

# Freedom of Education and Charter Schools

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## Abstract

Charter schools forge and maintain strong associational ties with families and communities and, in doing so, successfully cultivate social capital. A look at the data on who attends charter schools, demand for charter schools, parent participation in charter schools, and overall constituent satisfaction with charter schools proves that the charter school movement is not only fulfilling many of the promises that it has historically made, but also that its method of cultivating social capital is contributing to heightened achievement outcomes for some students. Though charter schools must remain aware of some of the problems that selection bias, parental contracting, and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 pose for their educational reform efforts, the popularity and success of the chartering movement indicates that it is one of the most important educational reforms in recent history.

## Introduction

For decades, educational researchers from a variety of disciplines have posited a strong link between family background and the educational achievement of children. Specifically, they find a positive correlation between the amounts of social capital found within families and communities, and the level of education that students attain and the test scores that they achieve (Coleman, 1966; Leichter, 1975; Levin & Belfield, 2002; Epstein, 1996; Jencks et al., 1972; Lareau, 1987). Though, as of late, the concept of social capital has come to be generally identified with Putnam's (2000) work, which asserts that strong relationships and networks (associational tendencies) lead to strong civil societies and flourishing democracies, Epstein (1996, p. 219) most usefully defines the term with regard to education. She points out that social capital is 'both an outcome and a process'. It is the process of making 'social connections' and storing them for later use. Stored and maintained properly, those connections become social capital, which 'can be invested or spent to help improve the experiences of children and families, the climate of the school, the effectiveness of teachers, and other school, family, or community conditions.'

Despite clear evidence that millions of American children are not achieving in school and that such children tend to come from families that have low amounts of social capital (Coleman, 1998), educational policy-making in the twentieth century was 'devoted overwhelmingly to school improvement' and failed to address the connections or lack thereof between students, families, and communities on one hand and schools on the other (Levin & Belfield, 2002). Federal initiatives attached to Title One of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)<sup>1</sup> mandating that schools forge better community and family partnerships are an exception to this rule. Another notable exception is the charter schooling movement, which became a visible part of the U.S. education scene when the first charter school was approved in Minnesota in 1991.

Charter schools are publicly-funded, independently-managed schools that are freed from many of the regulations that bind traditional public schools, such as hiring regulations and state-mandated guidelines for curriculum and assessment. Charter schools operate with enhanced autonomy because they are

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<sup>1</sup> Title One is best known as a source of 'targeted' or categorical funding for schools doled out by the federal government. Many times, monies given out come with 'strings attached', such as requirements that schools implement programs to 'reach out' to families and communities.

subject to higher standards of accountability; a charter school authorizer can close a charter school that fails to live up to the terms of the contract, or charter, on which it was established.<sup>2</sup>

While there is little evidence that government-initiated reforms seeking to ‘promote partnerships’ between families, communities, and schools have had success in achieving their goals (Himmelfarb et al., 1996, p. 273), the charter schooling movement seems promising. A reform that implicitly asserts that it cultivates social capital for students and families by retooling American schools from the community level up, charter schooling has experienced an enormous growth in popularity in the last decade. Since 1991, the parents of more than one million children have chosen charter schools. Whether such demand means that charter schools are cultivating social capital, however, is a question that begs exploration.

This paper explores that question and, based mainly on quantitative data, asserts that charter schools do cultivate social capital for certain families and students. It also finds that, for some students, the associational ties that charter schools forge could be contributing to heightened educational outcomes. Though it is important to note that charter schools place some constraints upon the kinds of student and families that they serve, the data indicate that charter schooling is, on many levels, living up to much of its promise.

The work that follows is divided into a number of sections. The first section gives an overview of the literature on the relationship between social capital and educational achievement. Though literature on this topic is extensive, briefly tracing the topic and its evolution is helpful to understanding how it informs the modern charter schooling. The second section of this work explores the concept and history of charter schooling as a phenomenon that grew from civil society and presents the claims that charter schooling makes with regard to increasing social capital for students, families, and communities. The third section documents how and why charters are making good on their claims by presenting and analyzing charter school data from both quantitative and qualitative sources. The final section of this work discusses the implications of these findings and suggests that state and federal governments must give charters continued freedom to flourish despite recently implemented educational reforms that threaten to diminish the effectiveness of chartering.

## **Social Capital and Educational Achievement: An Overview of the Literature**

‘Prior to the 1960s, it was assumed that differences in school resources and other characteristics were the dominant causes of differences’ in educational outcomes (Levin & Belfield, 2002, p. 3). The Coleman Report (1966), one of the first comprehensive studies of United States public schools, radically changed this assumption.

Based on national survey and test score data, the Coleman Report reached two important findings that greatly impacted both the course of educational history and of education research. First, it found that racial segregation in schools (in 1966) remained a pressing problem in the United States, and that African-American and Hispanic children, who achieved much lower test scores than their white counterparts, performed better when they attended schools that were majority white. Secondly, the report posited that family and community background had a much greater impact on educational achievement than previously thought. It pointed out that ‘differences in family backgrounds’ and ‘different community influences on students’ were ‘possible sources of within school variation in achievement’ (Coleman, 1966, p. 295). With these words, the Report, for the first time, elucidated the impact that family and community ties can have upon children in schools.

