

Educational Diversity and Accountability through Charter Schools

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Introduction

Charter schools have been a greatly debated topic in the United States in recent years. A charter school is a publicly funded, privately operated school. As Finn, Manno, and Vanourek (1996) suggest,

Traditionally, Americans have defined a public school as any school run by the government, managed by a superintendent and school board, staffed by public employees, and operated within a public-sector bureaucracy...Now consider a different definition: a public school is any school that is open to the public, paid for by the public, and accountable to public authorities for its results (p.16).

Charter schools have a contract (referred to as a “charter”) with the government, which defines the goals and operating methods of the school within general state requirements, and holds it accountable for results. Educators and politicians continue to argue over the successes and failures of charter schools, with teacher unions and some politicians have questioning their results,

Charter schools are about offering a choice, while demanding high standards and achievement. Regardless of criticisms, for many parents and students this choice means everything. As Nathan (1996) explains:

The charter movement brings together, for the first time in public education, four powerful ideas:

- Choice among public schools for families and their children
- Entrepreneurial opportunities for educators and parents to create the kinds of schools they believe make the most sense
- Explicit responsibility for improved achievement, as measured by standardized tests and other measures
- Carefully designed competition in public education (p. 1).

Charter schools offer innovation and choice. Most importantly however, charter schools offer an opportunity and possibility for students who might not otherwise have that choice.

A charter school provides parents and students with an option for schooling. Students are not required to attend charter schools, just as teachers are not forced to teach there. Charter schools are public schools and are therefore open to all students who wish to attend. Unfortunately, many charter schools have more applicants than allotted spots for students. As a result, many schools hold public lotteries in which students are assigned a number. If that number is picked, the child has a spot at that particular school.

Charter schools are different from traditional public schools in five important ways:

They can be created by almost anyone. They are exempt from most state and local regulations, essentially autonomous in their operations. They are attended by youngsters whose families choose them. They are staffed by educators who are also there by choice. They are liable to be closed for not producing satisfactory results (Finn et al., 2000. p.15).

Most charter schools are independent of the local school district and are free to make decisions that the leadership and staff think best. This flexibility allows charter schools to quickly and effectively make changes for their students. However, this freedom has also created tension between union members and charter school educators. In general, unions (which in most cases do not represent staff of charter schools) do not support charter schools. This is ironic given the fact that the first national call for

charter schools came from then president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), Al Shanker. In 1988 Shanker publically supported the idea of charter schools. Union support for charter schools has certainly changed since that time.

Charter schools are run by “operators”. These operators may be parents, teachers, an existing organization like a university, or a private firm. In some cases, charter schools are operated by and within the local school district. The operators have a contract or a “charter” with the sponsor. Sponsors are usually the state or local school board. Finn et al. (1996) explains, “If the sponsor deems an application solid, it will negotiate a more detailed charter (or contract) for a specified period of time, typically five years but sometimes as short as one or as long as fifteen” (p. 16). Although this short time frame can be challenging for some schools, it can also push them to work toward immediate successes.

Charter schools face many challenges. One of the biggest challenges has to do with the policies within each state. Laws for charter schools differ from state to state and as Hoxby (2006) explains, “The bottom line is that the details of a charter school law matter” (p.39). Additional challenges include a lack of sizable scale for the charter movement, a lack of equitable funding and difficulties with accountability from authorizers. These obstacles have made it difficult for all charter schools to succeed. Charter schools that do not “hold-up their end of the bargain” (i.e. positive results) are forced to close. This demand for accountability means a school must succeed or it will be forced to shut its doors. Given the amount of opposition, either from constricting laws or from union pressures, it is a wonder that so many charter schools have done as well as they have.

Charter schools provide hope and choice for many students. It is not a question of charter schools out-performing traditional public schools. Rather, it is a question of opportunity for an education that a child or parent desires. As Charles Glenn, former director of Massachusetts Bureau of Educational Equity and current education professor at Boston University, explains,

[C]hoice can do much to promote equity. It does so by creating conditions which encourage schools to become more effective, it does so by allowing schools to specialize and thus meet the needs of some students very well rather than all students at a level of minimum adequacy, and it does so by increasing the influence of parents over the education of their children in a way which is largely conflict free (as cited in Nathan, 1996, p.5).

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Charter schools are about choices and about hope. These schools provide parents and students with the education they want and with the choices they deserve.

A Brief History of the Charter Movement in the United States

The charter school movement has its roots in the educational and social movements of the 1960’s and 1970’s. Finn and his co-authors explain the five developments that led to the charter idea. These include “A shift in focus from school inputs to outputs, setting higher standards, the excellence movement, new school designs, [and] choice and competition” (2000, p.61). The first of these (“A shift in focus from school inputs to outputs”) began with President Lyndon Johnson’s signing of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965). This was part of Johnson’s “War on Poverty.” Johnson was a former one-room schoolteacher from Texas. He believed education would break the cycle of poverty. Johnson’s Elementary and Secondary Education Act helped to raise standards of education for all students.

