

CHELSEA CLINTON AND THE D.C. SCHOOLS

(In the Spring of '93 the editorial page at the Washington Post had invited comment on the issues raised by the Clintons' choice of private school for their daughter. I sent this. The Post didn't run it. You know what happened later.)

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A columnist in Saint Paul, reading the Post's report about the Clintons' decision to send their daughter to private school, objected less to the decision itself than to the reasons given for it. Why, the columnist asked, didn't they just say the D.C. schools are awful?

He seems not to have been alone in this opinion. Other columnists, too, pointed to studies making it clear the Clintons could hardly have been faulted if they had rested their decision on educational quality.

But that would likely have led to a discussion about improving the quality of public education in the District. And this seems, unhappily, to be something people in the District have decided is not possible. More than one organization has tried, more than once. All have been stonewalled by the existing organization. Why send in one more report urging better management?

Albert Shanker, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, did suggest in his New York Times column January 10 "bringing together the union, the school board and the parents" to "fix the Washington schools" so everybody will want to go to them. But that doesn't quite get us there either, does it?

There is another approach.

It's been fascinating to ask people in Washington these past two years, when they complain about the schools, "Why don't you just let somebody else offer public education to the kids in the district?"

There's always a pause, while they realize you haven't said private education. So you explain.

Everywhere else, if the local system isn't working, people go to their legislature to get things changed.

Section 601 of the 1973 home-rule act for the District of Columbia says:

"The Congress reserves the right at any time to exercise its constitutional authority as legislature for the District by enacting legislation for the District on any subject, within or without the scope of legislative power granted to the Council by this act".

Why not ask Congress to authorize the Department of Education, say, or one of the federally-chartered universities in the District, to sign agreements with organizations that want to start different and better schools?

The District is not without educational resources, from the Smithsonian to the military (the latter, incidentally, a meritocratic institution and probably way ahead of the public schools in its use of electronic technology for learning).

These schools would offer public education: non-sectarian, no tuition, no discrimination, not selective (no picking and choosing 'nice kids'). They would be held to performance outcomes. They would be financed either with a new appropriation or with funds withdrawn from the federal payment to the District.

Everyone gasps, "Oh, we couldn't possibly do that". Democrats do. Republicans too. Conservatives and liberals alike. Residents say it would be seen as presumptuous or elitist. People in Congress are pragmatic: "We enacted home rule to get us out of questions like this".

It's clear what everybody is really saying: "Certain adults would not want 'somebody else' offering public education in the District, and we are not prepared to challenge those adults."

You say: "I thought this was about improving education for kids."

They say: "Gosh, I'm late for a meeting."

Try it some time. See for yourself.

In fairness, this is not unique to Washington. Everywhere the impulse is to try to 'fix' the existing organization with better financing, better management or a new superintendent. People find it hard to go to fundamentals; hard to think in terms of what causes organizations to work well. And there is a prejudice against simple solutions: Letting 'somebody else' offer public education seems too obvious.

But the existing arrangement cannot work. Essentially it amounts to exhorting and expecting the schools to do hard things that will generate internal stress, while guaranteeing them their students, their revenues, their jobs, their security - their success - whether they do these things or not. This is not smart: It tells adults they can take the kids for granted; which means they can put their own interests first. Whose fault is it, then, if they do exactly that?

What is most disappointing about Washington is the failure of those who do care about the schools and about the kids to think through to the fundamentals; to think strategically. And their lack of courage. Asking Congress to let somebody else offer public education within the District would be controversial. But that's not a reason not to act . . . is it?

To:

Re: The Charter School Resource Center in Washington D.C.

I talked July 12 with David Perry of the Federal City Council (202/223-4560) about what kind of resource center they started - and why. The Council is the principal civic-leadership organization in Washington. Its chair is Terry Golden; its president is now Bob Dole.

This is what I heard.

o The civic leadership was frustrated simply trying to get the old district to improve; to manage better.

The Council had spent 10 years and literally millions of dollars on consultants to show the 'old board of education' what to improve and how. This effort was run through COPE - the Committee on Public Education - and was led by Terry Golden, a Texan who had previously headed the General Services Administration for the federal government.