The impact of the Report was two-fold. It served as an impetus for court ordered moves, such as busing, to combat de facto school desegregation, and for Congress to target impoverished schools for additional funding.<sup>3</sup> It also spawned decades of research focused upon the ways in which family background, especially as it relates to race and socio-economic status, positively and negatively affects students (Ravitch, 2000).

Research stemming from the Coleman Report has taken various paths, one of which is concerned with ‘addressing the family as a setting in which education invariably takes place’ and uncovering the habits

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<sup>2</sup> Please refer to section 3 of this contribution, ‘The History of Charter Schooling: Strategies for Cultivating Social Capital’, for further explanation of charter schools and the charter schooling movement.

<sup>3</sup> This funding is still targeted to certain schools and groups of students today under Title One of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).

that certain types of families have that correlate with school achievement (Jencks et al., 1972; Leichter, 1974; Epstein, 1984). Positive habits identified in this kind of research include parents reading to children, helping with homework, communicating with school officials, and setting strict expectations for achievement in school. Research in this vein derives from compelling ethnographic studies where anthropologists and sociologists have observed and recorded such habits within people's homes (Leichter, 1975; Clark, 1983). By and large, these ethnographers have found that habits conducive to academic achievement occur more often in white middle-class homes. Such findings reinforce the belief that socioeconomic status and degrees of cultural<sup>4</sup> and social capital within families and communities are highly correlated.

Because home life is, by its very nature, however, something that cannot be directly affected or changed by a school, research influenced by the Coleman Report has taken another path as well, one concerned with examining the relationships and connections between families, communities, and schools. The language of research in this tradition more explicitly focuses on the meaning and importance of social capital to education. It tends to speak of the extreme importance of 'family involvement' and 'parent participation' in education, seeing not only the cultivation of good habits, but also the ways in which different types of families communicate with school officials as conducive to educational achievement. Researchers such as Leichter (1975) and Epstein (1984) were some of the first to assert, through detailed quantitative studies, that 'parental behavior can be a crucial determinant of educational performance' (in Arum and Beattie, 2000, p. 288).

Importantly, much of the research focused on parental behavior and the networks between parents and schools that comprise social capital has been heavily influenced by the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. In a 1973 publication, Bourdieu posits that schools essentially discriminate against certain types of students because schools play an important role in reproducing the structure and distribution of cultural and social capital within a society. Central to this assertion is Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, which can be described as a disposition acquired through upbringing and education. For Bourdieu, this disposition, which can also be intimately related to one's social class and often informs beliefs about 'how society works' and 'one's chances for success', practically molds the ways in which people respond to society and its demands (Swartz, 1997, p. 72).

In short, Bourdieu believes (in Arum and Beattie, 2000, p. 57) that because the culture that the school transmits in terms of its 'authority patterns, types of curricula, and different linguistic structures', is closer to 'the dominant culture', those who are already members of the dominant class are likely to have a disposition that allows them to understand the culture and demands of the school and to, therefore, achieve to higher levels. Thus, one's background in conjunction with the tendency of schools to be closely affiliated with the dominant culture, according to Bourdieu, solidifies and reproduces different social statuses. Given their understanding of Bourdieu and his claim that schools represent the dominant culture, researchers have posited various reasons for differing amounts of parental involvement in schooling.

The work of Lightfoot (1978) and Ogbu (1974) illustrates this point; both accuse schools of a kind of institutional discrimination. Via participant-observation in two different schools, these researchers have confirmed not only that schools reproduce themselves as Bourdieu claimed, but also that schools often achieve this kind of reproduction by effectively shutting out families of racial minority and low socioeconomic status backgrounds. To combat this discrimination, both Ogbu and Lightfoot promote the idea that changing the way schools behave could increase the networks and connections, or amounts of social capital, which impoverished and racial minority families have. By being open to families of diverse backgrounds, the different cultures they embrace, and the challenges they face, these researchers assert, schools can involve families in educating children and thereby cultivate some of the habits of the home that are so necessary for academic success.

Additional research in this vein (Lareau in Arum and Beattie, 2000, p. 300) has attempted to uncover how different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds 'shape parental compliance with teacher's requests for participation in schooling.' Through ethnographic studies of two first grade classrooms in two very different communities, Lareau has arrived at the conclusion that working-class families are more likely to explicitly 'depend on the teacher to educate their child' and to therefore see less reason to establish strong connections to schools. She finds that middle-class families, on the other hand, are 'more

<sup>4</sup> Cultural capital is the actual cultural information and knowledge (mores, cultural traditions, types of knowledge particular to a certain culture or class) that a family or community inculcates in its children.

likely to behave in ways that mirror that requests of schools' and engage in positive participation (such as attending parent-teacher conferences and monitoring student homework), thereby providing their children with advantages over working-class children (in Arum and Beattie, 2000, p. 300).

