

WHERE WE STAND



By Albert Shanker, President
American Federation of Teachers



Convention Plots New Course

—A Charter for Change

American education and business face the same problem—how to change their institutions so that they are more effective. Even though our schools and businesses are doing better than ever, that's not good enough. Major changes are necessary, and that makes most people fearful.

At the 70th convention of the American Federation of Teachers in San Francisco this past week, 3,000 delegates from across the U.S. committed themselves to making major changes in public education. Many of these delegates are already involved in bold, district-wide or school-wide reforms. But the convention now also endorsed a process of change similar to that used in many private companies when they establish special teams or task forces to develop a new product or service. The AFT delegates proposed that local school boards and unions jointly develop a procedure that would enable teams of teachers and others to submit and implement proposals to set up their own autonomous public schools within their school buildings.

Many of the delegates teach in districts with huge, impersonal schools. The benefits to students and teachers of breaking up large bureaucracies into small learning communities are immediately apparent. But many other delegates enjoy favorable school conditions, so school size was not the decisive factor. The main idea that gripped the delegates was the prospect of having hundreds, even thousands of school teams actively looking for better ways—different methods, technologies, organizations of time and human resources—to produce more learning for more students.

There is a problem in finding a name for these schools. School-within-a-school is technically correct, but that name has two problems. First, it makes people think of the 1960s and 70s alternative schools that thought that they already had all the answers and whose standard was "do your own thing." But the purpose of the AFT delegates was to help authorize school teams to search for answers and to underscore the importance of high standards for all students. Second, many schools-within-schools were or are treated like traitors or outlaws for daring to move out of the lock-step and do something different. Their initiators had to move heaven and earth to get school officials to authorize them, and, if they managed that, often they could look forward to insecurity, obscurity or outright hostility. But the AFT delegates advocated the establishment of a regular policy mechanism that would make innovation an ongoing and valued part of the school community. The idea is to encourage risk-taking and change. But what name could capture all this?

The best answer so far is "charter schools," a suggestion made by Ray Budde in "Education by Charter: Restructuring School Districts," published by the Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands (290 South Main St., Andover, Mass. 01810). Explorers got charters to seek new lands and resources. Many of our most esteemed scientific and cultural institutions were authorized by charters. And national labor unions issue charters to state and local unions. As Budde notes, the charter concept can also be applied to public education:

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THE WEEK IN REVIEW

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1. A charter had to be granted by some official body. That can be the school board, working in accordance with a chartering procedure agreed upon with the teachers' bargaining agent.

2. The charter had to go to a "grantee—someone with a vision or a plan." Henry Hudson, for example, had a vision and a plan, but in "a school district the grantees would be teams of teachers with visions of how to construct and implement more relevant educational programs or how to revitalize programs that had endured the test of time."

3. "The charter usually called for exploration into unknown territory and involved a degree of risk to the persons undertaking the exploration." There was no guarantee that Hudson would survive the journey or, even if he did, succeed in his mission. There's also no guarantee that a charter school will find better ways of educating students. Of course, the school can do no harm to youngsters.

4. "A charter implied both the idea of a franchise and competition." A school system might charter schools distinctly different in their approach to teaching. Parents could choose which charter school to send their children to, thus fostering competition.

5. "The grantor of the charter provided the supplies and resources for the enterprise." The charter school should have its own budget on the same per pupil or staff cost basis as the rest of the school, but it could use the budget to have a differentiated staff to explore new roles. Also, charter teams would be guaranteed supplies and materials they themselves had chosen—including adequate space and clerical support.

6. "A charter contained within it specific directions for the grantee and a definite length of time for him to complete the activity." As with Hudson's commission, "each charter would have a beginning date and an ending date at which time the charter would cease to exist or would have to be renewed for another 3 to 5 year period."

7. There must be advance agreement between grantor and grantee on records to be kept and reports to be made and on what evidence will be required that the mission has achieved its purpose. There should be widespread publicity given not only to charter schools that achieve their goal but also to those that don't, not for the purpose of humiliation but because publishing failures also adds to our body of knowledge.

Over time, we can expect charter schools to stimulate a different and more effective school structure. But just as medical researchers trying to find a cure for a disease or product developers hoping for a new breakthrough in business don't know in advance whether what they're aiming for will be found in a few years or a few decades, neither will charter school teams. A demand for quick results will send the message that only quacks need apply for charters. It's also useful to remember that Henry Hudson didn't find what he set out to, but what he did discover was invaluable.

Safe passage, then, to charter schools—and next week I'll write about the approaching storms.

Shanker on Charter Schools

The following statement by Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers, was issued on July 10, 1988: 

A CHARTER FOR CHANGE

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