

The Charter School Initiative as a Case of Back to the Future

By Amy L. Anderson

Institutional shifts in education are primarily a response to changes in the larger environment in which schools reside—in the economy, the society, and the polity. In other words, institutional changes in education are economically, socially, and politically determined. (Murphy, 1999, p. 405)

In *New Consumerism: Evolving Market Dynamics in the Institutional Dimensions of Schooling*, Murphy (1999) argued that schools are subject to fluctuations that emerge through time—as culture changes, schools change. Kliebard (1995), for example, documented historical struggles for the American curriculum as various economic, social and political forces competed for control of the education of students in the United States. Charter schools can be seen as a response to contemporary cultural shifts in this country. This article uses the case of Forth Academy¹ to explore the impact of contemporary economic, social and political shifts on the organization, curriculum and instruction of one charter school.

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Forth Academy is a charter school operated by a private company that uses market-based and consumer-driven methods to advance a particular vision and curriculum. Forth Academy's version of reform espouses rigorous academics through a return to the basics, a strong moral focus, high parent involvement, and accountability for all. In true market fashion, Forth Academy promises parents—the primary consumer—to deliver a product that results in students' high academic achievement. Operating a number of charter schools in several states, Forth's parent company is taking successful advantage of the charter school reform initiative to market a product and realize a profit through the development of charter schools. Based in the reemergence of market ideology in economics and the growth of neo-conservative social policy (Murphy, 1999), taking advantage of the charter school initiative can be seen as a case of back to the future.

This case study was constructed as part of a larger evaluation of charter schools in North Carolina as mandated by state legislation (Noblit & Corbett, 2001; Price, this issue). Data were collected in Fall 2000 and included interviews and focus groups with school administrators (including principal, board members, and company representatives), teachers, parents and students. The site visit also included classroom observations and attendance at a school board meeting. Additional data include field notes, materials collected on site, and materials available on-line through the school and parent company websites. The description of the school will be followed by a brief review of literatures that outlines economic, social and political shifts and their impact on the culture of Forth Academy.

Description of the School

Forth Academy is managed by "American Legacy Charter Schools" (ALCS),² a for-profit company that operates more than 50 charter schools in several states. Literature on the company and its schools is available through publications and the company's website, each source claiming that ALCS has designed an ideal school for children: a "nurturing educational community" preparing "enlightened, ethical adults."

Visitors to Forth Academy are welcomed by a sign that announces **American Legacy Charter School** in large and bold letters, with the school's name, Forth Academy, in smaller-sized print. The sign also names the campus (i.e., West Campus), suggesting the possibility of another ALCS campus in this city (e.g., East Campus). Forth Academy opened in the Fall of 1999 in a suburban area of a mid-sized city in North Carolina. The school originally enrolled students in kindergarten through 5th grades, with plans to expand a grade per year until serving grades K-8. At the time of the site visit in the Fall of 2000, there were about 300 students in grades K-6 and 18 teachers. Forth Academy currently enrolls approximately 600 students in grades K-8, with 32 teachers, a principal and an assistant principal.

Forth Academy's principal established a policy that 100% teachers at Forth

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Academy be licensed to teach in the state. This standard is higher than the charter school legislation requirement³ and was thus higher than the requirements of ALCS. ALCS company policy establishes teacher-student ratios, in this case 21:1 in Kindergarten, 24:1 in first grade, and 26:1 in the upper grades. In relation to the demographics of neighboring public schools, Forth Academy enrolls a diverse student population with 50% white students and 50% students of color. Twenty-eight percent of students at Forth receive free/reduced lunch through Title I. In addition, Forth offers Title I compensatory services and reading classes. The Title I teacher, school resource teacher, and local school “science guy” are shared with another ALCS school in a neighboring county.

Forth Academy rents the school building from ALCS and is built following one of the company’s blueprints that feature elements uniform among other ALCS schools. Features common to ALCS schools include a parent room, as well as a music room, gymnasium, and media center. One advantage of the relationship between Forth Academy and ALCS was the relative ease with which Forth Academy opened given that many new charter schools face significant start-up challenges when working to secure and/or open a building.