Interestingly, however, researchers working from the same premise as Lareau have also found that the kind of social capital that middle-class parents exhibit is not always positive. Indeed, some parents may have such strong connections to schools that they exhibit undue influence over the track placement of their children or encourage teachers to give their children preferential treatment (Desfourges and Abou-char, 2003, p. 35).

Thus, major studies stemming from the Coleman Report in the 1970s and 80s delve both into the kinds of habits that parents cultivate in the home and into the kinds of connections that families, schools, and communities forge with one another. They acknowledge that social capital is related to educational achievement and that socioeconomic and cultural background can dictate not only how parents behave in relation to schools, but also how schools interact with parents. For all of these reasons, current educational research has come to focus on the idea that that if educational achievement is going to increase for certain groups of students, connections between families and schools *must* be forged, re-routed, and/or changed for the better.

In a 1987 article, Coleman and Hoffer (p. 9) clearly present the importance of forging and even restructuring associational ties with schools by describing that high amounts of social capital can, in fact, augment one's ability for future success even when high amounts of human capital (financial resources) are not present in a home. They assert that when parents actively participate in their children's education, both by cultivating desirable habits within the home and by constructively communicating with schools, educational achievement can be enhanced and financial resources can be gained for future generations, which ostensibly interrupt cycles of poverty that so many families and communities experience.

Given these findings, it is disappointing that so few education reforms in the latter half of the twentieth-century have focused on cultivating social capital within and among families and communities. To this day, the dramatic difference in achievement that Coleman identified in 1966 between black and Hispanic students and their white counterparts continues to exist and to remain tied, at least in part, to differences in family background, socio-economic status, and the amounts of social capital that families and communities have.

As a reform that seeks to activate ties between schools and communities, charter schooling has been one of the few success stories of the past decade. Premised on the notion that giving parents a choice of where to send children to school is a first step in cultivating social capital, charter schools represent a new approach to public education.

## **The History of Charter Schooling: Strategies for Cultivating Social Capital**

To fully understand the concepts that drive charter schooling and the ways in which they relate to social capital and education, it is useful to examine the origins of the movement. Though charter schools were not official educational options until 1991, the ideas that drive chartering have been around for much longer; indeed, chartering is a concept that has developed purposefully over time.

Original charter school advocates drew inspiration from school models first developed in the 1960s and 70s. 'Innovative schools', magnet schools, and alternative schools are the main educational reforms that gave rise to chartering (Nathan, 1996, p. 56). 'Innovative schools' were schools started in the 1960s by parents and community members who were dissatisfied with traditional public schools in their areas. They were small schools, located in various cities and towns throughout the United States, which received public funding and featured innovations like site-based management and an element of school choice for students and parents. That is, students were not 'assigned' to these schools, but could choose to attend if they resided within a sending district.

Magnet and alternative schools,<sup>5</sup> though government innovations, also influenced chartering. These schools featured innovative curricula for students not well-served by the traditional public system and, like innovative schools, cultivated a primary tie between schools and parents by allowing parents to choose schools for their children (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Though magnet and alternative schools still exist today, the 'innovative' schools of the 1960s were eventually subsumed by the traditional public school system (Nathan, 1996).

Despite the availability of some alternative schooling options for students, by the late 1980s, many parents and community members remained dissatisfied with the traditional public school system. They felt that it was top-down and over-regulated and that it had effectively taken the important element of community out of schooling. At this time advocates of free market ideals, such as Milton Friedman and Ronald Reagan, were promoting educational vouchers,<sup>6</sup> and many educators and policy-makers were looking back to the 'innovative schools' of the 1960s, and also abroad, to places like Britain, where citizens were lobbying for schools to become more autonomous from government.

By the end of the 1980s, two prominent figures had become affiliated with the idea of 'chartering schools', which drew upon all of these things: 'schools of choice' from the past, ideas that embraced the free market, and educational reforms abroad. Educator Ted Kolderi and American Federation of Teachers union leader Albert Shanker began popularizing an education reform that 1) promoted school choice for families and students, 2) believed in the virtues of true deregulation and school-based management, and 3) maintained that the creation of truly distinctive schools within a locality could pressure traditional public schools to become more innovative and therefore effective (Hassell, 1999, pp. 4-5).

Kolderi and Shanker took their idea to other educators and members of the general public, and a critical mass of private citizens, especially in states such as Minnesota, Arizona, and Massachusetts, lobbied state governments to establish charter school laws. Because it grew in this way, chartering can be called a social movement. Original charter advocates promised state officials that they and other members of civil society could do a better job of educating students (Finn and Manno, 1998) than government, if they were given the proper freedom to do so. Charter proponents proposed what many have called the 'chartering bargain' to policy-makers, promising that independently-managed schools, with reasonable amounts local level autonomy and public funding, would produce better achievement outcomes for students.

