off of this. We have one charter leader making 350 thousand dollars. That charter leader oversees the largest charter school organization in the city, which serves over 4000 students and makes less than the Chancellor of DCPS. Privatization is not happening in Washington. There is certainly the move. Charters are working independently of the government. It is our job to oversee them but they do work independently. And they all have boards that are comprised of DC residents.

**Kojo KNAMDI:** Except there have been several scandals and revelations of financial mismanagement in recent years around charter schools in dc and elsewhere this spring. The auditor finding found significant improvement in the financial oversight by the board but this was after a scandal involving Options PCS, a nonprofit school, funneled millions into for-profit side companies and enriched the member of the Public Charter School Board who was suppose to root out corruption but was in on this scheme. Could you talk about changes that have been put in place to prevent it from happening again because our caller is concerned, obviously, on public money falling into private for-profit hands.

**Scott PEARSON:** Absolutely. We have had in the last three years, two situations where charter schools hired a private management company that had been set up deliberately to extract money from the school. We had been cooperating with Councilmember Grosso and the Education Committee to give us the authority to root out those kinds of issues earlier. The law right now allows us to fully look at the books of the charter schools but we do that and we publish all of that information on our website to try to be as transparent as possible, but we don't currently have the authority to look at the books of the companies that the school may have hired. With Councilmember Grosso's assistance and assistance of the city council we hope to have that authority soon and hopefully we won't see these kinds of issues in the future.

The CREDO study, which is a national study that tries to determine whether charter students are doing better than their peers at traditional public schools, found that nationally, the typical student at a charter school was getting about the equivalent of 2 weeks of added educational benefit per year. They found in Washington, DC that they were getting the equivalent of about 6 months of added benefit. So here in DC our charters are really delivering.

**Kavitha CARDOZA:** I have a question Scott that I have never understood about charter schools. Why are you so against a neighborhood preference? So for example, we were talking about the military base. There are Ward 8 families who are desperate for a good middle school but they would not be automatically be able to—so you could get kids from Ward 1, 2—what's the deal?

**Scott PEARSON:** Well, we studied this at the council's request in 2012. A committee was put together broadly represented including people from the council, people



from DCPS, and from the Mayor's office. And we studied it and the overwhelming conclusion was that there were thousands of students from Ward 7 and 8 who were traveling west to attend charter schools in other wards. If implemented improperly, a neighborhood preference would essentially freeze those students out and could lock in traditional neighborhood-based patterns of segregation and hurt the most educationally disadvantaged students in the city. And so that taskforce a couple years ago recommended that we have only very limited cases with the neighborhood preference. Now we have a new mayor. We have many new members of the city council. If there is a desire to relook at that we're certainly open to doing so. I hear from parents and I hear from many charter schools. They would love a neighborhood preference. But I want to make sure as we do, that we keep in mind the least advantaged children in the city and make sure that this isn't hurting them.

**Kavitha CARDOZA:** Where I live the its not just the commute times where they may have to travel more, but the neighborhood where I live all the kids on the block attend like different schools so I think something on the neighborhood cohesion or getting to know each other is kind of lost. The kids don't really know each other and then the families don't know each other.

**Scott PEARSON:** One thing that I've heard said is that traditional schools create communities around the neighborhood and charter schools tend to create communities around common interests or common approaches. Each has its value but the commute time is a real issue and we certainly hear about that. One thing I noticed in the mayor's budget this year is that there's a proposal to allow children to ride the metro for free as opposed to just busses and for some families that could make a big difference.

*-Telephone Caller-*

**Jarred in Washington, DC:** Hey thank you...I believe you mentioned that charter schools are indeed outperforming public schools in dc at this time. And you could comment on that in a moment. I had a theory as well that the child that goes to a charter school, his or her parent has to actually make that extra effort to get that child into charter school and sometimes I think that that the efforts made by the child it shows that the parent has a greater involvement. Of course I don't mean to step on toes but different people have different abilities to get kids around and so forth.

**Kojo KNAMDI:** The point is that in charter schools you have parents that are already motivated. That is why charter schools, in the view of many, outperform traditional public schools.

**Kavitha CARDOZA:** And in fact, I just want to jump in before Scott comments. Many charter schools ask parents to say that they'll be involved for a certain number of hours and if you don't commit to that, then that's not the school for you.