Forth Academy is an L-shaped building that sits on 17 acres of land about that sits about 100 yards off a suburban road. One wing of the L shaped building houses second through fifth grade classrooms, the art room, the Title I reading coordinator’s room, and the media center. The other wing houses kindergarten and first grade classrooms along with the resource teacher’s office, the speech teacher’s classroom, and the parent room. The parent room is a feature of all ALCS schools and is accessible to parents on a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week basis through key-pad access. The room is equipped with tables, a refrigerator, microwave and telephone, as well as a space where teachers may leave information for parents. The gymnasium, music room, and office suite are located at the intersection of the wings. Construction of a new addition to the building was underway in Fall of 2000 to accommodate the school’s growth to a K-8 school. Similar to other charter schools, ALCS schools do not have bus service nor do they have cafeterias. Forth out-sources lunches for Title I students; all other students are required to bring their lunch and children eat in their classroom. The school also out-sources certain non-instructional services such as maintenance personnel and the school psychologist.

Similar to all ALCS schools, Forth Academy operates under a “back to basics” approach supported by structured discipline, character development programs, and parental involvement. Additional features of the ALCS approach described in company materials include a longer school day (6.5 hours); attractive, functional buildings at significantly lower costs; outsourcing services for non-educational activities; and quantitative results for expectations and measurement. Following a business approach model for education, Forth also centralizes administrative costs at the ALCS level; gives performance-based compensation for educators; and describes principals as general managers with teachers and employees as stakeholders.

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The next section shares a brief review of the literature that describes select economic, social and political shifts affecting education. This review serves as an organizing framework for an elaborated discussion of the Forth Academy/ALCS program.

Shifts in Economic, Social, and Political Culture

Charter schools represent a compromise in the debates over school choice in this country (Hassel, 2001; Fuller, 2000). Between arguments in favor of more complete school choice (i.e., vouchers) and arguments decrying choice and advocating instead an increase in resources to public schools, charter schools are envisioned as an experiment in school choice and school reform. A central premise of charter schools legislation is that in exchange for freedom from traditional public school requirements, innovative and challenging educational practices will emerge. Charter schools also are expected to improve education for all students as public schools compete to match or top innovations.

As introduced above, Murphy (1999) suggested that changes in education are a response to changes in the larger environment, particularly changes in the economy, the society, and the polity. Factors he identified that contribute to these changes include increasing public frustration with and distrust of the public sector, public concern over redistribution of resources (e.g., through welfare policies), and the perception that the structures of civil society are crumbling. Murphy suggested that “at the core of the current economic evolution is a recommitment to market philosophy” (p. 406), what he called “new consumerism” (p. 405). A recommitment to market philosophy is the central characteristic of new consumerism (Murphy, 1999), leading organizations “to emulate current private sector business practices” and moving individuals “in the direction of exercising choice as consumers rather than as citizens” (p. 409). In a culture attracted to this new consumerism, Murphy argued that education is “an especially appealing target for profit-oriented firms” (p. 411) for several reasons, including the fact that education is “a huge market” and is capital starved. Murphy suggested that charter schools are in the ideal position to capitalize on new consumerism.

New consumerism is also well positioned to respond to globalization, characterized by increased transnational porousness vis-à-vis economic goods and services. Global permeability also affects social and cultural arrangements, but the market remains the organizing principle. Wells, Lopez, Scott, and Holme (1999) framed the emergence of charter schools as a paradox in contemporary culture. They argued that the promise of public schooling—at least as imagined in modernity—was opportunity, progress and emancipation; rhetorically these ideals benefited citizens, although the reality often fell short. These ideals of opportunity, progress and emancipation are now principles aligned with globalized culture, with market principles as the medium. Wells et al, however, described the postmodern paradox

as the realization of modern ideals through localized movements characteristic of postmodernity (e.g., in charter schools based around an Afrocentric curriculum). The paradox is that equitable recognition of all citizens—at least in educational organization and practices—is posited as most possible at the local level (e.g., charter schools). Globalization, on the other hand, is characterized by its attendant practices that maintain and magnify the “physical, economic, and political distance” (Wells et al, 1999, p. 173) between communities.