Charter schooling was institutionalized in 1991 when Minnesota passed the first charter school law. Today charter school laws exist in forty states and the District of Columbia and over 3,400 charter schools are operating nationwide (Vanourek, 2005, p. 4). Though, according to different chartering laws, charter schools in different states have varied flexibilities and freedoms in terms of their operation and assessment, and though no nation-wide organization that serves as an umbrella for all charter schools exists, charter schools are bound together in several important ways.

The first thing binding all charter schools together is that they are independently-managed schools that receive public funding and are allowed to operate because of a 'charter'. A charter is a document that links charter schools to government; it is an agreement between an individual school and its authorizer (usually a university, local school district, or state department of education). Should a school fail to live up to the expectations outlined in its charter, under state charter laws, an authorizer is responsible for closing the school. Another thing binding charter schools together is that parents, community members, and civil society and private organizations run them. Indeed, according to one of charter schoolings main tenets, charter schools 'may be organized owned and run by any one of several parties' (Kolderi cited in Hassell, 1999, p. 5).

Additionally, charter schools across the country are linked because the chartering movement rests on several important claims for improving education, all of which arise from charter schooling's historical roots and espouse the importance of cultivating social capital to improve student achievement. The first claim charter schools make is that they cultivate social capital by giving parents and community members a choice of where to send their children to school. This choice, charter advocates assert, is a primary way of forging ties between schools and communities and of empowering parents who have previously

<sup>5</sup> Magnet schools were devised in an effort to aid desegregation by attracting students away from their 'zoned' schools with innovative curricular options. Alternative schools, on the other hand, catered to students who had academic and emotional problems in traditional public schools. They too offer innovative curricula to cater to students.

<sup>6</sup> Vouchers are an educational reform, legal in some U.S. states, which give families public-moneys to send their children to a private (sometimes religious) school.

had little influence over the education of their children to become involved in schooling (Chubb and Moe, 1990). By looking to the 'innovative', magnet, and alternative schools of the past, charter advocates present proof that school choice cultivates community ties.

The second claim the charter movement makes is that it can produce better outcomes for students by making education a community endeavour. Because charter schools are started by members of civil society and because community members must allow and provide support for charter schools (they must be willing to provide space for charter schools to use and to send their children to such schools), charter advocates claim that this form of schooling activates important community ties right from the start. Indeed, as Murphy and Schiffman (2002, p. 136) point out, the role that communities play in chartering is essential:

Economists have long recognized voluntary association as one method, in addition to governments and markets, of providing goods and services... there is a good deal of this community muscle behind the formation and growth of the charter school movement ...

In addition to drawing upon this 'community muscle', charter advocates claim, charter schools also cultivate ties to traditional public schools within communities by providing an innovative source of competition and pressuring such schools to perform better.

Finally, because of the 'chartering bargain' that they are based upon, charter schools have the autonomy to demand certain behaviors from parents, behaviors that work to cultivate and maintain social capital. Charters make these demands in the form of contracts that parents are asked to sign when their children apply to charter schools. While it is important to remember that charters cannot discriminate as to the students that they accept, when charters have more applicants than available seats (which is common) they often hold 'lotteries' to admit students who have applied. At the time of application, many charters take the opportunity to explain their educational philosophy and mission to parents and to outline expectations for student and parent behavior in the form of the aforementioned contracts.

The contracts that most charter schools use require some amount of parent involvement. In California, for example, a common charter contract requires that parents volunteer thirty hours of their time to a school per year (Becker and Corwin, 1995). Because such parent involvement is viewed as integral to helping many charters fulfil their missions and maintain a certain school ethos, these contracts have the force of law in many states. That is, once he or she signs a contract, if a parent cannot fulfil its terms, the charter school has a legal right to expel his or her child (Northwest Regional Education Lab ND, p. 2). Thus, while the effects of such contracts, which will be discussed in further detail later in this work, are not always positive, the contracts remain an important tool that charters have for forging and maintaining community ties.

Given its history and the implicit claims that it makes, it is clear that chartering, as a reform, recognizes the importance of social capital to educational success. Moreover, the extreme popularity of the chartering movement is evident and, in this sense, chartering is having an effect on society. As we will see, that effect can be quantified in various ways that illustrate how charters forge and maintain ties with communities. Such ties, when truly effective, sometimes result in higher educational outcomes for students.

## **Analyzing the Data: Do Charter Schools Cultivate Social Capital?**

Though it is difficult to quantify social capital, careful research has generated valuable data which illustrate the various ways in which charters forge and maintain ties with communities. This data is usefully understood via three categories that build upon both the claims that charter schools make and Epstein's (1996, p. 219) definition of social capital as 'social connections' between schools and communities that, when 'stored and maintained' properly can result in heightened educational achievement.

