

An Education Policy Project Briefing Paper

CHARTER SCHOOLS

By Gerald Bracey, Ph.D.

The idea of a charter school was first put forth by educator Ray Budde as early as the 1970's¹ and popularized in the early 1990's by the late Albert Shanker, then president of the American Federation of Teachers. As presented by Shanker, the idea was a simple one: some agency, such as a state or school district, would grant a particular school a "charter" to free it from presumably onerous state and district rules and regulations. In return for these freedoms, the charter school promised to raise achievement.

In retrospect, this was a hopelessly naïve and simplistic notion of the way schools operate, but it caught many people's fancy. It has proved to be the latest in the apparently never-ending fusillade of magic bullets targeted at the schools. The early operative word for charters was "hope." Indeed, University of Minnesota charter advocate Joe Nathan titled his 1996 book *Charter Schools: Creating Hope and Opportunity for American Education*. The preface of this book provides an excellent summary of how and why charter school advocates hold out hope:

The charter school idea is about the creation of more accountable public schools, and the removal of the "exclusive franchise" that local school boards presently have. Charter schools are public, non-sectarian schools that do not have admissions tests, but that operate under a written contract, or *charter* from a school board or some other organization, such as a state school board. These contracts specify how the school will be accountable for improved student achievement, in exchange for a waiver of most rules and regulations governing how they operate. Charter schools that improve achievement have their contracts renewed. Charter schools that do not improve student achievement over the contract's period are closed...

The charter idea is not just about the creation of new, more accountable public schools or the conversion of existing public schools. The charter idea also introduces fair, thoughtful competition into public education.²

One of Nathan's colleagues, Ted Kolderie expanded on the notions contained in the last paragraph, emphasizing that the conversion of a regular school into a charter school was just a start: the real goal was to use the charter to improve schools in the entire district.³

Certain assumptions embedded in these paragraphs have proved troublesome. The statement implies that people opening charter schools know how to run a school. This has often not been the case. People often open a charter school because they have a vision of what education should be. As has been found in several states, though, this vision

needs to be accompanied by skills in fiscal and personnel management and the ability to deal with many different people. It further assumes that charter schools are largely driven by idealism, whereas increasingly charter school operators are looking to make money. It assumes that people running the charter schools, idealistic or not, will be *willing* to be accountable and will have a plan for accountability. Finally, it assumes that there will be some entity that is empowered to judge if the school's goals have been met and that has the expertise to exercise that power wisely.

Neither assumption has yet been borne out in the real world. As early as 1994, George Washington University political scientist Jeffrey Henig found that charter schools “show few signs of interest in systematic, empirical research that is ultimately needed if we are going to be able to separate bold claim from proven performance. Premature claims of success, reliance on anecdotal and unreliable evidence are still the rule of the day.”⁴

Two years later, Alex Molnar of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee looked at charter school evaluations with a more jaundiced eye: “Charter schools will fail, fraud will be uncovered and tax dollars will be wasted.” But, said Molnar, there will also be no end of testimonials for allegedly wonderful charters.⁵

In that same year, some of charters biggest advocates, Chester E. Finn, Jr., Lou Ann Bierlein, and Bruno V. Manno lamented that they had “yet to see a single state with a thoughtful and well formed plan for evaluating its charter school program.” Although part of the problem was the generally sorry state of evaluation in general, “the problem is apt to be particularly acute for charter schools, where the whole point is to deliver better results in return for greater freedom.”⁶

It has now been nearly five years since the above hopes and reservations were expressed. We can begin to evaluate the predictions made for charters in the light of a half dozen or so evaluations from California, Michigan and Arizona, the three most active charter states, and from Ohio, which has recently experienced a charter boom. Such an evaluation can be undertaken in light of the qualities alleged, and those observed, in charter schools.

Student achievement. The essence of charter schools was that they would increase student achievement. Early on, this was measured largely through the use of test scores. Yet it turns out that this approach may have been naive. For some charter schools, standardized tests would be an appropriate evaluation tool, but not for all. Charter schools have been formed to provide an “Afrocentric” curriculum or to try to entice dropouts to return to learning environments. Other charters are focused on art or other subjects that are not reflected in test scores. Whatever the focus of the school, it is clear that charter-granting agencies are not using a clear set of guidelines in issuing the charters.

