

Education by Charter: The New Neighborhood Schools

by Jeanne Allen

Jeanne Allen is President of The Center for Education Reform, a national, independent, non-profit advocacy organization founded in 1993 to provide support and guidance to parents and teachers, community and civic groups, policymakers and grassroots leaders, and all who are working to bring fundamental reforms to their schools.

“...in too many instances, that good idea has been anything but good in practice.” Sandra Feldman, President, American Federation of Teachers (AFT), AFT Convention Keynote Address July 3, 2000.

“...I would encourage policy makers not to rush out and expand charter schools...” Anne Bryant, Executive Director, National School Boards Association (NSBA), November 8, 2000.

Are charter schools part of a bold education agenda? From the words emanating from the mouths of the establishment, one would think this was a train out of control.

Feldman’s remarks were the precursor to her charge to “take back” the charter idea, which requires following a whole set of conditions that would disqualify most of the nation’s 2,000 charter schools from fitting into the AFT box.

Likewise, the National Education Association (NEA) is loving charter schools to death. The damning praise includes statements like “charter school laws without adequate accountability measures open the door to gross abuses that hurt students.”

School boards president Bryant says that “the NSBA recognizes the value of charter schools ... but the fact [sic] is, there is little evidence to suggest that charter schools are living up to the promise offered by early supporters.”

While some see charter schools as a moderate, middle-of-the-road reform, observers should note that the education establishment never actively fights anything that does not fundamentally alter the existing system. While charter schools enjoy diverse support, they radically transform the current public education system. They can alleviate decades-old failure in some urban centers, provide new opportunities to those who have never had them and reengage parents and teachers in building schools that look more like the schools they've always had in mind for their children.

What Are Charter Schools?

Charter schools are independent public schools. They operate outside the educational bureaucracy that tends to stifle innovation in traditional public schools. Charters may not pick and choose their students, but they do have the autonomy to pick and choose programs and approaches, and they have the accountability that have allowed most private institutions to provide excellent education to their customers.

Charter schools are judged by how well they educate children in a safe and responsible environment, not by whether they comply with bureaucratic district and state regulations. Charter operators set academic and operational goals, and are judged on how well they meet the goals. If they fail, they are closed.

Almost anyone interested in creating a better educational opportunity for children can start a charter school. Parents, teachers, community groups and organizations have already started such schools in communities across the nation, and the schools are diverse — from specialized to “back-to-basics” approaches. Students choose to attend and teachers choose to teach at charter schools. More than 2,000 charter schools now operate in 34 states and serve more than 500,000 children. Nearly 70 percent of charter schools have a waiting list equal to their enrollment.

Charter School Laws

Thirty-six states and the District of Columbia have laws permitting the establishment of charter schools but the laws vary greatly. The Center for Education Reform has evaluated the likelihood that each law will actually produce charter schools.¹ This national ranking is based on 10 major factors in the law that can either encourage or discourage charter schools from opening. The strength of a law depends largely on whether or not the state allows for a high number of charters and whether a group can go to more than one authorizer for a charter. Does the law allow but not mandate collective bargaining? Finally, a strong law waives most rules and regulations, and charters operate as their own independent school districts, with money allocated per pupil flowing directly from the state to the charter school. Schools operating under those conditions are most likely to thrive, unfettered from the myriad of agencies and attitudes that hinder many traditional public schools. Just writing a good law does not necessarily assure great schools, and great schools are not always found in states with good laws. However, most are.

The key to fostering great charter schools is for each state to establish strong laws that act as a welcome mat.

Federal lawmakers can help by supporting changes in programs that now discriminate against charter schools. An example is Title I funding, which the district is expected to distribute to all public schools that serve disadvantaged youth. Not only is including charter schools a new way of thinking for most district administrators, it is often an unwelcome one. Some charter schools have struggled for years before getting their fair share of funding, and some have yet to see it.

Federal funds that go exclusively to traditional school districts send a signal to charters that they are inferior second cousins. There is grow-

ing bipartisan support to alleviate this burden without creating special funding sources to which charters become addicted. The new administration in Washington may be able to unlock some natural bureaucratic resistance to allowing money to follow children. Additionally, creating incentives for private and public institutions to solve the facilities crisis for charter schools is a high priority for charter advocates and one that is likely to see light in this Congress.

The New Neighborhood School

When the Greater Brunswick Charter School was conceived by left-leaning, pro-public education parents, no one anticipated the firestorm it would create. The schools in this mid-New Jersey region were too large, impersonal and not child-centered, the founders argued. So their charter school would introduce a personal learning environment, with an emphasis on civility, community, intellectual development and civic responsibility.

New Jersey's law gives the Commissioner of Education sole chartering authority. Upon being approved, the Greater Brunswick Charter incurred the wrath of several area school boards, most sharply that which governs the schools in Highland Park.

For more than three years, and throughout the opening and growth of this school, the Highland Park Board of Education fought and berated the charter school. The Highland Park representatives testified at hearings and distributed scathing literature. The Highland Park coalition argued that regional charters weren't permitted, that the money for charters represents an unfunded state mandate and shouldn't come from local districts and that the charter law was unconstitutional because the local district had no say in establishing the school.

The parents were shocked and their passion for public schooling was

squashed. “How could anyone that cared about children expect one system to fit all? Why the fight?” they asked.

The answer became clear through several levels of court battles and finally with the state Supreme Court ruling that the Greater Brunswick Charter School had every right to exist. The issue was not policy, but power. As late as November, the Highland Park coalition was recruiting allies to “confront the problems created by charter schools!”

