

Charter Schools: Passing or Failing

CHARTER SCHOOLS: PASSING OR FAILING? Charter Schools: Passing or Failing

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Abstract This study's objective was to research a certain type of "choice" school that operates under a performance contract which details specifics as the school's mission, program, goals, demographics of the students served, methods of assessment, and ways to assess success. Such educational arrangements are known as charter schools, which are publicly funded schools that have greater accountability for academic assessment and fiscal practices, while receiving more independence and experiencing fewer regulations than traditional public schools. Research shows that there is a fair amount of success with this type of contractual education, and that a fair amount of issues accompany the success, such as fluctuating changes in student performance that are immeasurable by test scores. Another issue with the contractual educational facilities that is heating up in recent months is the conflict that arises between this type of learning environment versus the traditional public school system. This paper examines differing authorities in an attempt to determine whether charter schools are achieving their intended missions, or falling short of their goals — the verdict of this author's research is that the structure is conducive to innovative practices, although the overall end results demonstrated by charter schools does not measure up to their tangible and intangible costs.

Charter Schools: Passing or Failing This study into the report card of charter schools in the United States will attempt to decide whether this mode of education is more or less successful in the quest of education. The unique research covered in this study represents the most recent journal articles that are related to these public schools that are operated independently of the local school board. Charter schools being unique in that they differ in various degrees from the curriculum and educational philosophy of other schools in the same system, they can also take the form of experimental public schools for mainly primary, but some secondary, education. Charter schools do not charge tuition and frequently have lottery based admissions. They, therefore, provide an alternative to public schools, oftentimes offering a curriculum that specializes in a certain field-- e.g. arts, mathematics, etc. Others simply seek to provide a better and more efficient general education than nearby public schools. Public school funding in the United States is not a product of intelligent design. Funding programs have grown willy-nilly based on political entrepreneurship, interest group pressure, and intergovernmental competition. Consequently, now that Americans feel the need to educate all children to high standards, no one knows for sure how money is used or how it might be used more effectively (Hill, 2008). These institutions are also exclusive in that some are created and organized by teachers and or parents and or community leaders, in a totally autonomous school environment, while others are state-run charters that are unaffiliated with local school districts and founded by non-profits such as universities and government entities that may appear in clusters across a geographic area. The term "charter" possibly originated in the 1970s when Ray Budde, a New England university professor, suggested that small groups of teachers be given contracts or "charters" by their local school boards to discover new approaches to education. Albert Shanker, former president of the American Federation of Teachers, then publicized the idea, suggesting that local boards could charter an entire school with union and teacher approval. One of the first charter schools was a well-known institution called the H-B Woodlawn Program, as a part of the educational movements that fueled such innovative education in the 1960s and 1970s, it was established to provide a more individualized and caring environment to students. As they were originally envisioned, the ideal model of a charter school appeared as a legally and financially autonomous public school - void of tuition, religious affiliation, or discriminatory student admissions. Charter schools were also foreseen to operate much like a private business. In the business sense of being free from many state laws and district regulations, the charter-school beginnings grew on the premise that they were more accountable for student outcomes rather than for processes or inputs that were believed to be enhanced through stipulations such as Carnegie Units and teacher certification requirements. The charter school movement has roots in a number of other reform ideas, including: alternative schools; site-based management; magnet schools; public school choice; privatization; community-parental empowerment. In the late 1980s Philadelphia started a number of schools-within-schools and called them "charters." Some of them were schools of choice. The idea was further refined in Minnesota where charter schools were developed according to three basic values: opportunity, choice, and responsibility for results. In 1991 Minnesota passed the first charter school law, with California following suit in 1992. By 1995, 19 states had signed laws allowing for the creation of charter schools, and by 2003 that number increased to 40 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. From 1997 to 2006 the number of charters in the US grew from 693 to 3,977. Perhaps surprisingly, given this growth, previous work has found mixed evidence on the impacts of charter schools on student performance. However, these studies focus almost exclusively on test scores as the outcome of interest. Thus, one potential explanation for this discrepancy is that charter schools affect student performance in ways that cannot be measured by test scores. The charter school data is gathered at least annually, collected by mostly independent groups, is largely captured by survey. The U.S. Charter Schools Organization is said to statistics that consist of information related to size, scope, demographics (Figure 1), operations, and management of public charter schools (Charter schools data, n. d.). It is because of conflicting and diverse initial findings that this research is important to the author's personal curiosity. On one hand, the appeal of fresh, new approaches to teaching and learning is the stimulus for continued education. On the other hand, a constant vigil over money and test scores to prove the worth of the methodology defeats the main purpose of acting as vehicle for education. The analysis of a sampling of literature is expected to illuminate the more constant and logical explanation of the evidence examined. *Opportunity* In this paper new, longitudinal data from an anonymous