The elaborated description of Forth Academy below describes a school that is taking advantage of the charter school movement to develop a local community school. An analysis of this school’s policies and practices shows how this school is using a local initiative to (re)inscribe a traditional, neo-conservative orientation to education. The success of this project depends on individual philosophies of education. The back-to-basics approach, for example, conserves certain traditional assumptions about the content and delivery of curriculum and there is a market that responds positively to a return to more traditional values in schooling. However the concluding section that follows the case study and analysis of Forth Academy (below) questions if the Forth Academy/ALCS model is good for American schooling.

When considering the impact of social, economic, and political changes on the policies and practices of schooling, paying attention to language can give insight to the culture of an organization. A critical feature of Forth Academy’s success is the extent to which Forth’s community of students, teachers and parents has embraced the parent company’s philosophies. Nowhere was this more evident than in the common language that community members used to discuss the school. As will be elaborated below, the language of each mapped closely onto the language expressed by ALCS in school materials and published information.

The degree to which ALCS philosophy is embraced and articulated by members of the Forth Academy community exemplifies the socio-cultural shaping of experience through the use of common language. As Vygotsky (1986) suggested, language is adopted and spoken by individuals as they become members of a community. Language thus facilitates understanding and interaction among community members. In addition, the capacity of language to reflect understanding—or alternatively to shape understanding—is an issue taken on in postmodern philosophies of language. Foucault (1972), for example, articulated a theory of discourse that suggested that discourse itself creates subjects and knowledge. From this perspective, the common script shared by members of the Forth Academy community is a marker of ALCS’s success in creating a shared understanding of schooling appropriate for children. Paying attention to the language of Forth and ALCS community members, in italics below, sheds insight into the success of ALCS in creating a school culture consistent with company beliefs.

Educational Philosophy

Hirsch... presents a frontal attack aimed at providing a programmatic language with which to defend schools as cultural sites; that is, as institutions responsible for reproducing the knowledge and values necessary to advance the historical values of Western culture. (Giroux, 1992, p. 94)

Forth Academy's ALCS-prepared charter included four focus areas for the development of the school and its students: (1) a back-to-basics approach; (2) an emphasis on moral guidance; (3) the importance of parental involvement; and (4) a structured discipline approach. The driving belief of the school is that "all students can learn." This structure is articulated by American Legacy Charter Schools, and all of their schools operate according to this ideology.

As described by the principal, the back-to-basics curriculum offered by Forth Academy is "*closely aligned*" with the Hirsch Core Knowledge Sequence. The alignment is close enough that ALCS recommends that parents buy Hirsch Core Knowledge texts (e.g., *What Your 1st Grader Needs to Know*) to familiarize themselves with the curriculum and support students in homework. According to the principal, the Hirsch Core Knowledge Sequence constitutes 50% of the ALCS curriculum, and it figures prominently in the disciplines of math, history, geography, government, science, English and reading. The Hirsch program emphasizes the importance of a core, standard body of knowledge. Additional key elements of the curriculum include Saxon Math, based on "repetition, review and retention," as well as a phonics-based approach to reading.

Company representatives indicated that the curriculum is a non-negotiable item: "*Our program is our program. We're not going to have changes to that. We want to allow innovation, but with the strong core curriculum. Teachers can supplement and complement but not supplant the curriculum.*" Another company representative continued: "*They teach things over and over. They teach something, go back and repeat it... they burn it in with repetition.*"

The chosen curricula and company policy at Forth Academy expect teachers to use a teacher-directed pedagogical approach in which teachers are leaders and direct everything that happens during lessons. ALCS literature states that such classrooms provide "rich opportunities" for student mastery of important bodies of knowledge. It is ALCS belief that these "important, timeless concepts" will prepare students to be lifelong learners. However, while acknowledging that children have a natural curiosity that drives investigations of the world around them, ALCS expresses concern that "they do not always know what is truly important and what merely satisfies their curiosity." The ALCS approach therefore rejects "the current fad of child-centered learning and allowing children to learn whatever interests them whenever they are interested." School staff has embraced the elements of ALCS-provided philosophy such that members of the community speak the company policy with ease. The school day is organized so that all students begin

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the day with morning work. One teacher described the efficiency of the approach: “*Students get to work right away. There is no socialization going on with their morning work. Kids get right to work because it’s expected and everyone else is doing it. That’s the line, that’s the mark, boom.*” At 8:30, the school gathers in the gymnasium for a morning assembly. Company literature describes the purposes of the assembly: “. . . to highlight student accomplishments, reinforce virtues, and celebrate national patriotism.” Accordingly, morning assembly begins with the Pledge of Allegiance and the National Anthem, followed by the state pledge and a Forth Academy Student Pledge, modeled on ALCS goals:

We are proud to be Forth Academy students.

