

October 30, 1992

## Toward charter schools

**THE ISSUE:**  
Foundation  
pans school  
choice

**OUR VIEW:**  
Not surprising,  
and not persua-  
sive

Former Education Secretary Bill Bennett is correct: asking the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Education for an objective assessment of programs that nurture school choice is "like asking the Catholic Church to evaluate Notre Dame football." The church will tend to like Notre Dame, of course, and the Carnegie Foundation, that pillar of establishment thinking, will tend to dislike school choice.

Bennett was in Denver this week in support of Amendment 7, the voucher initiative. You don't have to favor vouchers, however, to recognize that a recent Carnegie Foundation report, which garnered front-page coverage in the *Denver Post*, as a misused piece of analysis. At the very least, the kinds of choice programs that now exist throughout the country are so remote from what is contemplated in Colorado that drawing apt conclusions from them is reckless. It is simply not possible to study something that doesn't exist. No state grants vouchers to any student who wants one. Therefore, no analyst can pretend to know exactly how well such a system would work.

That uncertainty accounts, in part, for Amendment 7's depressed standing in the polls. If it fails, however, the fight for greater choice will continue, although on a more modest scale. Even Bill Clinton favors more choice than now exists in Colorado.

In the second presidential debate, for example, Clinton made favorable mention of "charter schools" — probably puzzling viewers outside the two states that have them, Minnesota and California. That should change rapidly, as more states consider this promising novelty endorsed by all three

candidates — and, recently in our presence, by Gov. Roy Romer.

Charter schools are publicly funded independent schools, usually run by teachers and parents and exempt from most district regulations. They are public schools that enjoy the same freedom as private schools to define their own mission and teaching approach. Also like private schools, they stand or fall on their ability to attract students and satisfy parents.

The idea is to unleash the creativity and expertise of teachers who believe they can improve on entrenched ways of doing things. New Jersey Gov. Jim Florio, who is pushing charter schools in his state, called them the Saturn of public education.

The mechanics vary in different legislation. Usually the state reviews applications and authorizes schools, granting each per-pupil funding equal to the average in the public system. Another constant is the fierce opposition of the teachers' unions, with their infallible instinct for protecting the status quo.

These experiments are too new to yet permit conclusions, but the notion behind them was captured well by Ted Kolderie, longtime analyst of Minnesota's schools, in a 1990 article published by the Progressive Policy Institute (despite its name, a hotbed of Democratic moderation). He argues that "withdrawing the exclusive franchise in public education" will stimulate innovation and also force existing schools to improve.

"The state should remove from the district its ability to take its students for granted," Kolderie wrote, "by making it possible for new and different public schools to appear, where the kids live and which the kids can choose. The district then will find improvement necessary, in its own interest."

It's a principle worth putting to the test.