

CHARTER SCHOOL STAKEHOLDERS:

Passion, Commitment and Outcomes

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School Reform Strategies

An interdisciplinary perspective

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ABSTRACT

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America will never be a great country without great schools. The United States now ranks 48th in the world in math and science, and has been dropping steadily for the past 10 years, all under the watchful eye of “No Child Left Behind”. Thus the charter school movement, while both political and ideological, is about the future of our country.

Charter schools have shaken up the traditional public education system, not merely with their change in governance, but with a laser focus on student outcomes, exercising their freedom to adjust resources and intention based on what children need, and measuring school success based on the valued added. While each is unique in design, charters share many characteristics. In general, they value members of their learning community, particularly students, parents and teachers; set high expectations; establish and maintain a school culture that values learning; increase learning time; focus on staff ownership of student achievement, and; exercise autonomous governance.

Merely changing the governance of the school by issuing a charter will not guarantee improved achievement, however we have documented example after example of individual charter schools succeeding where traditional public schools have failed. The charter school movement holds a great deal of hope for disenfranchised parents, students and teachers. We should be eager to build on their successes.

CHARTER SCHOOL STAKEHOLDERS: *Passion, Commitment and Outcomes*

The Blind Men and the Elephant

by John Godfrey Saxe (1816-1887)

It was six men of Indostan, to learning much inclined, who went to see the Elephant (though all of them were blind), that each by observation might satisfy his mind.

The First approached the Elephant, and happening to fall, against his broad and sturdy side, at once began to bawl: "God bless me! But the Elephant is very like a wall!"

The Second, feeling of the tusk, Cried, "Ho! What have we here. So very round and smooth and sharp? To me 'tis mighty clear. This wonder of an Elephant is very like a spear!"

The Third approached the animal, and happening to take, the squirming trunk within his hands, thus boldly up and spake: "I see," quoth he, "the Elephant, is very like a snake!"

The Fourth reached out an eager hand, and felt about the knee. "What most this wondrous beast is like, is mighty plain," quoth he; " 'Tis clear enough the Elephant is very like a tree!"

The Fifth, who chanced to touch the ear, said: "E'en the blindest man can tell what this resembles most; deny the fact who can. This marvel of an Elephant is very like a fan!"

The Sixth no sooner had begun about the beast to grope, than, seizing on the swinging tail that fell within his scope, "I see," quoth he, "the Elephant is very like a rope!"

And so these men of Indostan disputed loud and long, each in his own opinion, exceeding stiff and strong, though each was partly in the right, and all were in the wrong!

Moral:

So oft in theologic wars, the disputants, I ween, rail on in utter ignorance of what each other mean, and prate about an Elephant not one of them has actually seen!

INTRODUCTION

The very first charter school in the United States opened its doors in 1992, and today, 5,453 charter schools serve the families of more than 1.7 million American students. Charters have taken root in 39 states and the District of Columbia, providing parents and students with options to their traditionally assigned public schools (Center for Education Reform, 2010). As the charter school movement took shape in the 1990's, proponents predicted that choice and competition would lead to the innovation, energy, and commitment needed to improve achievement and narrow educational gaps. In hindsight, even the most devout advocate must admit that charter school outcomes haven fallen short of initial

predictions, distributed along a continuum from successful to failing. According to Henig (2010), those outcomes depend on a long list of factors, including the type of charter school, the prevailing charter school laws, and existing support mechanisms, including but not limited to funding and financing opportunities (Henig, 2010).

Advocates frame charter schools as successful experiments from which the broader educational system can learn. Opponents decry their drain on traditional public school funding and enrollment. Each side cites competing statistics to support their claims. However, there are some disturbing statistics that we all agree upon, illustrating how dire the problems with American public education have become:

- Among thirty developed countries, the US ranks twenty-fifth in math and twenty-first in science. When comparing the top five percent of students, the US ranked last.
- Barely half of African-American and Latino students graduate from high school.
- Since 1971, US education spending has more than doubled yet reading and math scores have remained flat (Weber, 2010).