Where test scores are available, there is little evidence to indicate that charter schools have led to improved achievement Evaluations in California and Michigan, two of the

most charter-active states in the country, have failed to find evidence that charters produce higher achievement.⁷

Accountability. Charter schools would be more accountable, the advocates argued, because they had promised to increase achievement and if they didn't, they would go out of business. Yet this academic accountability has yet to be enforced. To date, charter schools that have gone out of business have done so for mismanaging money, whether from criminal activity or ineptitude. A fairly rigorous fiscal accountability seems to be operating, but not academic accountability.

In some instances, accountability has been compromised by confusion over who is accountable to whom and for what. For instance, in Ohio, many charter schools did not file forms and reports as required by law. The schools said that they were unaware of the requirements and even if they had complied, it is not clear that Ohio had a monitoring structure sufficiently large and organized to review the reports adequately.⁸

In a related vein, some charter schools have seen themselves as accountable to more than one constituency. Some staffers felt accountable to the founder, some to the parents, some to the students. As a result “the claim of greater school-level accountability for student outcomes via charter school reform has not yet truly come to pass in California.”⁹ This is due in large part to the fact that charter schools answer to many different audiences, and thus are sometimes torn between being accountable to different people.

Innovation. Charters, it was said, would become laboratories for curricular and instructional innovation. This appears to not to have happened. It is true that some things might be considered an innovation by contrast to the local public school. For instance, if the public schools were emphasizing a whole language approach to the teaching of beginning reading, then a phonics-oriented program might seem innovative to those who adopted it.

Innovations in the broader sense of the word, though, are rare. In Michigan, for instance, evaluators did not find any program or approach that had not already been tried in the public schools. Jerry Horn and Garon Miron, who directed an evaluation of Michigan charters out of Western Michigan University, put it this way:

In summary, there are many opportunities for charter schools to learn about innovative practices. Since all of these schools are newly developed with the exception of the relatively few converted private or parochial schools, one might expect that innovative practices would be frequent and widespread. However, such is not the case. We found unpredictably few innovations, which would not suggest that transportability is an immediate expectation. In fact, we found the charter schools to be remarkably similar to the regular public schools.¹⁰

Choice. Since charters would be diverse, the argument went, parents would have more choices for their children. This has taken place within limits, but there are some disturbing trends on the horizon. As noted, if a whole-language school district gets a phonics-oriented charter school, that increases the range of parental choice. Clearly such schools have appeared.

On the other hand, the increased diversity might disappear quickly. Many of the schools that the Michigan evaluations labeled “Mom and Pop” schools have found that running a school is a great deal more work than they had counted on, and an increasing number of such schools have been turned over to for-profit Educational Management Organizations such as Mosaica Education, based in San Rafael, Calif. Yet Mosaica and other such companies appear to have schools that resemble each other in cookie-cutter fashion, eliminating the very diversity and innovation that these charter schools’ founders had envisioned.

Moreover, while a few new programs such as Edison, Tesseract, or Sabis, might offer some diversity when compared with what else is available in the district, these schools tolerate no diversity *within* a school. The program is tamperproof. This generates friction among many teachers. For instance, more than half of the teachers at one Edison school in San Francisco are not returning for the 2000-2001 school year. Teachers felt demeaned by the hyper-rigid curriculum. “They literally give you a script with what you’re supposed to say,” said one teacher.¹¹ When teachers complained, school administrators and officials in the New York headquarters of Edison Schools Inc. had a pat response: “Maybe our design is not for you.”¹²

One study found that public schools in suburbs were more responsive to parental input than private schools in those same suburbs.¹³ Suburban public school parents think it is both their right and responsibility to get involved with their children’s education. Charter schools operated by chains might well remove the opportunity for that involvement, however. These chains rely heavily on applying particular models in their schools -- Edison schools, for instance, use the Success for All and Chicago Math curricula -- and show great reluctance to alter them, as the San Francisco teachers discovered. Yet if teachers are unable to alter the model, it seems likely that parents would have even less of a chance for input.

Competition. One might infer from the previous two sections that the public schools find that charters offer healthy competition that they can benefit from. In Michigan, Eric Rofes of the University of California at Berkeley found that some schools vowed to “out-charter the charters,” but much of this response focused on issues other than quality of instruction--making playgrounds safer, putting more guards at crosswalks, etc. Outside of Michigan, Rofes found that “The majority of districts had gone about business-as-usual and responded to charters slowly and in small ways.”¹⁴

In fairness, it should be said that demographic changes in the population have likely rendered the public schools less interested in the charters than they might otherwise be: the school-age population is growing and increased enrollments offset the loss of students

to charter schools. In addition, many charter schools are too new to have a stable program that could be examined by other schools. Still, the promise of competition has not as yet been met.

