

Education: The Consumer's View

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CHARTER SCHOOLS

"You can have any color you want as long as it's black," Henry Ford is supposed to have said when his Model T was pretty much the only car you could buy. He was not big on choices.

Few salesmen are. If they can make your only other choice a really terrible alternative you'll buy the one they want you to buy.

Some people today are trying to limit our choices in education. One says: If you want schools free to innovate and to put kids first you can't hold them accountable to public authority. You have to go outside public education altogether. Another says: If you value the common-school ideal and want schools accountable for the tax dollars they spend, they will have to be run by the board of education. They can't be autonomous.

Sorry. There are always more shoes in the back room than the salesman tells you about. There is a way to have autonomous schools within public education. This is the "charter schools" idea.

- Teachers, a group of parents, the public library, or the Urban League can propose to set up a different and better school.

- The organizer approaches any of several public bodies to be its sponsor: a local board of education, the state board, perhaps a city council.

- The school forms as a legally separate organization: non-profit or cooperative; autonomous and site-managed.

- The school follows the basic principles of public education. It is non-sectarian. It takes everybody (or gives everybody an equal chance of being admitted). It can't charge tuition, can't be an elite academy, can't discriminate. It's accountable to the public for student performance and for the use of public funds.

- In return, it is freed from the normal rules. The school can be innovative about how kids learn. Teachers can be professionals.

The old alternatives are obsolete. Public education isn't limited to schools owned and operated by the local district. Minneapolis and Milwaukee have contracted for years with non-profits to run schools for kids who don't succeed in "regular" school. These autonomous yet accountable schools aren't public schools in the conventional sense. Neither are they private schools in the customary sense. But they offer public education.

This precedent can be extended. Minnesota enacted a version of the "charter schools" idea into law in 1991. It's under discussion now in California, Michigan, Florida, Massachusetts and other states.

This radical idea—letting two or more organizations offer public education on the same piece of

terrain—can speed up the process of improving our schools.

Today, no matter how badly kids may be served, the state will not let anybody else offer public education within the same territory: The state gives the district an exclusive franchise. That franchise tells the district it can take its pupils for granted. Its success—its revenues, its jobs, its security—will not depend on the students' success. So it does not have to improve. It can put other interests first.

This makes no sense. We need to remove the exclusive so there are consequences for districts that do not put kids first.

It makes no sense to limit our improvement efforts to remodeling the schools we have today. It is hard to change an organization from within. We need to create some different and better schools anew, schools that students and parents can choose. Giving "somebody else" that chance will encourage existing schools to move faster.

The "charter schools" idea can also help relieve two serious inequities in American education.

First: It can empower people who don't have time to serve on school or district committees, or who don't get the chance. Most of us usually have to "get involved" as customers. We depend on our choices to give us influence.

Second: It can give us a much more just system of choice than the one we have today. Choice does exist for the fortunate. It is possible for them to escape the exclusive: They can go to private school or they can move. Lots of people do. All it takes is money.

This is unfair. Poor and working class people deserve access to different and better schools, too. State law has to provide it for them, by withdrawing the exclusive franchise and letting "somebody else" offer public education where they live.

We don't have to let our choices be narrowed. There is more than just "private school" and "public school." We can have autonomous and innovative schools operating within the framework of public education. That's the "charter schools" option.

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