What is also undeniable is that more than four decades after the famous *Coleman Report* (1966), nearly three decades since *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (1983), and after nearly a decade of *No Child Left Behind*, in spite of divisive debates, finger-pointing, dissension, disagreement, disillusionment, and disenfranchisement, as well as countless attempts to improve the overall quality of public education, many parents and policy makers now look to charter schools, private schools, choice/voucher schools, or home schooling, rather than our traditional assigned public schools, to provide the world class education our children need and deserve.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I must acknowledge that I am the founder and current executive director of a charter school in Milwaukee, WI, the Central City Cyberschool. As such, I tend to be biased in support of the charter school movement. Try as I might to be objective, I have dedicated more than a decade to this endeavor and I fully admit that this passion clouds my judgment. Nevertheless, I am also dedicated to improving teaching and learning for all children and therefore recognize the need to closely examine charters, warts and all. I further recognize that much like the blind men and the elephant, advocates and critics of charter schools alike rail on about what charters are and are not, and could or could not be, often “in utter ignorance of what each other mean.” While all the time, the realities of public education in America and the futures of our nation’s children hang in the balance. We see what we want to see, or feel what we want to believe, and often as a result, we are all “in the wrong”. Thoughtful reflection on what is and what could be is long overdue.

THE CHARTER SCHOOL IDEA

Charter schools are public schools: publically funded; chartered by public authorities; and serving the public. Charter schools are as unique as the policies that created them, varying significantly from state to state, and often within states. As originally conceived, charter schools are a policy experiment, focused on changing the fundamental governance and management structure of schooling, providing options for families, encouraging educator creativity, and holding schools accountable for student learning. These educational advantages were posited to benefit not only the children who attended these charter schools, but to improve learning opportunities for all children through increased competition for enrollment funds. The conventional argument is that charters will benefit students who remain in their assigned public schools by providing incentives to those traditional school districts to strive to better serve their

students in a climate of competition for public education dollars. Opponents argue that charters harm those who remain in their assigned schools by draining much needed funding from the district. The battle cry of most district superintendents is that charters are taking their money, as if the money belongs to the district of residence and not to the people who pay the taxes. We often hear that charters drain money from public schools, ignoring the fact that charters ARE public schools. Meanwhile charter advocates argue that school dollars should follow the student.

Others see educational choice is a civil right. And yes, schools play an important role in making our society more fair. School choice advocates argue that poor and blue-collar parents should have the same options that middle- and upper-class parents have always had – to exercise the option of removing their children from their assigned underperforming public school, and enroll them in a tuition-based private school. Prior to school choice it was a right that could only be exercised by those with financial means to pay for private schooling. Charter options furthered equity of access, guaranteeing to disadvantaged families the same educational options available to middle- and upper-class families, without the burden of tuition costs (Hastings & Weinstein, 2008).

A model charter school strategy was offered up by Joe Nathan (1966), one of the charter school movement's earliest, most articulate, and best informed

advocates. It outlined:

- 1) Teachers, parents, and other community members can create new schools or convert existing schools by authority of a charter granted by an authorized sponsor.
- 2) Charter schools are responsible for improved student achievement.
- 3) In return for accountability for specific results, the state grants an up-front waiver of virtually all rules and regulations governing public schools.
- 4) The state authorizes more than one organization to start and operate a charter public school in the community.
- 5) The organizers, usually teachers, parents, or other community members, can approach either a local board or some other public body, to be the school sponsor.
- 6) The charter school is a school of choice.
- 7) The charter school is a discrete legal entity.
- 8) The full per-pupil allocation should move with the student to the charter school.
- 9) Participating teachers should be given support to try new opportunities by having their status protected.

To date, these fundamental tenants remain.

ACCOUNTABILITY

In this NCLB environment students' performance on standardized tests and a school's record on making AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) drives evaluation on school effectiveness. Many of the early studies on charter schools over- or under-estimated the consequences for children who attended charter schools due largely to the shallowness of outcome measures used. Moreover, since study results on the effectiveness of charter schools as compared to their traditional public school counterparts vary widely, the effectiveness of charter

schools remains an open question. However there is enough evidence to suggest that the challenges of developing and sustaining charter school reforms are worthy of pursuit (Berends, et al., 2008).

While it is too early to draw firm conclusions on the systematic effects of charters (Hoxby, 2003; Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010), the effects of competition and innovation on student achievement outcomes have been quite small, when found (Weitzel and Lubienski, 2010). Although few studies on charter school effectiveness to date use convincing value-added or experimental methods, the sample is growing. The results are mixed. There are numerous examples of charter schools that outperform traditional public schools, and others that underperform. By and large, positive effects are somewhat more common than negative effects. Most typically charter schools outperform traditional public schools in elementary reading and middle school math, while they underperform in high school math. Overall, results are certainly promising (Buckley & Schneider, 2007).