We strive to achieve academic excellence.

We show high moral character.

We strive to realize our potential.

We work hard to prepare for the future.

Also discussed during morning assembly is the virtue of the month. Each month of the school year is dedicated to the study of a virtue (e.g., wisdom, justice, temperance, prudence, fortitude, etc.). No custodial service during the school day and unlocked lockers were offered by the school’s principal as symbols of the virtues in action. The school does not require uniforms but has a dress code requiring white or navy collared shirts and starched navy or khaki pants or jumpers. Students can pay for the privilege to wear jeans once a month on “Blue Jeans Day” if they contribute \$1.00 to school fundraising efforts. ALCS offers “spirit clothing” for purchase on the company website; that website is accessible through a link from the Forth Academy site.

Forth Academy teachers are supportive of the school’s (and ALCS) program. One said: “*Forth provides three things not heard in other schools. We talk about morality, academic excellence, and parental involvement.*” Another agreed that “*we’re morally straight and academically sound.*” Students are also familiar with the ALCS philosophy. When asked what their school was all about, fourth grade students responded with “*academic excellence,*” and “*moral character.*” One added that “*we’re a lot more morally focused and you can learn more like this. Teachers believe in you and we’re learning things we should have learned last year in public school.*”

“Student mastery” is the guiding expectation at Forth Academy. According to company materials, “it is essential that students master subject matter in one grade before moving on to the next,” therefore they have adopted a policy of no social promotion. Concerned parents attended a board meeting (that coincided with the site visit) because they heard a rumor that the school was going to honor a parent’s request and promote a student in spite of policy. The concerned parents, however, articulated that “*We came here for something better,*” meaning they were dissatisfied with the promotion of students in public schools and were attracted to ALCS policy of no social promotion. The discussion was shelved for next meeting, but the

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example demonstrates the success of ALCS's marketing of a particular mission for their school. During a parent interview, one parent shared anecdotally that another parent had been quite vocal at a board meeting against the Title I program at Forth Academy because he was concerned that it reflected poorly on the school and students. These parent concerns suggest that they were deeply invested in the language of excellence and accountability espoused in ALCS literature. Social promotion and Title I programs seemed to challenge the ALCS rhetorical stance of "educational excellence."

Forth Academy's emphasis on moral education is an important addition to the back-to-basics curriculum. According to school materials and website, the moral education focus is based on "universal" cardinal virtues of justice, temperance, prudence, and fortitude and is expressed through highlighting monthly character qualities such as responsibility, respect, cooperation, courage and perseverance. When asked to talk about what makes their school unique, for example, students responded "*The moral focus; how you're about showing character traits. I like it a lot because at my old school we didn't do it. I like seeing [the moral focus] on the report card.*" And from a 4th grader: "*They've got more rules and we can learn more because in other schools there are not as many rules.*" Parents are also supportive of this program. One parent indicated she chose Forth Academy because "*I knew they would have strict discipline and I like the virtues approach because it reinforces our home life.*"

The back-to-basics approach and focus on moral education are two central components of the Forth Academy/ALCS program and these practices have clearly been embraced by school community members. The next section discusses another central component of the program, namely a business orientation to school practices.

The Corporate Model as Organizing Philosophy

The logic here is that consumer-based control and accountability are simply a third act in the play known as school governance, an act that follows the professionally controlled governance structures that have dominated education for the past 75 years . . . [that] displace the more democratically based models of school governance that characterized education in its formative years in the United States. (Murphy, 1999, p. 405)

As demonstrated in the list of the characteristics common to American Legacy Charter Schools (i.e., back to basics; character development programs; parental involvement; a business approach; outsourcing; centralization; performance-based compensation; language of general managers and stakeholders), Forth Academy operates according to a corporate policy highly attuned to market practices in education. The languages of the school and its members clearly reflect the reach of this policy. The focus on market practice is not unique vis-à-vis the larger culture of accountability that characterizes contemporary education, although it stands in contrast to alternative visions of reform articulated by schools

and educators seeking to create newer, more innovative approaches to education less aligned with market principles.