large urban school district is used to assess how charter schools affect student discipline, attendance, and retention; these are compared to test score impacts. Using individual fixed-effects analyses shows that schools which begin as charters generate improvements in student behavior and attendance but not test scores. Charters that convert from regular public schools have mixed effects on test scores. While there is evidence of selection into charter schools based on changes in outcomes, these results change little after applying intermittent panel strategies. Finally, there is little evidence that charter schools generate long-term benefits if students return to non-charter schools. A report prepared by the Center for Education Reform in 2006 states the opportunity posed by charter schools well by saying, "when the charter school concept was born in the days prior to the advent of The No Child Left Behind Act, the bargain was freedom in exchange for accountability" (CER, 2006). As an educational watchdog for learning and teaching communities, the CER felt that charter schools were a chance to try to provide a tailored education to some students through a more micro-managed, yet opportunistic, educational environment and respond to needs expressed by parents, students, and communities (including the teaching community). According to the National Education Association (NEA), for-profit charter schools rarely outperform traditional public schools, even when the charter receives higher funding. Although the U.S. Department of Education's findings agree with those of the NEA, their study points out the limitations of such studies and the inability to hold constant other important factors, and notes that "study design does not allow us to determine whether or not traditional public schools are more effective than charter schools" (NEA, 1998). **Choice** Counselor interviews, professional journals, litigation, and the most recent data and statistics on the subject of charter schools is evidence that is examined at the primary and secondary levels of education. Many of the inherent organizational challenges found therein, are to be analyzed for themes that are perpendicular and those that are parallel. Earlier reviews on the topic has used the words perverse and "spectacle of fear" to describe charter schools in their failing and miserable attempts to reform the contemporary schools under the guise of the 2002 No Child Left Behind ideal (Granger, 2008). In only a few of the sources consulted in this study has this harsh language been used to describe the effects of charter schooling. The majority of the literary sources have been supportive of the innovation that is placed in those type of schools. It is the latter positive contributions consulted in this paper, which convinced the writer to theorize that charter schools are one of the fastest growing innovations in education policy because they have a tendency to invoke a positive learning outcome in their students. Broad bipartisan support from governors, state legislators, and past and present secretaries of education contribute to the solidarity of this concept and the general research opinion. In his 1997 State of the Union Address, former President Clinton called for the creation of 3,000 charter schools by the year 2002. In 2002, President Bush called for \$200 million to support charter schools. His proposed budget called for another \$100 million for a new Credit Enhancement for Charter Schools Facilities Program. Since 1994, the U.S. Department of Education has provided grants to support states' charter school efforts, starting with \$6 million in fiscal year 1995. Another point of kudos for the charter school system that was evident through this research was the issue of the choice processes that charter students have at their disposal that public schools make available only on a limited and or unobservable basis. Substantiation of these alternatives and support that are more-readily made available to charter school students was noted in a report on the charter school counseling by Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch (1995) and mentioned in a professional high school journal article entitled, "College Counseling in Charter High Schools: Examining the Opportunities and Challenges". (Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008). The schools' staff generally promotes college as a normal and viable postsecondary choice that is communicated through the charter schools counselors' open relationship with their students. **Responsibility for Results** The mere premise of a charter school is to exhibit results in many major areas. Through the research of this paper, it is evidenced that the charter schools are displaying a great deal of positive results with respect to the subject areas listed in most of their legal charters. The original thesis was that the cost of these results versus the benefit of their results was questionable. During this research, only one professional article was readily available to discuss this particular subject, although there are many legal causes, some are mentioned in this writing, that indicate that this is a huge concern with the public, as well. There is an important consideration when drafting or revising the legislation for a charter school, however, that addresses "whether to include an appeals process for organizers whose initial proposals are rejected" (The Charter School Roadmap, 1998). Many of these are shown in a report (Table 1) that tracks the variables of applicants within established guidelines. Many states have seen the concept of charter schools in their state supreme courts on mostly monetary issues, but a unique case of the governing authority over a charter school application for its charter was heard in *Beaufort County Board of Education v. Lighthouse Charter School Committee, et al.* (1999). This case went a long way towards resolving many of the issues surrounding charter schools in the state of South Carolina. "The Court's decision made it clear that a local school board has the authority, under the S.C. Charter Schools Act of 1996, to require a charter school applicant to comply with the Act's provisions before a charter is approved and, once the local board makes a decision concerning a charter school applicant, the local board's decision must be upheld by the State Department of Education if that decision is supported by substantial evidence on the record" (Duff, White & Turner, LLC, 1999). Presidential mandates are indicative of the popularity of charter-school types with the constituents and the general public at large. "In the end, school improvement is accomplished through the hard work of school staff, with administrative and parent support" (NEA, 1998) — stated exactly as a common knowledge and belief to the author of this research. The results of the literature consulted and cited in this paper have been found to emphasize the original theory that the overall benefits produced by charter schools are almost equal to, if they don't exceed, the cost that is incurred. The fact that this paradigm exists is not believed to be intentional, but rather more of an undefined direction for charter schools and an existing incompetence at truly managing a budget. Previous research, although truly controversial, was not found to reveal a huge imbalance of the overall end results as opposed to the cost of such at present. Charter schools were found financially unaccountable, whereby their products outweigh the sum of their tangible and intangible costs, by only one professional review. The research of this independent review was even concluded with the following, "recent three initiatives - an R&D