It failed. The district could stonewall with impunity and there was nothing any outsiders could do about it. The civic and business leadership - being realistic - decided it would start to work also to develop a charter sector in local public education.

o The Federal City Council took the leadership in getting a charter law for the District of Columbia.

The Council worked with Steve Gunderson, then a Republican congressman from LaCrosse WI, on a charter law for the District. This passed in 1995: a single charter program with two sponsoring bodies - the old elected Board of Education and a new and separate "D.C. Public Charter Schools Board", of which Jo Baker is the chair and Nelson Smith now the executive.

o The Council created a Resource Center to work on the development of a charter sector specifically.

The Council decide to create a new group - a D.C. Public Charter Schools Resource Center - to work for the design and approval of quality schools. The old board of education had been an irresponsible authorizer. Several of its schools quickly showed serious problems. The need was clear for some entity to help develop sound proposals and well-run schools.

The Resource Center is now the only body providing free assistance at all stages in the development of charter schools in the city. It charges no fees. It is financed entirely by local and national foundations.

It recruits new applicants - an 'advocacy' function that cannot really be performed by a sponsoring board. The Resource Center works to develop and improve governing boards for the schools; works on accountability; works to develop internal leadership in the schools.

The Resource Center is housed with the Federal City Council. Dave Perry from the FRC staff serves on its board. Bruce MacLaury, formerly president of the

Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis and later president of Brookings, also serves on its board. The first executive was Ken Campbell. The center is run now by Shirley Monastra: 202/835-9011.

o The superintendent of schools was hostile, but the Federal City Council maintained its support for chartering anyway.

After the '94 elections the Congress, dissatisfied with government in the District of Columbia - and acting as state legislature for the District - essentially put the city into receivership. Through a Control Board it took over the schools, creating a new board of education (MacLaury its chair).

The first new superintendent named by the new board turned out to be fiercely resistant to chartering. In meetings with the Council she would typically profess support for the idea. But her organization never cooperated, and was especially difficult about turning over surplus buildings to new charter schools as the law required.

The Federal City Council held firm; made it clear it would continue to support the charter sector, directly and through its Resource Center.

o Today the charter sector in the District of Columbia enrolls over 10,000 students and has a 'market share' of almost 15%.

Washington D.C. has one of the largest, strongest and highest-quality charter sectors in America. It has a top-notch, very responsible sponsoring body. And it has a strong Resource Center with top-level backing from the civic and business leadership.

And, despite that earlier opposition from the district, the charter sector continues to grow steadily. There are now about 33 schools; the majority sponsored by the independent D.C. Public Charter Schools Board.

o Today the District of Columbia has both an improving district sector and an improving charter sector . . . each with a positive impact on the other.

In time that first superintendent moved on (to San Francisco, where she continues to fight the charter idea). After the next municipal elections the Control Board returned the schools to local control. A new board was elected and a new superintendent named. He is Paul Vance, previously superintendent in Montgomery County MD, who came out of retirement to head the D.C. schools.

The difference is dramatic. Vance sees the charter sector as a part of public education. He cooperates with the charter sector - might even make available in Fall '01 a surplus district building to a chartered school if the school's own facility is not ready on time. Vance and the D.C. school administration are also watching - learning from - the charter sector: always asking, "What are those folks up to these days?"

o The strategy of the Federal City Council is to support both these sectors of local public education.

It's not one or the other, Perry says. The Council helps both. Each's presence makes the other better.

To:

Re: Organizational arrangements for charter schools

What follows are notes of a conversation January 18 with Nelson Smith, executive director of the D.C. Public Charter Schools Board (hereafter "the Board"). Legislation creating the Board was enacted in 1996; Congress acting as state legislature for the District.

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Early-on, the Board was more in the 'promotional' mode. At the time we were about the only believers. This probably happened in a number of states. Over time it's changed. We now take the view that the best way to promote the charter sector is to be sure we have good schools. Others, outside, do the 'promotion'.

There is a very close relationship between what you do to get schools set up and what you do to hold them accountable. We think we do a better job on oversight because we have worked with the schools to set them up and to support them. We know the school better. Our board now has the reputation of having better oversight than there is on the district schools.