Forth Academy's market-driven emphasis is also not unique among charter schools, for many charters are designed and marketed to address perceived shortcomings in contemporary schooling (RPP International, 2000). Charter schools frequently open in reaction or opposition to existing practices in public schools. In the case of Forth Academy, the irony is that this charter school was opened by a national company that *assumed* (or perhaps projected) local needs, and designed what could be considered a one-size-fits-all approach to education. The consumer-based control and accountability approach described by Murphy (1999) is manipulated by ALCS to create a school that seemingly addresses the perceived pitfalls of public schooling (e.g., lack of challenge for achieving students; over-crowding; increased violence) through a common script (Willinsky, 1989) that presumably neutralizes the risk that educators might shortchange students.

In an interview with the principal of Forth Academy, he suggested that ALCS schools resemble Wal-Mart in the sense that the schools are uniform—not only in their physical similarities but also in the operational similarities as designed by ALCS policies and practices. While the principal introduced the Wal-Mart analogy as a means of describing the uniformity of the physical features and certain administrative functions, there are many elements of Forth Academy and other ALCS schools that make the corporate model suggested in the Wal-Mart analogy insightful, including the business approach, decision-making procedures, financial structures of the school, and shared language in the school community.

Business Model

Forth Academy's principal is considered the school's general manager by ALCS. He has a fleet of manuals that describe the operation of ALCS academies, manuals designed to make the school, in his words, "*dummy proof*." According to a company representative, "*The schools are more alike than different.... They have different principals with different administrative styles, but the three tenets of ALCS are the same: Back to Basics, Strong Moral Focus, and Parental Involvement.*" To insure consistency among schools, ALCS provides a Forth Campus Manual, a School Operations Manual, a Principal's Manual, an Engineering/Traffic Flow Plan Manual, and a Curriculum Manual. These sit on a shelf behind the principal's desk, each with standardized forms to streamline school processes.

Following ALCS policy in which the principal is the general manager, teachers are considered stockholders. As stockholders, all teachers were flown to company headquarters for extensive training in ALCS curriculum and pedagogy before the school opened, and new teachers visit company headquarters to be oriented to the company's chosen curriculum and pedagogical style. Students knew about the teacher training and referred to it as "*boot camp for teachers*." Teachers in ALCS

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schools are not given tenure, for company policy holds that tenure “breeds mediocrity.” Teachers are, however, given stock options. In addition, school staff are given bonuses based on school enrollment, test scores, parent satisfaction surveys, and teacher evaluations.

Finally, parents and their children are consumers at ALCS schools. The *parent* as consumer, however, is the central feature of ALCS materials and discourse. For example, schools are “*a partnership with parents*” (company representative); parent satisfaction is measured twice a year and “customer feedback” shapes future projects; schools are based on what parents “want most for their children;” and ALCS schools hire Parent Ambassadors. ALCS schools hire a Parent Ambassador because, according to a company official, “*a happy parent says a lot.*” The Parent Ambassador acts as liaison to current and prospective parents for ALCS and school staff. The interview with the ambassador revealed a strong advocate for Forth Academy. However, she also finds herself confronted by other parents who want to push Forth to realize their expectations. In addition to bringing parents’ concerns over the Title I program to the board, she characterizes a significant amount of feedback as race-based: “*In terms of what I hear, from white parents I hear that there are too many black kids here. From black parents, I hear that white parents run the school. It can be overwhelming.*” These comments (along with complaints about Title I programs) suggest that some parents see in Forth Academy the potential to return to a model of schooling unburdened by the responsibility to educate *all* students, and preferring a curriculum focus on white middle class values (e.g., Hirsch Core Knowledge). At the same time, it seems that African American parents see in Forth the possibility of a program that will bring African American parents into decision-making roles.