During this time, new, “innovative public schools” were being established in places like Metro High School in Chicago, City as School in New York, and Parkway in Philadelphia (Nathan, 1996, p. 65). These schools gave teachers more flexibility to operate and create schools that met the different needs of students. “By creating distinctive schools and giving families an opportunity to choose these schools, educators in these districts hoped to serve youngsters more effectively than they could with the prevailing one-size-fits all model” (Nathan, 1996, p. 56).

At the same time, districts were also establishing “magnet schools.” Magnet schools were created to help fix racial segregation in schools. These schools are public schools that have specialized courses and allow students from all over a particular district to attend. Magnet schools, as well as the “innovative” schools, were catalysts for creating change in the education system of the United States.

During this same period, Ray Budde coined the term “charter” in reference to education. In 1974 Budde wrote a paper entitled, “Education by Charter” and presented it to the Society for General Systems Research. In the paper, Budde suggested a model for an autonomous school, which would be run by teachers. Budde’s concept for the charter movement was slightly different from the current definition.

Ray Budde’s proposal was actually for a restructuring of the *district*: for moving from “a four-level line and staff organization” to “a two-level form in which groups of teachers would receive educational charters directly from the school board” and would carry the responsibility for instruction. It dealt with existing schools. It was the concept that Paul Hill later called the ‘contract district’; that the Education Commission of the States later termed the ‘all-charter district’ (Kolderie, 2005, p. 1).

There was no real response to Budde’s original proposal; in fact, it was not until after a *Nation at Risk* was published that Budde’s idea was noticed, in the context of an intense nation-wide discussion about restructuring the American education system. In 1988, Al Shanker, the president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), publicly supported the idea of “charter schools.”

Shanker wanted the United States to create a ‘fundamentally different model of schooling that emerges when we rethink age-old assumptions—the kind of rethinking that is necessary to develop schools to reach the up to 80 percent of our youngsters who are failing in one way or another in the current system.’ He contemplated an arrangement that would ‘enable any school or any group of teachers...within a school to develop a proposal for how they could better educate youngsters and then give them a charter to implement that proposal.’ ‘All this,’ he wrote, ‘would be voluntary. No teacher would have to participate and parents would choose whether or not to send their children to a charter school’ (as cited in Finn et al., 2000, p. 18).

Shanker’s public statements popularized the term that is so well known today.

In the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, many of the original proponents of innovative schools were frustrated. Most parents and teachers who had helped open these schools felt a loss of control. School boards and policy makers controlled most of what happened in these schools, which was not the original intent. This frustration led many parents and educators to consider new approaches for operating schools (Nathan, 1996, p. 57).

Minnesota was the first state to implement school choice programs that went beyond the magnet schools and other choices that had been pioneered in Massachusetts. In 1985, then governor Rudy Perpich proposed numerous school choice programs. “Perpich, a Democrat, felt it important to expand educational opportunities for families who could not afford to move from one community to another in order to change their children’s school. He also felt thoughtful, controlled competition could stimulate public education improvement” (Nathan, 1996, p. 58). Perpich’s proposals “were strongly supported by an unusual coalition that included the Minnesota PTA; directors of the War on Poverty agencies in Minnesota; individual teachers, administrators, and parents; and the Minnesota Business Partnership (MBP)” (Nathan, 1996, p. 58). In 1988 three of Perpich’s proposals had been passed by the Minnesota legislature. This included postsecondary options, which allowed junior and seniors to take some of their classes (paid for by the state) at local colleges and universities. A second proposal passed by the legislature gave students who had difficulty in their particular school district the option to attend another public school in a different district. A third aspect of the legislature was open enrollment. This allowed all k-12 students the ability to apply to schools outside their district, provided the school had the space and that it did not increase racial segregation. As Nathan (1996) explains, “These proposals were extremely controversial when initially proposed” (p. 59). However, over time, these choice options became increasingly popular.

The Minnesota Legislature approved, in 1991, the first law authorizing charter schools. This provided that

Charter schools had to obtain permission to operate from *both* a local school board and the state school board, rather than having the option of gaining sponsorship from a local school board *or* the state board of education. Only eight charter schools were to be permitted. A majority of charter school’s board members have to be teachers in the school (Nathan, 1996, p. 69).

Although the Minnesota charter school law was not as strong as some had hoped, it was an important turning point for the charter movement. As a result of the legislation in Minnesota, many other states began to pass charter school laws. In 1993, California passed a similar law. Later that year, six more states passed similar laws including Michigan and Massachusetts. Both of these states also included non-district authorizers as part of the law. As Nathan (1996) states, “So the charter school concept was planted in Minnesota...The charter idea is a seed that is spreading, changing the schooling and lives of thousands and thousands of youngsters” (p. 71). Minnesota planted the first seed and the charter movement has continued to grow.