Scott PEARSON: Well we've tried to eliminate that sort of thing because we don't want schools putting up barriers for people applying. But I do think there is some truth to the fact that every charter schools is school of choice and if a student is there, some adult in that child's life made that choice for them so that may provide I guess what I'd a psychographic advantage. Its important though to remember that we have all sorts of charter schools including many that have a specific mission to serve students who have been unsuccessful elsewhere and for students who are really challenged and so for years we've had Maya Angelou PCS, which has that as an explicit mission to serve students who've been adjudicated and students who've dropped out. Just this year, we have approved Children's Guild, which is a very successful organization and in Maryland with a specialty in serving students with disabilities to open in DC their focus. They want to serve 60% students with disabilities. We approved Monument Academy that'll be opening this fall. This will be the first charter school that I'm aware of in the country that has a focus on serving children in the foster system. So those schools I believe would tell you are not getting students who are selective in any way. They are getting students who are least advantaged in the city.

**Kojo KNAMDI:** I want to talk a little about special needs kids. Kavitha, this is something you've focused on in your reporting and I know you have some questions for Scott about that.

**Kavitha CARDOZA:** I have some questions. So the DC Charter School Board does something very interesting. They have a mystery shopper program and staff actually calls different charter schools because the complaint is all so well charter schools when you call them and say hey I have a child with special needs. Can he enroll? Staff would say well actually its not the right fit for you. I remember doing an interview with someone from the charter school board the years ago that said well if they do it with a wink and a nod there's nothing that we can do. Scott started this program, which is a mystery shopper program, where staff actually calls and say I've got a child with special needs and how does he enroll. If the school does not give the right answer, which is yes, they are welcome here, then they're kind of flagged and there's a conversation. Scott, you had done a story about this and you had talked about how the numbers were going down and how it wasn't punitive. I was wondering, whether it's been 3 years of the program and whether people are savvy to that and they know what to say but there's a way to make families feel unwelcome. Is there a way for parents to complain directly and you know, to make it easier.

Scott PEARSON: Well its very difficult now for schools to make people feel unwelcome. You have the mystery shopper program and for almost all of our schools the way you apply is through a common lottery so you go on a city website and you indicate, in rank order, your school preferences and then a computer assigns you so I think its quite difficult for schools to put up barriers whether real or imagined. However, we've been thinking about perhaps adding to the caller program and having people actually go in in person posing as parents or guardians

of children with special needs. We have seen the number of incorrect answers going down every year, and I should say the incorrect answers that we've gotten tend to be the kinds of things where it looks more like a poorly trained frontline staff person rather than a deliberate school wide policy. But as schools realize that we are doing this, they are making sure that their staff are properly trained.

**Kavitha CARDOZA:** And then there's a really interesting program, the Special Needs Center. Could you talk about this?

**Scott PEARSON:** We called these satellite classrooms. The idea is that if you are operating a small charter school with 250 students but you may not have the capacity to serve every student who comes to your school but you are legally obligated to serve every student who enters your school. How do we help build the capacity of those smaller schools? So we've been working with larger schools that have this capacity, in particular with this organization I mentioned earlier, Children's Guild, to create classrooms where other schools can send students temporarily, if need be, to be served in that classroom. By that strategy we are hoping to pool the talent and expertise and the resources of charter schools so that they can better serve students of all needs.

**Kavitha CARDOZA:** And when will that be online?

**Scott PEARSON:** It'll start this fall.

*-Telephone Caller-*

**Tom in Washington, DC:** Okay, thank you very much Kojo. There's a public charter boarding school called SEED. Several years ago I got a chance to go there. The kids, I think they sleep there five nights a week and I got a chance to talk to a ninth grade girl and I asked her a question. The question was, "what's the difference between your previous school and the one you now go to?" And she said the main difference was in her previous school, nobody cared if you did your homework. You didn't have to turn it in and most kids didn't. This school, two or three times a night you would have someone knocking on your door making sure you're doing your homework. That is my comment.

**Kavitha CARDOZA:** It's like the classic saying, right? Kids don't care what you know until they know what you care.

**Scott PEARSON:** Yes, well I'm glad you made that comment about the SEED school. We see that at a lot of our charter schools but under Chancellor Henderson's leadership we've seen a lot more of that at traditional public schools as well. She is really doing a good job there and in particular, her focus on hiring great leaders has meant you will hear that less and less about DC public schools as well.

**Kojo KNAMDI:** The number of debates around charters brewing nationally and although the issues have been more contentious in places like NYC, DC is a charter

school leader in a city with nearly half of its public school population in charters has a lot at stake in these discussions. One debate is around suspensions and whether charters boost performance by finding ways to essentially pressure struggling kids or suspending troublemaking kids to drop out, which is something that traditional public schools are not allowed to do. There are long waitlists for many charters and some charters do not back fill seats. What does that mean and what's the issue?

**Scott PEARSON:** Well first on the suspension issue, charter schools suspend at about the rates as DC public schools so we are working on that. It's an issue of concern because some schools they suspend a lot of their kids and we are trying to see if those schools can't use other strategies rather than suspensions to try to maintain order and to set the right culture in the school.

