

## NEED EVERY CHARTER SCHOOL BE 'INNOVATIVE'?

The purpose of the charter-school laws is to expand the supply of quality public schools. At various times certain advocates of the charter idea have suggested that the law will produce "innovative" schools; or, more precisely, that with the freedom provided by these laws the teachers and others who set up schools will be "innovative". Clearly it would be a plus if the school were to make a significant new contribution to the design of academic programs, or of school governance.

But it would be unrealistic to make "being innovative" a requirement, a test of success, either for an individual school or for the charter sector generally. Taken literally this would mean a school should not be approved, or the local charter sector should not be allowed continue, if it does not come up with some idea never-before-known. There is no way every charter school can come up with something never-before-known. And there is no need for the sector to be innovative in that sense.

There is a reasonable sense in which a school "is innovative" if it offers something different and better than is available in public education in the community today. Suppose for example that a charter school appears offering the "Core Knowledge" program. This is a known program; available in many states; not new, not literally "innovative" when it appears in the charter school. Yet if the local schools do not offer a "Core Knowledge" program there's a sense in which it is new - is a kind of 'innovation' - when offered now by the charter school.

This is a tricky question, though: Existing operators usually feel they can provide all the innovation needed; often try to represent innovation as 'duplication'. When Gov. Perpich's program of Post-secondary Options arrived in Minnesota in 1985 many superintendents argued that a student should not be permitted to enroll for "a course we offer at the high school". Yet clearly Physics 101 at the University of Minnesota is a different course . . . quite a different experience for the student . . . than Physics I at the high school. The Legislature has consistently declined to restrict student choices on the basis of similar course-titles.

There is also the possibility that a school doing "the same thing" might do it better than existing schools. A school of 200 students might be better for some students, say, than a school of 2,000. So might a school with "the same" as the district school but where people care more or teach better.

Finally, let us remember, there is a sense in which 'charter schools' as a sector is an innovation. It was a dramatic change for the legislatures to create a sector of public education in which someone other than the board or superintendent may at least experiment with learning designs and forms of organization, and in which the school is on contract for student and fiscal performance. The charter sector is the R&D sector of public education: the country's principal experiment with school-based decision-making . . . for teacher-selection, for the learning program, for budget control and facility management, for accountability.

Within this R&D sector some schools are now in fact generating real innovations. Surely a successful school with no courses, no classes and no employees qualifies as innovative. The most important function of the charter sector, though, may be not so much to generate innovations as to spread them.