Decision-Making Procedures

Similar to the centralized procedures articulated in a variety of manuals and forms, decision-making among ALCS schools is also concentrated at the corporate level. While the principal indicated that he was trying to establish greater autonomy at the school level, he also acknowledged that centralized decision-making both makes individual schools more accountable and frees him to focus more on students and their families.

The site visit to Forth Academy coincided with a school board meeting for which ALCS officials flew in on the company jet from company headquarters in another state, a standard practice for board meetings. The presence of company officials at school events receives a positive reception by teachers. One teacher said: “*I appreciate seeing the president and staff of the company in the classroom. Some people work for a company and never see their president.*” Another continued: “*There have been some organization and communication issues due to being a new school. For example, some things come down from the home office on short notice,*

but they make up for it with thanks and appreciation.” A third teacher elaborated: “*The whole company is very supportive . . . they say thank you and tell you you’re doing a good job.*” These quotes demonstrate that teachers recognize that ALCS is a company and also suggest their awareness of the company as the entity that establishes school policy and curriculum. While the principal indicated he might prefer more autonomy in decision-making, the teachers seemed to enjoy their position as stockholders.

Financial and Organizational Structures

Centralization also characterized financial arrangements at Forth Academy. At the time of the visit, the school budget of 1.6 million dollars was controlled by ALCS. ALCS built the school and owns the facility; Forth Academy rents the facility from ALCS. Per-pupil allocations from the state are deposited to an account maintained by ALCS. According to the visiting company officers, ALCS established a break-even point at which Forth Academy would realize the for-profit model of ALCS schools, in this case 500 students. At the time of the visit, just over 300 students were enrolled. In the Fall of 2004, 604 students were enrolled, over the break-even level of 500 students but still shy of an ALCS goal of 700 students. ALCS has an accounting department that manages budgeting concerns for their charter schools, including payroll and invoices. The principal deferred interview questions about budget matters to company representatives. He does, however, manage a line-item school budget.

Every interview and focus group mentioned the positive impact of Forth Academy’s principal to the success of the school and satisfaction of parents, students, and teachers. One parent said “*I’m jealous of him because my child loves him so much!*” Teachers indicated that he *shared decision-making at the school, respected all opinions, worked for teacher consensus and trusted teachers’ opinions*. The principal, however, was in a curious position as leader of a school that was highly programmed by parent company policies and practices. As a new administrator in a new school, he indicated that he was not always aware of ALCS plans for the school.

The school board is composed of a local board chair, four local board members, and two company representatives. Parents are also invited to attend board meetings. The board maintains a \$35,000 discretionary fund allocated according to suggestions from school staff and parents. During the school board meeting that coincided with the site visit, \$1,500.00 was allocated to support the attendance of three Forth Academy teachers at a summer institute run by Hirsch Core Knowledge. In addition, \$3,500.00 was allocated for a contract with an accountant—chosen by ALCS—for a charter required audit.

The school keeps in touch with parents though the use of a school-based web site for students, teachers, and parents. Forth Academy’s website is maintained by

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ALCS, and while some content on the site is specific to Forth, the majority of content about the school links to the ALCS site. The principal (monthly) and teachers (weekly) post newsletters to the web page, and ALCS contributes material on a regular basis. Teachers post up-to-date grade information to the site, accessible to parents through a user-identification system. It is estimated that only about 25% of parents actively use the site.

Parent satisfaction surveys are administered twice a year. At the time of the visit, the most recent parent survey had returned 149 surveys. Findings indicated that 97% agreed that the school promoted parental involvement and 97% agreed that the school promoted moral guidance. Ninety-two percent of the parents were satisfied with the education their child was receiving. Ninety-three percent of parents agreed that “my child enjoys attending this school” and 96% of parents would recommend Forth Academy to others. Also seen at the time of the visit was a parent petition in the office asking ALCS to extend Forth Academy through high school; close to 300 signatures had been collected.