Challenges For Charter Schools

Charter schools face many obstacles. One of the most challenging obstacles involves differences in charter school laws in each state. This makes it difficult to study charter school successes and failures. Stanford University’s Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREO) recently (2009) reported on charter schools “effectiveness in comparison to traditional public schools,” stating that “The effectiveness of charter schools was found to vary widely by state” (p. 3). This variation of effectiveness is a result of the diverse charter laws in each state. As Hoxby explains, “The bottom line is that the details of a charter school law matter” (2006, p.39). The policies within a state affect the success of charter schools. Many of these laws are a reflection of unions’ opposition toward charter schools. Most policies about charter schools have been heavily debated and often greatly altered before the law is ever passed. Chubb (2006) explains,

Every piece of charter legislation has been fiercely debated, with opposition coming from the traditional public school world, concerned about the loss of students and revenue, and support coming from uneasy coalitions of business interests, wanting to accelerate school improvement, and community groups, often from inner cities, frustrated with the quality of regular public schools. Every charter law is a compromise (p.128).

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Another problem for charter schools has to do with scale. Most states have restrictions on the number of charter schools they allow. The environment the charter laws create within a state matters. In states where more charter schools are allowed to operate and are given greater autonomy, there is a greater demand for these schools. Hoxby (2006) explains, “It turns out that differences in states’ charter school laws are the primary reason why the supply of places for students in charter schools differs across areas of the U.S.” (p. 16). These restrictions ensure that charter schools remain individual schools and that they do not become a system (Chubb, 2006, p. 130). Chubb describes charter schools as a “cottage industry” whose “organization is a byproduct of political opposition and compromise – not conscious design” (p. 130). Charter laws in all states are about compromise and negotiations. These compromises have made it difficult for charter schools to do well on a large scale.

Funding poses another challenge for charter schools. Just as there are different charter laws in the various states, so there are also different state funding options. In some states, charter schools are provided with the same per pupil amount as traditional public schools. In other states, however, there is a significant difference in per pupil funding. In a study done by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute (2002-2003), funding in seventeen “prominent charter school states” was examined. The study found, “In these seventeen states, charter schools faced an average funding short-fall of \$1,801 per pupil in 2002-03” compared with other public schools (as cited in Osberg, 2006, p. 49). The study also found that, “Nine states faced much worse shortfalls, ranging as high as \$3,638 per pupil in Missouri” (as cited in Osberg, 2006, p. 49). In addition to differences in per pupil funding, charter schools are also responsible for funding their own facilities. In the same Fordham Institute study it was found that, “Only seven of the seventeen states had laws on the books in 2002-03 providing charters access to facilities funding sources enjoyed by districts. In only five of these did charters receive such funds in practice, and never in amounts equal to that received by district schools” (as cited in Osberg, 2006, p. 57). The lack of equity in per pupil funding and the strain of supporting facilities costs puts charter schools at an immediate disadvantage.

An additional issue for charter schools has to do with the schools’ authorizer. As Finn and Hill (2006) explain, in the early days of chartering laws, “Nearly all of their attention focused on schools

and operators, not on the public bodies that license them to operate” (p. 104). In some states, local school boards are responsible for authorizing schools. This presents a challenge for charter schools. “Indeed, confining sponsorship to local school districts would prove to be a powerful inhibitor of the charter movement – which is precisely why the teachers’ unions, school board associations and superintendents’ groups wanted it that way” (Finn & Hill, 2006, p. 105). When districts act as a charter school’s authorizer it can be problematic, “because they are, in effect, licensing their own competition-an inherently unstable situation” (Finn & Hill, 2006, p. 115). Finn and Hill are quick to point out that not all states operate charter schools in this way, in fact this is changing in many states. They explain that Massachusetts’ law allowed for a separate chartering office under the state secretary of education. If charter schools are going to succeed, then more states need to reexamine their authorizing laws. Without a doubt, charter schools face many difficult hurdles. These challenges make it difficult for all charter schools to succeed.

Today’s chartering policies let a few schools emerge but they prevent the growth of a critical mass of charter schools that could support one another, increase the numbers of schools of choice, stimulate development of supportive vendors and financial institutions, and give parents many real options (Hill, 2006, p. 203).

Given the challenges and inequities, it is a wonder that some charter schools have done as well as they have. Charter schools need to be given a fair chance in order to succeed.

