

What's A Charter School If Not A Game Changer?

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September 1, 2012

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The charter school movement is now at a crossroads. More than 2 million students will be enrolled in charter schools in the fall — a big number for a movement that's barely 20 years old. The publicly funded, privately run schools have spread so fast, they operate more like a parallel school system in some places.

The intention was to create labs for education experimentation. But the quality of charters and their record of success are mixed. Sometimes, the results aren't much different from their public counterparts. Original arguments against the business model have never dissipated, and now there are questions about whether charters are serving their initial purpose.

New Forces In The Movement

At this year's charter school convention in Minneapolis, the birthplace of the movement, vendors sounded almost giddy about the millions of dollars charter schools spend every year. The vendors are selling everything from graphing calculators and playground equipment to packaged curricula and risk-management services.

Charter schools today are big business. The public and private money that's going into charter schools, though, is not the main reason for their remarkable growth, Ted Kolderie says.

Kolderie, considered by many as the "godfather" of the charter school movement, says charters have grown because of the need for real options for kids who haven't done well in traditional public schools.

"Chartering is the opportunity for radically different approaches to learning to come into public education, and that's why one of the major threats currently is coming from people who don't want radically different models, who simply want the old model done better," he says. "And this is, today, the central debate going on within the charter movement."

Skepticism From The Get-Go

Kolderie, a former journalist turned academic, designed and helped pass the nation's first charter school laws. He began the work in Minnesota in 1991, despite formidable opposition — and not just from teachers' unions.

"School boards' associations, superintendents' associations, principals' associations — the whole array of organizations regarded in most states as the most powerful at the [state] capitol," he says. "So the opposition wasn't just something that the unions led."

Ironically, Kolderie says, it was a top union leader who first endorsed and promoted the concept of charter schools in the spring of 1988. Al Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, gave a supportive speech at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C.

"We're meeting here today because it's time to take a major step forward in trying to improve the schools of our nation," he said.

It was Shanker's response to relentless political attacks, namely by the Reagan administration, that blamed unions for the dismal quality of public schools described in the 1983 report, "A Nation at Risk."

But the school-reform movement born of that report, Shanker argued, was so feeble, it was bypassing 80 percent of the nation's public school students.

"Therefore, I would like to make a proposal today. We now need to seek ways that will enable any group of teachers in a building and parents of children to opt for a different type of school," he said, "a totally autonomous school within that district. We in the American Federation of Teachers intend to make this work."

Shanker never used the word "charter" in that speech, but he quickly realized members of his union did not fully understand or support the concept. Louise Sundin, former president of the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers, was on Shanker's executive council at the time.

"It was received with skepticism, if not outright hostility," she says.

'An American Idea'

With teachers choosing to be on the sidelines, Sundin says the charter school movement was eventually hijacked by organizations intent on destroying unions, making money — or both.

"There's been a well-funded attack on public school educators by folks who don't want public education to exist, would rather it be privatized for profit," she says.

Joe Nathan disagrees that there is such an attack. He's been advising governors and state lawmakers on school-choice legislation since the 1980s. If there was a "right wing" conspiracy, Nathan says, why would President Obama, Bill Clinton and many in the civil rights community support charters?

"It's far beyond a left or right or a Democrat or Republican idea. It's an American idea ... and I think that's so fundamental to understanding why this idea has taken off," he says. "It strikes people as fair — as reasonable — that groups of parents and teachers be allowed to create new kinds of public schools, open to all kinds of kids."

Nathan heads the Center for School Change in Minneapolis, which receives millions of dollars from corporations, foundations and advocates of school choice. And yes, he says, the money that has flowed to charter schools has attracted a few bad, greedy people.

"There flat-out are some crooks — people over the last 20 years who've made terrible, illegal use of money," Nathan says. "We need to do a better job dealing with the crooks and charlatans, of which we certainly in this movement have our share."

A Lack Of Innovation?