Gary Miron et al., (2008) attempted to synthesize the evidence across 40 studies. Results from their work suggest that on average, students in charter schools do not perform significantly higher than those in traditional public schools for a number of reasons: Lack of effective oversight and insufficient accountability; insufficient autonomy; insufficient funding; privatization and pursuit of profits; strong and effective lobbying and advocacy groups; high attrition of teachers and administrators; growth in school and class size; and rapid growth of reforms.

In their study of charter schools, Buckley and Schneider (2007) found that on average charter schools do no harm, and in many areas have the potential to do good, including building social capital, increasing customer satisfaction, and enhancing the civic skills of children. Other outcomes suggest that attending a

charter school results in higher educational attainment, fewer disciplinary infractions, and higher attendance rates (Zimmer, et al., 2009; Betts, 2010).

In general results suggest that while charter schools may not be the silver bullet for school improvement, it is possible that the real effects that charters are having on educational outcomes have not yet been captured in studies to date (Zimmer & Buddin, 2008, 163-193). While test scores are important, direct measures of long-term outcomes may prove more valuable. Research suggests that charter high school students stay in school longer and are more likely to graduate and enter college. Furthermore, charters offer safer and more serene environments whose full effects might only be evident in the long run, improving persistence in school, avoidance of course failures, and taking more rigorous courses (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010).

Charter schools will likely play an increasingly important role in public education since the NCLB accountability provisions outlined that underperforming schools must be restructured from a menu of options that include converting to charter school status (Betts & Hill, 2010, 203-214). Further, President Obama has expressed support for charter schools, speaking to the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, March 2009:

One of the places where much of that innovation occurs is in our most effective charter schools. And these are public schools, founded by parents, teachers, and civic or community organizations with broad leeway to innovate – schools I supported as a state legislator and a United States Senator. But right now, there are many caps on how many charter schools are allowed in some states, no matter how well they’re preparing our students. That isn’t good for our children, our economy, or our country. Of course, any expansion of charter schools must not result in the spread of mediocrity, but in the advancement of excellence. And that will require states adopting both a rigorous selection and review process to ensure that charter school’s autonomy is coupled with greater accountability – as well as a strategy, like the one in Chicago, to close charter schools that are not working. Provided this greater accountability, I call on states to reform their charter rules, lift caps on the number of allowable charter schools, wherever such caps are in place (Obama 2009).

CONCLUSION

“Charter schools, or something very much like them are here to stay. This is so, not because charter schools have always been proven superior to other forms of public school or because proponents have always won the fights [legislative, fiscal]. . . They haven’t. However, charter schools offer something that the public school systems, parents, and teachers need: a way to experiment with alternative ways of teaching, of motivating students, of organizing schools, of using technology, and of employing teachers” (Betts & Hill, 2010, p.2).

While some outstanding examples of effective schools can be found in the charter school movement, based on the existing body of research after nearly 20 years of operation and expansion, the charter school experiment has perhaps fallen short of the optimistic predictions and initial expectations of advocates (Ravitch, 2009). However, in spite of research results to date, for parents and policy makers charter schools continue to represent a powerful idea. Their rapid expansion, their popularity with parents and legislators, testifies to the compelling nature of the idea, and the demand for alternatives to traditional, assigned public schools and tuition-charging private schools. Furthermore, the charter school movement exhibits many of the characteristics of sustainable reforms, promising accountability results that can be monitored. Thus charters will likely become a permanent fixture of our American educational system (Weitzel & Lubienski, 2010).

In the short term, without definitive research findings, issues of how charter schools affect achievement will continue to be debated. However, on restructuring public education – charters might set a new pattern for public education, leading to fundamental changes in missions and functions of districts, in an era of continuous improvement, forcing them to eliminate their low performing schools and open more promising ones.

Although advocates assumed that parents would seek out the highest performing schools for their children using empirical measures of school quality, those

working in charter schools are painfully aware that parents make their choices for a variety of reasons, many having absolutely nothing to do with school effectiveness, such as location, availability of transportation, uniform policy, hours of operation, and availability of after-school programming or child care. For the charter school movement to be effective, quality information on student learning outcomes and innovation must be available for parents considering alternatives (Cookson, 1994).

For charter advocates, the ultimate challenge is to create charter schools worth choosing, and that are open to all children (Darling-Hammond & Montgomery, 2008). To make that happen, proponents, opponents, and researchers of the charter school movement would be wise to turn down the rhetoric and work to identify the particular programs and practices that have demonstrated increased achievement and accountability. Meanwhile parents and authorizers must hold charter schools and traditional public schools accountable using evidence about what works and for whom.

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