

Leveraging Quality Charters

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Charter public schools serve a variety of roles in education reform: innovation labs, havens from failing traditional schools; and competitors for public resources. Education leaders have the opportunity to use high quality charter schooling to innovate not only in developing transformative schools but, more importantly, in creating great public education systems.

Intent of the laws

Starting twenty years ago, legislators and governors pushed through charter laws specifically designed to spur innovation by empowering parents and educators to create new forms of high quality educational programs. In California, the second state (after Minnesota) to adopt charter school legislation, the intent was laid out explicitly:

- Improve pupil learning.
- Increase learning opportunities for all pupils, with special emphasis on expanded learning opportunities for pupils who are identified as academically low achieving.
- Encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods.
- Create new professional opportunities for teachers, including the opportunity to be responsible for the student-learning program at the school site.
- Provide parents and pupils with expanded choices in the types of educational opportunities that are available within the public school system.
- Hold schools established under this part accountable for meeting measureable pupil outcomes and provide the schools with a method to change from rule-based to performance-based accountability systems.
- Provide vigorous competition within the public school system to stimulate continual improvements in all public schools.

Since then, state after state has enacted charter legislation, citing similar reasons for their actions. In both expected and unexpected ways and to varying degrees, the charter school movement has lived up to these intentions across the nation.

When it comes to education reform, charter public schools play three important roles outlined below.

Innovation labs

From the start, charter school leaders have embraced innovation. In some cases, the new practices have been truly novel; in other cases, they merely have executed well on existing promising practices. Innovations have covered every area of school operations from curriculum and instruction, to the structure of the school day or year, to personnel practices and parent engagement. Some of the earliest experiments involved governance—engaging educators deeply in the development and ongoing management of learning communities. These charter-led and/or charter-proven practices have made their way into traditional public school efforts, although rarely in a collaborative, systematic way.

In the most profound innovation of all, the development of excellence-focused school cultures in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, traditional public schools have generally not been able to replicate the success of high quality charter schools.

Havens from failing schools

Particularly in urban and rural areas, charter schools have sprung up as a parental reaction to very low performing traditional public schools perceived of as being unsafe. When a fourth grader can't read, parents don't have time for ten years of incremental change. When the educators on a school site have negative expectations for their children, parents want solutions immediately. They vote with their

feet, even when that vote means creating a school themselves to rescue their children. This has led some education leaders from the traditional institutions to give lip service to charter public schools as a “necessary relief valve” until the system changes and the traditional schools improve.

Competitors for public resources

As the traditional public school systems lose their students to charters, and the dollars follow the students, some have reacted by trying to copy charter innovations—requiring uniforms, creating schools with “charter-like” autonomy, involving parents in quasi-meaningful decision making, or allowing teachers to create new programs. However, there is little evidence that a “tipping point,” the moment when traditional public schools get better because a certain percentage (10%, 20%, 90%?) of their students have moved to charter public schools, has proven elusive.

It now is fair to ask whether or not a former monopoly has the capacity to compete on the basis of student achievement or whether the calcified structures that bind that system simply keep even the most talented educators with the best of intentions and near boundless energy from success. Those educators have pleaded, “If charters just had to follow the rules we have, then it would be fair.” But that is exactly backwards. If traditional school systems would accept the autonomy-for-accountability bargain of charter laws, then it would be fair.

Transformation by leveraging quality charters

What if the “tipping point” were actually the moment that a new generation of education leaders embraced charter schooling as a tool for change AND a solution providing long-term continuous improvement? Assume for a moment that the personnel and contracting dollars that flow through the educational system to political parties and entrenched institutions were not the real issue we face in education reform. What if the leaders of public education nationally embraced the idea that schools should be measured by student success not bureaucratic compliance? What could be? (And, what is starting to come into view in a few instances?)

We would recognize that traditional schooling has not failed so much as it has simply become obsolete as our world has changed. Academically unsuccessful schools could be replaced by start-up and replication schools with the capacity to build new school cultures and practices without the burden of “because it has always been done that way” requirements. They could choose to keep what works, discard what doesn’t, and invent new solutions. Every school would not have to be a “comprehensive” school. Educators could specialize and personalize in order to reach every student uniquely. New technologies could be integrated more readily into the instructional programs and school operations. Parents, students and teachers could choose from among a vastly larger number of high quality educational choices—to find the right fit to flourish. To reach this new reality, big changes are needed, especially in big urban school districts.

1. *Governance, not management*

Governance and management of education (schools and other learning environments) must be separated. The important role of public accountability needs to be freed from the conflicts of interest inherent in our current system.

2. *Embracing chartering as a vital tool*

Remove the barriers to the development of high quality charter schools by decreasing the red tape, providing access to start-up capital, and repurposing facilities. If the money invested in school turn-around over the past ten years had been invested in the creation of new high quality replacement schools instead, we would have more high performing schools today.

3. *Accountability (un-re-regulation and release from old school regulations)*

Charter schools started with very little compliance-oriented regulations. Over time, as individual charter schools have made mistakes, the entire body of charter schools has faced re-regulation designed to make sure those individual mistakes cannot happen again. The right policy choice is usually NOT to re-regulate, but to punish offenders. Re-regulation is simply the slow

reinvention of the rule-based, not outcomes-based, system none of us wants.

Some have criticized the charter public schools movement as not being innovative enough. Many of the same criticisms currently are being leveled at the online and blended learning schools now (charter or not). The main constraint in both cases is an addiction to Old School regulations requiring, for example, seat-time, supervision ratios, and expenditure mandates. A genuine focus on student outcomes, diversely measured, would encourage more innovative improvements.

4. *Rich information about choices*

Parents making choices about where to send their children to school have very little to go on right now. Savvy parents can look up test scores, but we know test scores don't tell the whole story. Beyond information about the school programs, the processes for admission are complex, Byzantine and opaque. A public school system with diverse options requires more access to information for parents and all stakeholders engaged in education.

5. *Support for renegades*

Inside of every education bureaucracy, internal innovators strive to create great learning environments despite the barriers of the existing system. Over time, many of these educators have "left" to start charter schools in a community that embraces education entrepreneurship. A new education system would cultivate and embrace that energy and talent while providing the operational support these innovators often need to succeed.

6. *Capacity development*

This next education generation requires initiative, training and informed creativity. The education leadership world has shifted from requiring a workforce made up predominantly of rule keepers/followers to one of leaders with specialized skills and the ability to integrate complex knowledge

spanning instruction, technology, communication and management. In addition to new talent development strategies, the information technology systems to support this next generation will be vital to their success.

Our commitment to an old system of public education, despite all evidence of its obsolescence, is irrational and blocking our nation from success. Public frustration over the state of education has made expansion of charter schooling inevitable. Embracing high quality charter schools as critical tools to transformation not only is smart, done right it will work.