The first way to determine whether charters are cultivating social capital is to uncover whether they are activating demand. That is, instead of shutting families out, are charters cultivating a primary tie to families and communities by bringing them in? Secondly, it useful to uncover whether parents and families who make the choice to create a tie with charter schools actually maintain that tie by participating in charters. If participation in charters is evident, it is likely that the ties that charters forge are reciprocal; charters are not just available to families, families are also available to charters. Finally, if social capital is truly being activated within communities and put to good use, it is likely that parents, community members, and even faculty and staff who work in charters exhibit high levels of satisfaction. Satis-

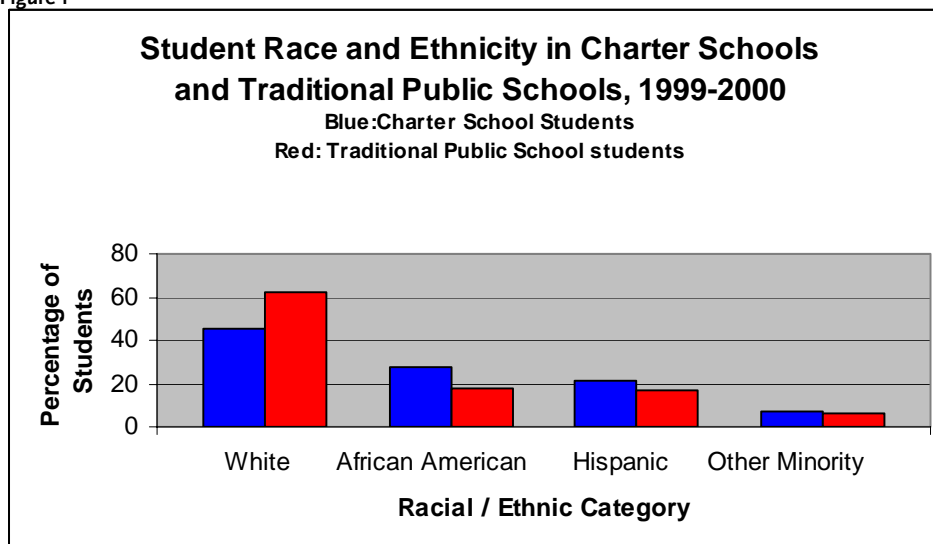
faction levels with charters are therefore a third important category through which to view charters and social capital.

None of the aforementioned categories are useful tools for understanding charters, however, without a good understanding of the students that charters serve. For, if charters are predominantly serving populations that already have high amounts of social capital, then their claims for cultivating social capital lack meaning. Because charter schooling is a rapidly growing movement, statistics regarding charter school attendees are often in flux. A 2004 U.S. Department of Education study (p. 23) reveals, however, that charters tend to serve students who come from families likely to have low amounts of social capital. According to the study:

compared with traditional public schools, charter schools enrol more African-American students, fewer white students, and slightly higher proportions of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. Charter schools also attract high proportions of low-performing students.

Given such statistics, it is safe to say that a good number of charter schools are serving students that much of the research discussed in the previous review of the literature would characterize as having low amounts of social capital. Figure 1 (adapted from PPSS, 2004, p. 24) presents the ethnic make-up of the nation's charter schools between the years 1999 and 2000. When viewing figure 1 it is important to remember that researchers suspect that the number of minority students enrolled in charter schools has increased since this time (Vanourek, 2005; PPSS, 2004).

Figure 1



As figure 1 demonstrates, charters are serving students with presumably low amounts of social capital, students who have historically been classified by group as 'at risk' or low performing. But are students in such categories demonstrating a strong interest in chartering, or is the movement serving only a small minority of these students?

### Demand for Charter Schooling

As indicated above, researchers believe that more and more racial minority students are enrolling in charter schools. This, combined with evidence that the number of charter schools has grown exponentially since the inception of the movement in 1991, makes it clear that charter schools are creating a primary associational tie with families and communities by 'bringing them in'.

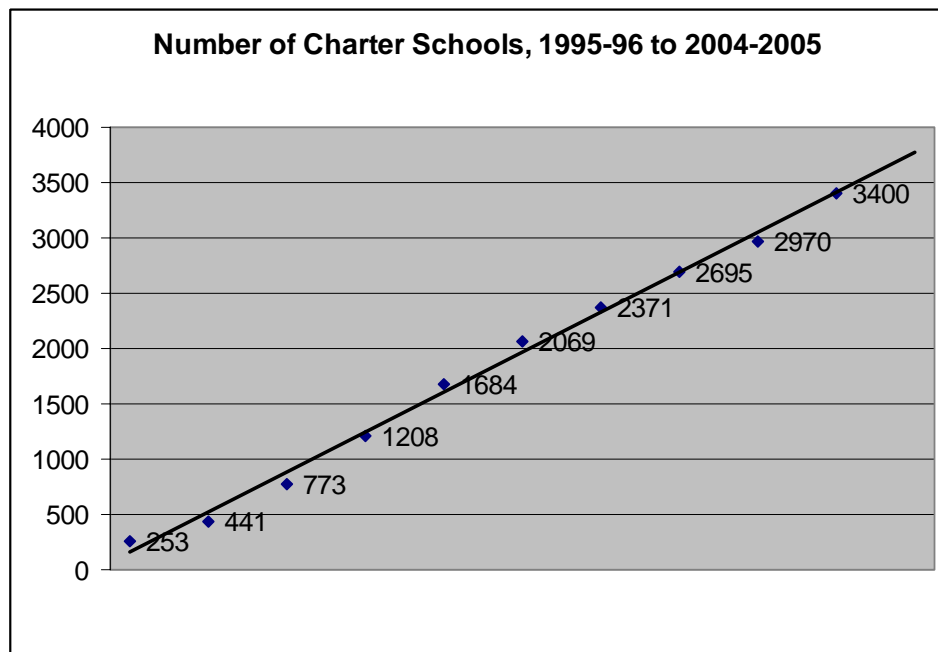
Because charter schools are schools of choice and because they are often started by community members, their growth is telling; indeed, charters would not exist if there were no demand for them. Al-