It is never easy deciding "which way to tip" . . . how to strike that balance between support and critical judgment. It's like being a parent. We recently put a school on probation, for example, after deciding we'd done enough to help them with their organizational and financial problems. We "tipped". We will decide in February whether to close that school.

We think we did a good job from the beginning on reviewing applications. DCPS (the local 'district') had chartered a few schools and the Marcus Garvey school had blown up just as we were beginning. Currently we're looking harder at what an applicant proposes re: the learning program.

It's not foolproof. There will be some mistakes. It's not wrong to have some mistakes. Oversight can't necessary prevent all problems.

It is good to have an agency specialized for this function . . . of working just with the charter schools. These are different. We have nothing else to think about. We devote more care and attention to the schools than would an agency that has charter schools only as a small part of its overall responsibility.

We are expanding our monitoring of the schools. We now do an annual performance review on each school. This shows us where schools need better support. In the past we have not spent a lot of time on-site. But we have just hired a former school principal who will be doing more of this: a "good cop" hanging around, watching. Some of the charter-advocacy groups sometimes accuse us of becoming too much like a typical school district. But we are trying hard not to be just a regulatory body. We have to balance both roles.

DCPS does not oversee our schools, but is required by law to "provide services" to them. It is the 'state education agency'. So the federal grants, as for charter school start-up, comes in through DCPS. Each charter school can elect whether to be its own LEA for special ed or to be under DCPS.

*was cumbersome and
after inefficient*

There is now also an "SEO" in the general District of Columbia government. It will have a limited role, though: in reports on enrollment, general reports on school performance, appeals re: standards. The intent is not to let the SEO become too bureaucratic. If jurisdiction overlaps, it will defer to us.

What do we do to develop and promote charter schools in the larger sense, beyond just reviewing applications and overseeing schools? I see two things.

The first is in the facilities area. We work generally on the legal framework for the schools acquiring and owning property; and on ways for the schools to finance their facilities. We have discussions with DCPS on behalf of our schools, about the availability of their surplus buildings.

Second, the promotion of the general idea. We do have to be careful about this, since our law gives us no specific charge to promote the growth and development of the charter sector. There are other, private, groups around that do a lot of this. We have started to put out a newsletter. This gives us some opportunity to explain generally what charter schools are, and to deal with some of the questions that pop up in the press etc.

We have not "requested proposals" for certain kinds of schools; not solicited applications of a particular sort. In the guidelines we issue, for applications, we may sort-of hint generally at the sort of proposals we'd like to see in the following year. Basically it's up to applicants, and the advocate groups that work with them, to get up the proposals.

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Key facts about charter schools in D.C. in 2000-2001:

- o Our board has about two-thirds of the schools and the students in the charter sector in D.C.; about 6,000 students. DCPS has the remainder.
- o Our schools and DCPS charter schools together enroll just under 14 per cent of students in the District of Columbia.
- o Total budget for our schools is \$105 million.

Origins of the charter idea

Someone asked for a quick history.

1. The process was pretty simple.

There's 'a situation'. People think. Ideas appear, and flow together. Proposals get made. Governors and legislators act. Some states lead. In time other states follow.

2. In Minnesota:

- o Districts wouldn't change. Lots of talk about choice. **Joe Nathan** very important in this. Q: What do, exactly?

- o Minnesota's post-secondary option in '85 first 'withdrew the exclusive'. The charter idea is essentially the state saying "It's OK for more than one organization to offer public education in the community". **Gov. Perpich** (Democrat) was proposing open enrollment. **Connie Levi**, the House majority leader (Republican), said she's support that if Rudy would support her proposal for PSEO. Deal. Done. Somebody else can offer 11th/12th grade.

- o In '86-'87 Perpich gets open enrollment. Quickly, tho, it's clear choice among districts has limited effects. Got to have more good schools for kids to choose among. Q: How create schools new? And: Who?

- o In March '88 **Shanker** makes his National Press Club speech. Picks up **Ray Budde's** notion of 'charter'. Proposes letting teachers start small schools within schools.

- o In Minnesota the **Citizens League** has a committee thinking about 'the situation'. Starts building 'charter' idea. By October the plan almost fully thought-out. Committee chaired by **John Rollwagen**, then CEO of Cray Research.

