

Charters Pushing the Pricelessness Envelope

John Merrifield

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Charter operators are [pushing the envelope](#), but they are mostly still in it. Take for example, the [Rocketship brand](#); if you can. They are adding schools, but admission at each is by lottery. The waitlist has about as many students as the Rocketship chartered public schools enroll. Since the potential for expansion in any location is limited by the ability to raise money there, expansion means a new school and a new waitlist in a new location, not expansion to fully meet demand in any given location. State funding is often not enough to start new schools; maybe not even to operate them. Like so many other innovative charters aiming for some customization to address the unique learning needs that were a bad fit for the traditional public school mainstream, Rocketship is donor dependent. “Rocketship must raise \$5.5 million for each regional rollout. In Milwaukee, [for instance](#), Rocketship has pulled together funding from the [Walton Family Foundation](#), the [Bradley Family Foundation](#), and Baird Corporation among others.”

The shortages represented by the waitlists and the [struggles](#) to replicate what produced impressive results at the first Rocketship schools are readily explained by the economic fundamentals of the low price ceiling (‘pricelessness’) established by one-price-fits-all school funding policies. Unable to charge what the market will bear and thus have the resources to build and *appropriately staff* enough schools to avoid the quality-eroding effects of persistent shortages, Rocketship is struggling to finance expansion as described above, AND failing to maintain the personnel quality needed for its model to work as well at its new schools as the original campuses. That is yielding the scandals and declining test scores that [threaten](#) the whole chartered public school and school choice movements.