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Charter Schools

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In seven short years, the U.S. charter-school movement has produced about 800 schools in 29 states and the District of Columbia, enrolling over 100,000 students. Charter schools reflect their founders' varied philosophies, programs, and organizational structures, serve diverse student populations, and are committed to improving public education.

Charter schools are freed of many restrictive rules and regulations. In return, these schools are expected to achieve educational outcomes within a certain period (usually three to five years) or have their charters revoked by sponsors (a local school board, state education agency, or university).

What Explains Charter Schools' Growing Popularity?

Some members of the public are dissatisfied with educational quality and school district bureaucracies (Jenkins and Dow 1996). Today's charter-school initiatives are rooted in the educational reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, from state mandates to improve instruction, to school-based management, school restructuring, and private/public-choice initiatives.

Many people, President Clinton among them, see charter schools, with their emphasis on autonomy and accountability, as a workable political compromise and an alternative to vouchers. The charter approach uses market principles while insisting that schools be nonsectarian and democratic. For founders, starting a brand-new school is an exhausting, yet exhilarating experience that "stirs the creative and adaptive juices of everyone involved" (Ray Budde 1996).

Which States Are Leaders in the Charter-School Movement?

In 1991, Minnesota adopted charter-school legislation to expand a longstanding program of public school choice and to stimulate broader system improvements. Since then, the charter concept has spread to more than half the states.

State laws follow varied sets of key organizing principles based on Ted Kolderie's recommendations for Minnesota, American Federation of Teachers guidelines, and/or federal charter-school legislation (U.S. Department of Education). Principles govern sponsorship, number of schools, regulatory waivers, degree of fiscal/legal autonomy, and performance expectations.

Current laws have been characterized as either strong or weak. Strong-law states mandate considerable autonomy from local labor-management agreements, allow multiple charter-granting agencies, and allocate a level of funding consistent with the statewide per pupil average. Arizona's 1994 law is the strongest, with multiple charter-granting agencies, freedom from local labor contracts, and large numbers of charters permitted.

The vast majority of charter schools (more than 70 percent) are found in states with the strongest laws: Arizona, California, Colorado, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, and North Carolina.

What Progress Have Charter Schools Made?

Evidence on the growth and outcomes of this relatively new movement has started to come in. The U.S. Department of Education's *First Year Report*, part of a four-year national study on charters, is based on interviews of 225 charter schools in 10

states (1997). Charters tend to be small (fewer than 200 students) and represent primarily new schools, though some schools had converted to charter status.

The study found enormous variation among states. Charter schools tended to be somewhat more racially diverse, and to enroll slightly fewer students with special needs and limited-English-proficient students than the average schools in their state. The most common reasons for founding charters were to pursue an educational vision and gain autonomy.

"Charter schools are havens for children who had bad educational experiences elsewhere," according to a Hudson Institute survey of students, teachers, and parents from fifty charters in ten states. More than 60 percent of the parents said charter schools are better than their children's previous schools in terms of teaching quality, individual attention from teachers, curriculum, discipline, parent involvement, and academic standards. Most teachers reported feeling empowered and professionally fulfilled (Vanourek and others 1997).

Nathan points to three other signs of progress:

1. Charter schools in California, Colorado, and Minnesota have had their contracts renewed because they produced measurable achievement gains, including that of students from low-income families.

2. The charter idea has helped stimulate improvement in the broader education system. For example, the Massachusetts charter law permitting applicants to go directly to the state board for a charter helped convince Boston to create its own "Pilot School" program. Minnesota districts, which had refused to create Montessori public schools, did so after frustrated parents began discussing charters.

3. Civil-rights and advocacy groups



are trying to create charter schools. This includes civil-rights legend Rosa Parks, and groups like the Urban League and ACORN (Association for Community Organizations Reform Now) (Nathan, personal interview).

What Are Some Problems and Challenges Facing Charter Schools?

Nearly all charter schools face implementation obstacles, but newly created schools are most vulnerable. Most new charters are plagued by resource limitations, particularly inadequate startup funds.

Although charter advocates recommend the schools control all per-pupil funds, in reality they rarely receive as much funding as other public schools. They generally lack access to funding for facilities and special program funds distributed on a district basis (Bierlein and Bateman 1996). Sometimes private businesses and foundations, such as the Ameritech Corporation in Michigan and the Annenberg Fund in California, provide support (Jenkins and Dow). Congress and the President allocated \$80 million to support charter-school activities in fiscal year 1998, up from \$51 million in 1997.

Charters sometimes face opposition from local boards, state education agencies, and unions. Many educators are concerned that charter schools might siphon off badly needed funds for regular schools. The American Federation of Teachers urges that charter schools adopt high standards, hire only certified teachers, and maintain teachers' collective-bargaining rights. Also, some charters feel they face unwieldy regulatory barriers.

According to Bierlein and Bateman, the odds are stacked against charter schools. There may be too few strong-law states to make a significant difference. Educators who are motivated enough to create and manage charter schools could easily be burnt out by a process that demands increased accountability while providing little professional assistance.

What Are Some Possible Policy/Practice Directions for Charters?

As more states join the movement, there is increasing speculation about upcoming legislation. In an innovation-diffusion study surveying education policy experts in fifty states, Michael Mintrom and Sandra Vergari (1997) found that charter legislation is more readily considered in states with a policy entrepreneur, poor test scores, Republican legislative control, and proximity to other charter-law states. Legislative enthusiasm, gubernatorial support, interactions with national authorities, and use of permissive charter-law models increase the chances for adopting stronger laws. Seeking union support and using restrictive models presage adoption of weaker laws.

The threat of vouchers, wavering support for public education, and bipartisan support for charters has led some unions to start charters themselves. Several AFT chapters, such as those in Houston and Dallas, have themselves started charters. The National Education Association has allocated \$1.5 million to help members start charter schools. Charters offer teachers a brand of empowerment, employee ownership, and governance that might be enhanced by union assistance (Nathan).

Over two dozen private management companies are scrambling to increase their 10 percent share of a "more hospitable and entrepreneurial market" (Stecklow 1997). Boston-based Advantage Schools Inc. has contracted to run charter schools in New Jersey, Arizona, and North Carolina. The Education Development Corporation was planning in the summer of 1997 to manage nine nonsectarian charter schools in Michigan, using cost-effective measures employed in Christian schools.

Professor Frank Smith, of Columbia University Teachers College, sees the charter-school movement as a chance to involve entire communities in redesigning all schools and converting them to "client-centered, learning cultures" (1997). He favors the Advocacy Center Design process used by

state-appointed Superintendent Laval Wilson to transform four failing New Jersey schools. Building stronger communities via newly designed institutions may prove more productive than charters' typical "free-the-teacher-and-parent" approach.

Charter schools might also benefit by adopting research-based schooling models, such as Accelerated Schools and the Success For All Program, and by emulating successful programs in charter or "grant-maintained" schools in England, Canada, and New Zealand.

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Also consult these websites:

- Center for Education Reform
<http://edreform.com>
- U.S. Department of Education
<http://www.uscharterschools.org>
- Private Site
<http://csr.syr.edu>
- AOL Online has an extensive site (keyword is charter)