Schools that are Succeeding

Although charter schools face many challenges, some are persevering and doing quite well. In her book *Inside Urban Charter Schools* (2010), Katherine Merseth looks at the characteristics that have helped five high-performing charter schools succeed. She describes each of these successful schools as having a strong culture and mission, being able to find the “right” people and having strong, organized structures of operation and classroom instruction that are driven by data. These schools are providing parents and students with a real choice for a high-quality education.

Community Day Charter Public School (CDCPS) in Lawrence Massachusetts is one of these high-performing urban charter schools. Started by a group of parents and educators, CDCPS opened its doors in 1995 and serves a mostly Latino population, predominantly derived from recent immigration. The school began with 112 students in kindergarten through third grade. CDCPS added subsequent grades each year until it reached its maximum k-8 enrollment of 306 students. An amendment to the school’s charter in 2007-2008 increased enrolment to its current level of 331 students. According to the school’s website,

The mission of CDCPS is to provide a kindergarten through grade eight school that will draw upon our considerable experience in working together as a community to develop and implement a curriculum that discovers and supports the special characteristics and unique learning styles of each student. We will engage that student in meaningful learning experiences for the purposes of clearly stated goals in the areas of understandings, knowledge, skills, habits, and social competencies. The school will reinforce the positive aspects of our city: its culture, art and economy, working class history, and strong work ethic. Our educational philosophy, curriculum, and teaching methods are informed by an understanding that learning takes place in the context of family and that family must be supported in ways that make learning for the child possible. (Retrieved from: <http://cdcps.org/mission.htm>)

With a strong emphasis on “individual, data-driven academics,” CDCPS has successfully closed the achievement gap for its students. The school’s website cites the following data:

In 2009, Grade 8 English students ranked first of all middle schools in the state.

In 2008, Grade 7 English students ranked first and grade 6 math students ranked second of all middle schools in the state.

In 2007, Grade 8 students ranked second in math and third in science of all middle schools in the state, and the Grade 8 Low Income science students ranked 1st of all middle schools in the state. (Retrieved from: <http://cdcps.org/closingtheachievementgap.htm>)

CDCPS is serving its students well. Given its proven track record, the school has plans to expand. In 2010, Massachusetts passed legislation to lift the cap on the number of charter schools allowed in the state. CDCPS is currently in the process of applying for two additional charters in the city of Lawrence. KIPP is another model of charter school that is succeeding, but on a national scale. KIPP stands for “Knowledge Is Power Program,” and began when Mike Feinberg and David Levin met in 1992 while serving in Teach for America in Houston. There, a remarkable teacher named Harriet Ball mentored Feinberg and Levin, who learned from her demanding teaching style and methods. Feinberg, Levin and Ball subsequently opened a school in Houston and then another in New York City, and then the KIPP Foundation was established to replicate the model nation-wide

The KIPP model promotes strong character development as well as strong academics. The goal of KIPP is to have at least 75% of their graduates (all from low-income families) graduate from college. The KIPP website clearly states one of their mottos: “There are no shortcuts!” There are currently 99 KIPP schools in 20 states. This is the largest number of charter schools operated by a single sponsor, proving that large scale projects are possible. The website explains why KIPP matters:

Every day, KIPP students across the nation are proving that demographics do not define destiny. Over 80 percent of our students are from low-income families and eligible for the federal free or reduced-price meals program, and 95 percent are African American or Latino. Nationally, more than 90 percent of KIPP middle school students have gone on to college-preparatory high schools, and over 85 percent of KIPP alumni have gone on to college (Retrieved from: <http://www.kipp.org/about-kipp>).

A study by Angrist, Dynarski, Kane, Pathak and Walters (2010), the authors found that: “The results show overall gains of 0.35 standard deviations in math and 0.12 standard deviations in reading for each year spent at KIPP. LEP students, special education students, and those with low baseline scores benefit more from time spent at KIPP than do other students” (p.9). KIPP has succeeded on a large scale, unlike many charter schools. KIPP’s model is successful and its students are succeeding.

Conclusion

Charter schools are about choices. Although not all charter schools are successful, parents appear to be content with their choice. The U.S. department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics found that, “In 2007, students enrolled in chosen public schools and private schools had parents who were more satisfied with their children’s schools than did students enrolled in assigned public schools”(Grady, 2010, p. 34). Parents want a choice for their children’s education. For many low income and minority families the choice of moving to a wealthier district or paying for a private school are not real options. Charter schools offer an alternative, without the need to move or pay tuition. The charter school option does not necessarily mean that all charter schools are better than traditional public schools. It means that parents and students are offered a choice. Choice exists in all other parts of our lives; why should education be any different?

Charter schools have come a long way in their short 15 year history; from the first charter school law in Minnesota to President Obama’s current “Race to the Top” initiative, which calls for more school options. Although the obstacles continue to persist, charter schools are succeeding, despite these challenges. Charter schools are able to give their students something other schools cannot: they provide families with the education they want and deserve.

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