Local Reaction

In his report at the school board meeting, the principal discussed the impact of Forth Academy on the local school district. He reported that three new public middle schools were opening in the district the following year, each with a back-to-basics focus similar to Forth Academy’s. The principal credited the positive community reception of Forth Academy with the public school district’s decision to adopt focus areas similar to the ALCS program, namely parent involvement, a moral focus, and back to basics approach. The principal also learned that one new school chose to adopt the Hirsch Core Knowledge curriculum. His report is in keeping with the argument that competition introduced with the arrival of charter schools leads to change at other public schools, although the extent to which Hirsch Core Knowledge can be considered an innovation is subject to debate (see Giroux, 1992). The parent ambassador believes that Forth can only have a positive impact on the Forth community of parents and students as well as on the local community. “*We can’t affect the public school community in a negative way because we’ll feed these children into public high schools.*” In other words, the return or entry of Forth Academy students into the local public school system would elevate the public school program.

In keeping with the tepid-to-hostile reception of charter schools from local educational agencies (Kelly, 2001), however, at the time that ALCS submitted the charter for Forth Academy to the state, a Statement of Impact letter from the local county board of education was sent to the state detailing the threats the proposed charter posed to the local community. The letter articulated several concerns of the local school board, including the potential financial impact of lost funds to the local school district based on charter school enrollment, and the potential educational

impact of Forth Academy given that the proposed charter did *not* appear to offer a program too dissimilar from that offered by local schools. Concern was also expressed about the possibility of large class sizes given projected enrollment figures. In other words, the local board suggested that the proposed school did not measure up as an innovative possibility.

An additional concern raised in the letter was that the lack of transportation provided by the charter school would make it inaccessible to students of limited financial means. Interestingly, this concern appeared to be driven by the subsequent impact on test scores rather than a concern over access to the school by a diverse student population. In a state deeply invested in high-stakes testing, where test scores have become the bottom line, the LEA concern was that enrolling only students whose parents could afford to drive them to school (read middle class white families) would produce higher test scores, leaving lower achieving students in traditional public schools where scores were seemingly bound to drop. A final concern raised by the local school board was the idea that the school lacked *local* leadership and involvement.

Discussion

Returning to the paradox introduced by Wells et al (1999) in regards to the emergence of charter schools and their potential impact on issues of innovation and school choice, they state:

We see charter schools as being caught between the politics of modernity, in which the liberal project promised—often unsuccessfully—to provide more equal distribution of material resources along with universal rights and freedoms, and the politics of postmodernity, which are punctuated by fragmented social movements, identity politics, and the struggle for recognition. (p. 174)

In considering Forth Academy in light of the postmodern paradox, this school and its parent company have escaped capture in the paradox by exploiting the politics of school reform in the service of *and* by means of maintaining the politics and practices of modernity. The Hirsch Core Knowledge program exemplifies the ALCS model of innovation. As Giroux (1992) argued, however, this model of education represents “the latest cultural offensive by the new elitists to rewrite the past and construct the present from the perspective of the privileged and the powerful” (p. 95). Based in a return to canonical texts that hold Western culture, literature, and achievements as the ideal, Giroux continues that this “abstract[s] the liberal arts from the intense problems and issues of public life” (p. 96). Public life, in other words, is more complex than the interests of one demographic (the white, the male, the privileged), and basing curriculum and pedagogy on that demographic may limit points of interest and entrance for all students.

As described by Kimball (1986), the curricular choices of ALCS and Forth Academy exemplify the aims of modernity through articulation of the “artes

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liberals,” a model of education based on seven characteristics: (1) Training citizens (orators) to lead society through (2) identification of true virtues; (3) commitment to these virtues (4) elevates the student; (5) the authority of great texts (6) relate true virtues that must (7) be embraced for their own sake (p. 228). The academic program advanced by American Legacy Charter Schools is clearly in the tradition of the artes liberales. Kimball contrasted the traditional model with a liberal-free model more reminiscent of postmodernity in which (1) epistemological skepticism (2) underlies free and (3) intellectual search for truth which is forever elusive; all possible views must (4) be tolerated and given equal hearing; (5) the final decision is left to individuals (6) who pursue truth for personal reasons. This liberal free model is more attuned to the importance of the local and particular and in the contingent nature of truth claims. Kimball provides a lens for identifying the traditional educational values that undergird Forth Academy’s academic program, a program clearly aligned with traditional and universal values.