intermediary, using charters as the point of the lance, and creation of a level playing field for competition - could set off a wave of innovation and escalating school performance. This, in turn, could tell Americans what they need to spend for effective schools (Hill, 2008). This lack of professional review to the contrary is not believed to be a limitation, yet an indication that the concept of the charter schools is a sound one that is being refined into a more efficient and effective educational environment. Therefore, the conclusion of this research is found to be that the charter schools are passing on their score card - marginally, at present, but they are expected to become better stewards of their funds and expenses in the future, thus increasing their passing score.

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Table 1 State-by-State Analysis of Charter School Laws Appeals and Approval

Schools/Students	Application	Appeals & Approval	State	# of
School Limit	Student Limit	Eligible Operators	Sponsors	
Alaska	None	30 (limits are defined geographically)		
None	Anyone; law does not specify	Local school board; subject to state school board approval		
Arizona	None	25 SEA per year 25 charter board per year; no limit on local board-sponsored schools		
None	None	Public body, private person or private organization		
Local school board, state board of education or state charter school board		May apply to other sponsor		
Arkansas	None	None		
State board with approval of local board		None; SEA may request hearing but cannot overturn a decision		
California	250 charter schools for the 1998-99 school year with an additional 100 charter schools per school year thereafter	Existing public schools; new start-ups; no private or home-based schools allowed		
None	Local school board, county board of education, state board of education	May apply to other sponsor		
Colorado	None	None		
home schools	Local school board	None		
24 schools (distinction between local and state and number in congressional district removed in 1997)				
school can enroll more than 250 students or 25% of the district enrollment, whichever is less				
schools	Local or state school board			
Connecticut				
				No state
				Anyone; no private or home

About the Author

An administrative career of over 26 years in the civil service has coupled with a lifetime of learning in various forums. I wish to share my knowledge and wisdom through written expression, as I strongly believe that how to learn is the most important lesson gained from academic studies tempered with real-life experience.

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