Meanwhile, the charter is healthy but smaller than it should be, and its leaders are more cautious. The same steps have been repeated hundreds of times over and have led to more than a dozen lawsuits reaching state supreme courts. Charter school opponents have also brought local nuisance suits over issues such as zoning, racial balance, money and even whether or not a charter can exist in a hall that is shared by an Italian men’s club.

The birth of the new neighborhood school is a difficult and slow process. The opponents have ensured the slowing of the birth rate, but the participants are fertile, frustrated and armed with a powerful idea.

Against what most statisticians consider enormous odds, the research reveals that charter schools are creating diverse, healthy and plentiful learning opportunities for more children. Of the 53 national, regional and state research studies done exploring charter schools, only three have found negative effects. The rest have found positive factors, achievements recorded, satisfaction, waiting lists healthy, voluntary integration.

While better student achievement is the goal of all charter schools, their relative newness and variations from state to state in assessing schools have made it difficult to draw any universal conclusions. But many schools have already shown demonstrable success and others

are beginning to measure progress from year to year. The Charter School of Wilmington achieved the highest average SAT scores of any secondary school in Delaware. The Police Athletic League (PAL) Charter Middle School in Florida has made among the highest gains of any school in the state since it opened in 1997. Of the 25 charter schools whose students took the Colorado Student Assessment Program test in 1999, those in 19 of the schools scored higher than pupils in comparable district schools.

Much of the research documents a growing ripple effect among the traditional schools that had feared the existence of charter schools. From enabling dedicated and gifted teachers to launch their own schools, to changing the perspectives of traditional public school administrators, charter schools are accelerating system wide school improvement.

The superintendent of schools in Capistrano, Calif., was so impressed by charters that he asked the legislature for permission to become a charter district. He said it would “bring a new spirit of entrepreneurship to the district. If we eliminate busywork and red tape, teachers and principals will be able to function better and focus more on teaching and learning.” A former Detroit, Mich. superintendent said “charter schools are helping us move in the right direction.” The troubled Patterson, N.J., district created seven specialized academies after seeing hundreds of children drawn to several new charter schools away from the district.

Dynamic, Proud, Passionate and Visionary

When it comes to charter schools and their leaders, these words say it all.

Peter Morcombe started Financial Reform for Excellence in

Education (FREE) in North Carolina, and was among the first to propose and start a charter school. A successful business leader, Morcombe faced countless obstacles but succeeded in opening five successful charter schools.

Boston's City on a Hill founder Sarah Kass left the less risky classroom to start her school for teenagers, a widely acclaimed institution. As she recalls "starting a charter school meant finding a building, purchasing books, supplies ... obtaining insurance, finding the resources for physical education, food service, counseling and art ... arranging transportation and doing it within public bidding laws."

Hoping to join their ranks are people like Nancy Hamilton in Laramie, Wyo., and Patricia Earle in Keswick, Va. They are in states with weak laws, but are connecting with parents statewide who share their frustrations. Their ranks represent almost as many grassroots groups as there are charters now in existence.

These individuals imagine a public education system that provides a wide variety of learning opportunities, giving parents access not only to their traditional school but to other choices as well.

This is exactly the world that the education Blob imagines, too. The Blob knows that the more choice people have, the more they'll want.

Parents of today who are devoted to good public schools want nothing more than to have a strong public school at their disposal. Like Leslie Mansfield of Frederick, Md., they'd rather not have the headache of having to choose an alternative. But the inadequacies of education prompted Leslie to look more closely at her district. She found others who were concerned and proposed to the district a new idea for a school. She was rebuffed, learned the hard way that most school boards do not want to take risks and is now engaged in a battle

to bring the charter reform to her state. The case is urgent. Mansfield learned not halfway into the school year that her daughter had finished the Kindergarten curriculum. As she feared, her assigned school set low standards and her daughter's first school experience has been marked not by challenge and excitement but by boredom.

What Parents Want: A Bold Agenda for Reform

This is the position in which an increasing number of parents find themselves. And they are not unlike the children of the 1960s, whose Question Authority motto is gaining currency. These are also the attitudes driving the risk-takers that make up the charter pool. "Establishment be damned," they say. "Let us run the schools."

As *Time* magazine proclaimed in 1996, the charter movement is a grassroots revolt. They are an important part of the reform menu that includes greater choices for children, high standards and accountability, teaching and curriculum reform.

Maryland is one of 14 states that do not permit charter schools. Leaders among those states have tried repeatedly to enact laws — and once again coalitions are being built from Indiana to Washington state. Without intensive pressure from below, their efforts will not bear fruit. However, the recognition of what parents want, together with pressure at the national level, can make a difference.

The new administration can spur states to adopt charter school legislation, making it a national priority. Washington must also ensure that policies affecting traditional K–12 schools do not impose additional mandates on charters. The new president must also ensure that federal grant monies for new and model charter schools is not misdirected by state and federal rule makers. The proclivity of bureaucrats to meddle — even in reasonably conservative administrations — is

well documented. With charters a priority at the presidential level, such interference is less likely.

Finally, the new president must trumpet, embrace and showcase the work of leaders whose challenges to the status quo have led to better educational opportunities for millions of children. Doing so will not only help the charter movement but will also put the education establishment on notice of more changes to come.

Charter schools are not a fad or experiment. They are a wholesale reform that has already begun to reinvigorate public education in this country. The president who champions good schools for all children can publicize the power of this reform and push state leaders to be its guardians.