though charter schools can and do ‘recruit’<sup>7</sup> students, families that apply to charter schools are showing an important interest in their children’s education; they are going out of their way to choose schools, to fill out paperwork, and sometimes to read, evaluate, and sign contracts with schools.

Importantly, however, the acts of applying and making such a choice imply something that may work, in part, to undermine charter schooling’s claims for cultivating social capital; parents and families that go out of their way to choose charters may be pre-disposed to do so. Such parents may already have higher amounts of social capital than other members of their communities. This implication will be discussed in the following section of this work.

The following figure, adapted from Vanourek (2005, p. 5) illustrates how demand for charter schooling has grown nationwide in the past ten years. When considering this figure it is important to recognize that, due to more flexible charter laws (allowing for the establishment of larger numbers of schools), the movement has grown more rapidly in some states (especially Arizona, California, and Michigan) than in others.

Figure 2



So, though charters currently make up less than a quarter of all schools in the United States, it is clear that they are in demand. Indeed, the numbers in the chart above might be even higher if some state laws did not limit the amount of charters allowed to open within a year. Such demand for charters speaks to the choice that they give parents, especially parents who may be dissatisfied with traditional public schools but cannot afford private schools for their children. By providing this choice, charters create an important bond with communities, a bond that they seem able to maintain by making parents feel tied to their children’s schooling.

## Participation in Charter Schools

Measures that demonstrate whether parents feel tied to charter schools, or whether the initial bond that charters forge with parents is reciprocated, require careful consideration. Parent participation and involvement in charters are helpful indicators. It is necessary, however, to differentiate between these two things. Parent participation entails, for example, parent attendance at school events and the willingness of parents to be generally supportive to schools and therefore to children in schools. Parent involvement, on the other hand, entails something deeper. Being involved in a school means that an individual do-

<sup>7</sup> Many charters, for example, outline a mission to serve ‘underperforming students’. Because of this, they may specifically advertise to communities in which large numbers of such students reside.



nates valuable time and expertise in a way that enhances a school environment and allows a school to function properly. Therefore, to measure parent involvement it is necessary to consider the extent to which parents contribute to things such as curriculum and instruction, school governance, and the day-to-day workings of classrooms. The following figure, adapted from NCES (2003), gives an illustration of parent participation in charter schools in comparison to traditional public schools.

**Figure 3. Parent Participation (NCES 2003)**

<b>More than half of parents participated in:</b>	<b>Charter Schools</b>	<b>Traditional Public Schools</b>	<b>Total, All Schools</b>
Open house or back-to-school night	47.5%	26.1%	27.3%
Parent-teacher conferences	43.9%	35.6%	36.0%

Clearly, charter schools exhibit higher rates of parent participation in schooling than traditional public schools, and the rates at which they do so are significant. By the same token, charter school parents exhibit high rates of involvement in schooling, as the next figure illustrates.

**Figure 4. Parent Involvement (NCES 2003)**

<b>More than half of parents participated in:</b>	<b>Charter Schools</b>	<b>Traditional Public Schools</b>	<b>Total, All Schools</b>
Written-parent school contracts	43.1%	26.4%	27.3%
Instructional Issues	5.0%	5.5%	5.5%
Governance	4.3%	0.9%	1.1%
School Volunteers	14.2%	1.4%	2.1%

So while it seems that all schools could benefit from even higher rates of parent involvement, charter school parents, on the whole, appear to be significantly more involved than their counterparts. Interestingly, according to the data, though charter school parents do not report having a lot of say in instructional issues, they participate in written contracts and in school governance and volunteering at noticeably higher rates than parents of children in traditional public schools. In some sense, the lower rates of participation that charter school parents report in instructional issues could be evidence that charter school parents exhibit negative social capital at about the same rates as parents in traditional public schools. An example of negative social capital would be unduly influencing instructional matters in a school, especially in a way that might be advantageous to one's own child and disadvantageous to another person's child.