The issue with back-filling is whether or not a school admits students in all grades and its also whether or not a school will admit students in the middle of the year. What we found is that most of our schools don't admit in the middle of the year or they admit very few students. But most of our schools do admit new students in every grade or virtually every grade. So it's an issue we continue to look at and its an issue that's probably going to grow in prominence as charter schools become more fully integrated into the city's educational structure but our current look at it is that virtually every school admits students in almost all of their grades.

**Kavitha CARDOZA:** I had a question Scott and perhaps more of an update. There was a report maybe last year which showed how many kids were leaving to traditional public schools from charter schools and vice versa and it was much higher for students leaving charter schools to go to traditional public schools and that placed a lot of stress on—I think it was Roosevelt or some DC Public School, had a 40% like the kids who entered during the year that were not the same as the students who started out. And I remember talking to you about it and you said you were looking into it. Do you have an update?

**Scott PEARSON:** Well we were particularly concerned that a few charter schools were expelling large numbers of students and not only was that the not right thing to do but it was creating a disproportionate impact on the schools where those students were then showing up. And we've made a lot of progress on the expulsion issue. Expulsion rates at charter schools have come down by half. They are now at sort of national averages for expulsions and also the most egregious cases, the schools that were expelling 5% of their students or 7% of their students, those have come way down. We don't have any schools where you see suspensions sort of north of 1% maybe even 2% in some cases. Sometimes there will be a fight that'll involve a lot of kids with weapons and so you'll see a spike but by in large I'm really proud of the progress we've made in reducing expulsions.

**Kojo KNAMDI:** Some critics point out that overall that charter schools perform on average about the same as traditional public schools and that's with freedom from the school system and the additional resources in the form of grants that many

charters get from private foundations. Are charters performing as had been hoped and expected?

**Scott PEARSON:** In DC they certainly are. Charter schools are several percentage points higher in proficiency rates on the DC CAS and when you look at subgroups for example, how are African-American students doing versus traditional public schools, you see double digit kids of improvements. And I mentioned the CREDO study that showed that students are getting six months of extra school for every year. So its certainly working in DC. There are many states where its not. My own view is that that can often be traced to a weak authorizer. If the authorizer is not doing a good job of selecting good schools to open and is not being tough on making the difficult decision to close schools that are not performing well, then you end up with this kind of mediocre performance.

**Kavitha CARDOZA:** I think that's what made your op-ed so refreshing that it wasn't just charters for charter sake which I just attended a conference of education reporters and a lot of speakers were just charters for charters sake and it was kind of frustrating. I think in DC we've gone beyond that.

**Scott PEARSON:** Charters are supposed to do at least three things. They're supposed to bring quality schools and raise quality. They're supposed to bring innovation and they're supposed to offer parents real choice. If they're not doing those things, then we need to ask, "why are we bothering?"

*-Telephone Caller-*

**Danny in Washington, DC:** Thanks for taking my call Kojo. I am wondering why it is that there is only one charter school in all of Ward 3 especially given how prolific they are east of the river. And also, I'm curious to know how that might relate to the fact that Ward 3 hasn't faced any school closures or loss of any traditional neighborhood schools.

**Kojo KNAMDI:** Remember you heard it here first. People in Ward 3 are jealous of people east of the river.

**Scott PEARSON:** Actually to my knowledge there are no public charter schools in Ward 3 and I think that's not right. I think we should have school choice in every Ward in the city. Facilities are an issue. Facilities in Ward 3 are really expensive and so that's made it difficult but I hope that in the next few years we can see at least one charter school in Ward 3.

**Kojo KNAMDI:** This isn't your purview as DC Charter schools but Maryland's new governor wants the state to expand beyond the 50 schools it has there. Virginia has yet to allow them but could down the line. What's your feeling on the expansion of charter schools in our region?

**Scott PEARSON:** We are surrounded by two states that have the worst charter laws in the country. I think Maryland's was ranked dead last and Virginia was pretty close to that and so in Virginia that has inhibited the growth of charter schools. There is fewer than 10 in the whole state and in Maryland its' really hobbled them. I would love to see great laws in those states and see charter schools grow and it would allow schools to create region-wide networks that could give them more scale and ability to serve students with specific disabilities.

**Kojo KNAMDI:** Scott Pearson is the Executive Director of DC's Public Charter School Board. Thank you so much for joining us.

**Scott PEARSON:** Thank you.

**Kojo KNAMDI:** Kavitha Cardoza is a special correspondent for WAMU. Kavitha it is always a pleasure.

**Kavitha CARDOZA:** Thank you, Kojo.