Problems foreseen and unforeseen. Early on, fears were expressed that charters would “skim” better students away from public schools. Some evaluations have found evidence for such skimming.

A study in Arizona turned up evidence that the charter schools there were much more ethnically segregated than were nearby public schools.¹⁵ A Michigan evaluation also revealed evidence for such segregation.¹⁶ However, a recent survey of charters in 23 states found the evidence mixed and inconclusive: “A closer analysis suggests that charter schools may be proliferating at both the low and the high end of the race/ethnicity and affluence/poverty continuums. Whether this tendency will exacerbate racial isolation, or create more isolation by social class among students, remains to be seen. It is likely that some schools serving high percentages of students of color are responding to legislation that asks charter schools to serve at-risk students.”¹⁷

Another recent paper, though, concluded that while there were charters serving at-risk students, “charter schools serving low-income children of color are less likely to provide an academic curriculum, and are generally not as rich in educational resources, as charter schools serving white middle-class students.”¹⁸

In sum, establishing and maintaining charter schools has proved to be a much more complicated undertaking than initially thought. Charter schools enthusiasts seem to view them as a “magic bullet” that would offer immediate and major improvements in education. The actual outcomes have been much more modest. It is too early to draw firm conclusions about the ultimate usefulness of charters.

¹ Ray Budde, personal communication, September 2000.

² Joe Nathan, *Charter Schools: Creating Hope and Opportunity for American Education*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1996 P. xxvii

³ Ted Kolderie, *The Charter Idea: Update and Prospects, Fall, '95: Public Services Redesigns Project*. St Paul: Center for Policy Studies, 1995.

⁴ Jeffrey Henig, *Rethinking School Choice: Limits of the Market Metaphor*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, paperback edition, 1995. Page 234. (The quoted passage did not appear in the original hardcover edition.)

⁵ Alex Molnar, *Giving Kids the Business: The Commercialization of America's Schools*. Boulder: Westview Press. 1996. Page 167.

⁶ Chester E. Finn, Jr., Lou Ann Bierlein and Bruno V. Manno. “Charter Schools in Action: A First Look.” Hudson Briefing Paper,. Indianapolis: Hudson Institution. January 1996.

⁷ Amy Stuart Wells, *Beyond the Rhetoric of Charter School Reform*. LA: UCLA, 1998.
Jerry Horn and Garon Miron, *Evaluation of the Public Schools Academy Initiative, Final Report*. Kalamazoo: The Evaluation Center, Western Michigan University, 1999.

⁸ Dennis J. Willard and Doug Oplinger, "Charter Experiment Goes Awry: Schools Fail to Deliver." *Akron Beacon Journal*, December 12, 1999, p. A1.

⁹ Wells, pp. 26-27.

¹⁰ Horn and Miron, p. 77

¹¹ Tali Woodward, "Edison Exodus: Will a Teacher Revolt Spell an End to the School Privatization Experiment?? *SF Bay Guardian*, July 19, 2000, p. 1.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Richard Rothstein, Martin Carnoy, and Luis Benveniste. *Can Public Schools Learn from Private Schools*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2000.

¹⁴ Eric Rofes, *How Are School Districts Responding to Charter Laws and Charter Schools?* Berkeley, CA: Policy Analysis for California Education, University of California at Berkeley, April, 1998. Page 13.

¹⁵ Casey Cobb and Gene V Glass, "Ethnic Segregation in Arizona Charter Schools," *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, January 14, 1999. Available at <http://epaa.asu.edu/v7n3.html>

¹⁶ Horn and Miron.

¹⁷ Carol Ascher, Robin Jacobowitz, and Yolanda McBride, *Charter School Access: A Preliminary Analysis of Charter School Legislation and Charter School Students*. Institute for Education and Social Policy, New York University, February, 1999, p. 13.

¹⁸ Carol Ascher and Nathalis Wamba. *Charter Schools: An Emerging Market for a New Model of Social Equity?* Delivered to the "Conference on School Choice and Racial Diversity, Teachers College, Columbia University, May 22, 2000.