Moreover, given that charter school parents appear to be significantly more involved when it comes to governance and volunteering, it is extremely important to note the influence of contracts on charter schools and charter school parents. Charter school parents may feel forced to be involved with charter schools because of the contracts that they have signed (and that data indicate that charter school parents sign such contracts at relatively high rates). Especially if parents reside in a state where charter school contracts have the force of law (which a contract with a traditional public school may not have in the same state), the data on parent involvement and charter schooling could be biased. When trying to understand the relationship between charters and social capital, it is imperative to point out that parent involvement rates may signal the cultivation of social capital but that such cultivation could be 'forced'.

Nonetheless, the data show that, no matter how they are doing it, charter schools are forging reciprocal ties with the families and communities that they serve. Those ties are, undoubtedly, contributing to the growth of the movement. Whether those ties are strong and effective enough to be maintained, however, is another matter. To determine this, it is useful to examine data on parent and teacher satisfaction with charter schools.

## **Satisfaction with Charter Schools**

On the whole, charter school constituents report being overwhelmingly satisfied with their schools. Such data points to the idea that charter schools are, in some respects, probably doing a good job of maintaining the ties that they create. To understand just how satisfied charter students and parents are, it is useful to compare their feelings about specific components of schooling, and also to take into account experiences that many constituents have had with traditional public schools (as many charter

schools are so young, many students have transferred in to charters from traditional public options in their area). Figure 5 gives an overview of parental satisfaction rates with charter schools only.

**Figure 5. Overall Parental Satisfaction with Charter Schools (Vanourek et al., 1997)**

	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Uncertain	Not too satisfied	Quite dissatisfied
Opportunities for parent participation	75.9%	17.7%	5.1%	1.1%	0.3%
Class size	75.2%	19.2%	3.0%	2.3%	0.3%
Curriculum	71.6%	22.9%	3.4%	1.9%	0.2%
School Size	74.5%	18.6%	4.5%	1.9%	0.6%
Individual attention by teachers	70.8%	21.5%	5.2%	2.0%	0.5%
Academic standards	67.8%	22.4%	6.7%	2.5%	0.6%
Accessibility and openness	66.1%	23.6%	7.3%	2.2%	0.8%
How much school expects of parents	66.0%	23.2%	7.8%	2.2%	0.8%
Quality of teaching	56.6%	32.4%	8.1%	2.2%	0.8%

Given that an overwhelming majority of parents report being very satisfied to somewhat satisfied with their charter schools, it is safe to say that charters are, in general, working to maintain the ties that they create. As the table above indicates, constituents feel that charter schools are open and accessible; they don't appear to be shutting students out in the ways that Bourdieu (1973), Lightfoot (1978), and Ogbu (1974) describe. Importantly student and teacher satisfaction with charter schools mirrors that of parents.

When asked to rate their charter school teachers and their school work in comparison to other schools they had attended, students responded in a positive manner. When charter school teachers were asked about their work experiences, they exhibited high degrees of satisfaction as well. The two tables that follow give data on student and teacher satisfaction rates with charters (adapted from Vanourek et al. 1997):

**Figure 6. Student Satisfaction in Comparison to Previous School (Vanourek et al. 1997)**

	My Teachers			My Interest in School Work		
	Better	The Same	Worse	Better	The Same	Worse
All students	60.7%	27.0%	4.8%	49.9%	35.4	7.7%
Prior public school students	65.2%	24.7%	5.5%	52.4%	34.4%	8.4%
Prior private school students	48.5%	37.1%	6.6%	42.1%	43.7%	9.6%
Other	52.1%	32.3%	1.9%	46.5%	37.2%	4.4%

**Figure 7. Teacher Satisfaction with Charter Schools (Vanourek et al., 1997)**

	Very Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Uncertain	Not too Satisfied	Quite Dissatisfied
Educational Philosophy	61.6%	31.6%	4.3%	1.9%	0.6%
Teacher Decision-making	46.6%	31.9%	11.6%	7.4%	2.5%
Relations with the Community	21.3%	46.6%	23.5%	7.0%	1.6%
Parental involvement	25.8%	42.1%	9.7%	16.9%	4.5%
Administrators	53.6%	31.8%	7.1%	5.3%	2.2%

These tables show that, in all areas measured, charter students and teachers give their schools relatively high marks. Although teachers (who are sometimes paid less in charter schools than in traditional public schools (Glenn, 2005)) are more likely to be 'somewhat satisfied' than 'very satisfied' in terms of parent involvement and community relations, they seem to feel very connected to the educational

philosophies of charter schools and the people who run them. Also, with regard to teacher perceptions of parental involvement and community relations, the data could be indicators that teachers perceive that some parents are involved in charters because of contracts and that some community members, especially strong supporters of traditional public schools, do not always welcome charters.

Also worth noting in terms of constituent satisfaction is the differentiation between former private and public school students in terms of charter school ratings. The data show that private school students are more likely to rate their charter school as 'about the same' as a private school while public school students are more likely to rate their charter school as 'better' than traditional public schools. This could be an indicator that charter schools, given the greater flexibilities they are afforded under law, behave more like private schools in terms of the ethos and communities that they are able to create.