- o September '88 Al Shanker comes to Minnesota for the Itasca Seminar, put on by the Minneapolis Foundation. Again talks about his 'charter' idea. Sen. **Ember Reichgott** was there; got interested.

- o CL helps Ember do a bill for '89 session. House not interested. Bill revised for '90. House still not interested. But Rep. **Becky Kelso** says to Ember: "If you'd like to try that charter idea again next year I'd like to help you". Fall '90 Commissioner **Tom Nelson** pulls together a new bill. In '91 Rep. **Ken Nelson**, Minneapolis Democrat, provides the third vote in House conference. Ember reluctantly accepts his 'conditions'. (Right decision.) 'Charter schools' passes as part of the omnibus bill.

3. The idea spreads

- o It was California acting in '92 that really put the idea in business. **Eric Premack** (from Minneapolis) had followed developments in MN. He set up discussions that spring with everybody. Sen. **Gary Hart** gets his bill through on the last night of the session: One of a number of great legislative maneuvers/stories.

- o (Important, and overlooked) **Will Marshall** spots the potential of public-school choice and chartering for the DLC agenda. Makes it central in the

policy-book they do for **Bill Clinton**. Elected, Clinton is a supporter. **Riley** and **Jon Schnur** get active. Very important, politically.

o In '93 six states act. **Barbara O'Brien** at the Childrens Campaign is key in Colorado; gets Rep. **Peggy Kerns** (D) and Sen. **Bill Owens** (R) as authors. **Romer** makes the bill a 'must'. In Wisconsin **Senn Brown** is important. **Mark Roosevelt** authors in Massachusetts. It's mostly governors and legislators, frustrated by districts that won't do-right. When you ask: "Why don't you just get somebody else who will?" you see this big smile spread across the face.

o Through the '90s there're a whole series of these state capitol policy initiatives. (Strikingly bipartisan, always in defiance of conventional wisdom that nothing can be done that the establishment opposes.) **Jack Ewing** (R) and **Joe Doria** (D) in New Jersey. **Wib Gulley** (D) in North Carolina. **Engler** in Michigan. **Charles Zogby** and **Tom Ridge** pick up the idea while still in Congress. **Joe Tedder** gets his bill through as a freshman Democrat in Florida. **Tom Patterson** and **Lisa Keegan** in Arizona. Wily old hands like **Cooper Snyder** and **Mike Fox** in Ohio. On and on. Congress does a chartering law for D.C., thanks partly to a Wisconsin congressman and to determined effort by the business community through the Federal City Council. In state after state a few local citizens, too, who just wouldn't quit. Amazing outpouring of energy from people, both to get the laws and then to create/operate the schools.

o The whole thing was mostly word-of-mouth. No master plan; no national 'project'. No foundation grant (at that stage; tho lots came in later. Not many of the education-policy groups an advocate. No real national media coverage, in these early stages. The academic community inattentive. I wrote those little memos I sent around. Joe and I were probably in 25, 30 states, one way and another. Lots of telephone calls. The Minnesota bill got sent-around: I could see Betsy Rice's drafting in a number of other states' bills. **Jeanne Allen** and the CER keeping wonderful track of the laws, doing the directory of schools. By mid=90s a new 'infrastructure' appears: The Charter Friends Network, with **Jon Schroeder**. Foundation money begins to come into the charter sector, while other foundations are giving up on districts. The federal grant program goes from \$6 million to over \$200 million.

o The whole thing, the essential idea, just organic; has an internal dynamic of its own. Keeps unfolding, year by year and state by state. Showing new variations; unexpected. In the laws, new processes; new kinds of sponsors. In the schools, new ideas about teaching, about governance, about teacher ownership. Chartered sector becomes an R&D sector for public education; the principal experiment with school-based decision making, with contracting. Still developing: cf the idea now for 'the charter district'; for the strategy of moving beyond district re-form to just building a second system, new, alongside the districts.

o Clearly, not a pedagogical innovation. A charter school is not a kind of school. An intitutional innovation: the states creating new opportunities for educators etc. to try new kinds of schools. And creating new dynamics.

o Amazing story. We get frustrated with the legislative politics, but the whole thing is really a huge credit to our political system; to the state legislative process. Things that are necessary do tend to happen.