## **Charter Schools and Student Achievement**

All things considered, charter schools are doing an excellent job of cultivating social capital. Not only do they clearly forge primary associational ties with the communities they serve by giving parents a choice about where to school their children, they also elicit high amounts of parent participation and satisfaction, which indicates that they do an excellent job of establishing a two-way relationship with parents and community members and retaining that relational bond. Whether that bond translates to higher educational outcomes for students is the ultimate test to which charters should be put, however. For, as Epstein (1996, p. 219) suggests, if associational bonds are truly stored and maintained, students, parents, and entire communities should benefit from heightened student performance in schools.

Thus far, much of the available data on student performance in charter schools is mixed. One of the most recent published studies (NAEP, 2004) indicates that, on the whole, students in charter schools attain about the same achievement outcomes, controlling for race and social class, as students in traditional public schools. Another recent study (Hoxby, 2004) confirms these findings with regard to white and African-American students, but finds that charter schools produce higher educational outcomes for students that are Hispanic and poor. As such students are one of the specific segments that many charters seek to serve, these findings are promising evidence that some charters are doing an excellent job of helping parents to maintain and use the social ties that they create.

There is also evidence that charters are positively impacting communities in a way that increases overall social capital. In a 2004 study Greene (2005) finds that when traditional public schools operate in an area with a 'critical mass' of charter schools their overall test scores increase at statistically significant rate. These findings are especially impressive because they show that charters have the capacity to impact entire communities in addition to individual families.

Indeed, because the chartering movement is so young, it may be that charter schools need time to fulfil the promises they make for cultivating and maintaining social capital in a manner that dramatically affects student achievement. As charters that have been established in the last ten years overcome the 'start-up' issues that plague new schools and establish themselves with community members, they may produce even more promising results (Loveless, 2003). Nonetheless, the 'chartering bargain' to which all charter schools are subject ensures that charters which fail to cultivate some degree of social capital and produce disappointing educational outcomes for students will be shut down.

## **Implications of the Research and the Future of Chartering**

Because of the overwhelmingly positive response they receive from students, parents, and community members, states should continue to support charter schools legislatively and to allow the movement to flourish. However, to ensure further success and fair outcomes for all constituents, charter schools should consider two important things that the data discussed in this paper reveal: the issues of selection bias and contracting.

While the school choice option that charter schooling presents is integral to the movement and likely accounts for much of its success, it could be that, by requiring that parents make a choice about education, charters are flourishing because of selection bias. That is they are 'selecting out' those families that they could most usefully serve. Such families likely have amounts of social capital so low that they are completely alienated from schools and the 'dominant culture' and do not know how or are not inclined to make a choice about education. Though taking the choice component out of chartering is not an op-

tion because it would fundamentally change the reform, charters could ameliorate the problem of selection bias by more aggressively recruiting parents who have been identifiably alienated from public schools and by making their application processes streamlined and easy to understand. In this vein, it is also important for charter schools to be constantly aware that just because a majority of their students come from communities with low amounts of social capital, some families within those communities will be predisposed to have much higher or much lower amounts of social capital than the average.

Additionally, charters should reconsider the use of some school/parent contracts, as contracts can negatively reflect upon schools and the ways in which they cultivate social capital. Especially in states where contracts have the force of law, charters could be further shutting out parents with low amounts of social capital, parents who may be unwilling or unable to donate their time to schools because of work or other matters. In this sense, some charters are exhibiting exactly the same behaviors that they claim to combat. Though it may seriously alter some of the data on chartering, to truly live up to the claims that the charter movement makes, charter schools would be well-served to draft and enforce contracts very carefully. Indeed, it might be very useful for charters to exhibit extreme sensitivity toward impoverished or otherwise limited parents who desire to forge associational ties with a school but do not have time to donate.

In addition to these obstacles, charters face another, larger, impediment to their continued growth and effectiveness. New federal legislation, in the form of the No Child Left Behind Act, runs the risk of hampering the chartering movement. Because No Child Left Behind requires that all charter schools in the country adhere to state-designed curricula and state-mandated standardized tests, many charters are finding that they are less able to innovate in terms of curriculum and assessment (Fusarelli, 2004). This is problematic because the ability to provide innovative curricula is a primary tenet of the charter movement. Because parents and community members may be less attracted to charters that do not offer innovative curricula, they may also be less inclined to forge associational ties with charter schools. Unless such families are already exhibiting strong associational tendencies with the traditional public schools that their children attend, No Child Left Behind could be putting many communities at a significant disadvantage. Because of this, charter advocates should closely watch how schools are affected by the new law as it reaches full implementation.

As the United States moves into a new century of schooling, it will be important and exciting to watch the chartering movement as it continues to develop and, hopefully, to flourish. In that it is clearly living up to some of its promises to increase social capital; it is possible that chartering could be one answer to some of the problems originally posed in the 1966 Coleman Report. Indeed, should this prove to be the case, then history would likely look to charter schooling, along with its pre-cursors, as the most important and effective educational reforms of the twentieth-century. A title that would not only be an honour, but that would also indicate an important tide change in American education.

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