The one-size-fits-all critique of a program like Forth’s mirrors concerns about a new globalized culture that compresses diversity and assumes a culture of consumers. Forth Academy’s principal introduced the idea of similarity between his charter school and Wal-Mart, and given that charter schools and Wal-Mart can be seen as products of social, economic, and political shifts in contemporary culture, this analogy merits exploration. Frontline, a PBS public affairs program, aired television programs and produced web materials in 2004 asking the question: *Is Wal-Mart Good for America?* (Frontline, 2004). This question has relevance for a school and company taking advantage of a local movement to develop schools based on a company at the forefront of globalization, begging the question “Is Wal-Mart good for education?”

Contributors to the Frontline program offer analyses of Wal-Mart that have merit to an evaluation of Forth Academy and American Legacy Charter Schools. Hedrick Smith, the Frontline correspondent for the report, describes Wal-Mart:

Wal-Mart’s power and influence are awesome. By figuring out how to exploit two powerful forces that converged in the 1990s—the rise of information technology and the explosion of the global economy—Wal-Mart has dramatically changed the balance of power in the world of business.

Considering ALCS schools crafted in the Wal-Mart image leaves the program open to scrutiny for its blending of educational and economic motives. ALCS *also* figured out how to exploit two powerful forces—the neo-liberal interpretation of the charter school movement and the rhetorical force of the accountability movement. Forth Academy is using the potentially innovative charter school legislation to reinscribe traditional models in education. In this instance, two of the schools’ strongest elements: the business model of efficiency that dictates school administrative practices and the back to basics, moral education that dictates the school’s pedagogical practice are representative of modernity.

Much of the success of ALCS schools, including Forth Academy, seems to be the extent to which community members, including school staff, parents, students and board members buy into the product that ALCS sells. Much of this appears to happen through the development of a shared culture and is manifested in the common language shared by community members. Everyone interviewed spoke the “company line” with ease. A seemingly ironic statement on the parent company website speaks of schools that are “crafted from the ground up,” a turn of phrase that demonstrates ALCS’s skill in presenting their product as a local movement when the reality is far from the nurturance of a local movement; the “crafting” of the product actually happened at company headquarters, exploiting a local movement for corporate gains. The founder, after all, is described as an entrepreneur.

According to Anderson (2001), the consumer based approach in contemporary education is exemplified in the language of educational administration that has borrowed vocabulary from business, the military, engineering, and industrial psychology, “all fields that have been socially constructed as high in status, legitimacy, and efficiency” (p. 205). The vocabularies of democracy, participation, and diversity are also influential as administrators in education are acutely aware of their public function and work to legitimate their organizations to multiple constituencies. The language used to talk about education, however, serves to “[hide] human agency” (p. 205). Anderson described administrative language according to the function it plays:

This legitimation role . . . produces a discourse similar to that of presidential candidates who use language in such a way as to not offend any particular constituency. (p. 211)

This consumer-attentive language homogenizes both language and its interlocutors, however, and may also mask the messiness of schooling in its efforts to project an image of control. Language, then, can be understood as a central factor in shaping the identity and culture of a school, and in the case of ALCS schools in general, and Forth Academy in particular, language serves as powerful unifying force.

Brink Lindsey, an economist at the Cato Institute, was a consultant to the Frontline program on Wal-Mart and offers a perspective for exploring the merits of the ALCS approach to charter school development:

I think Wal-Mart is good for America. Wal-Mart is doing what America is all about, the American market economy is all about, which is producing things consumers want to buy. . . . It is not good for its competitors. They have a tough time keeping up.

In this quote we have the recognition of traditional U.S. values borne of modernity. There is the invocation of “what America is all about,” and a survival-of-the-fittest ethic based in competition. Working the analogy between Wal-Mart and ALCS schools, there is a similar recognition of traditional values in the back-to-basics program, the moral education focus of the school, and in recognition of the power of individual choice as important to personal satisfaction. Perhaps most significant

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is the importance of the consumer and customer satisfaction. ALCS web materials indicate that their program is a “partnership with parents” based on what parents “want most for children.” Parent satisfaction, as measured in twice-yearly surveys, is clearly important to the success of the ALCS program. In addition, the Parent Ambassador program serves a critical role in maintaining parent satisfaction and in the recruitment of new families for the school.

Another Frontline commentator, sociology professor Edna Bonacich of the University of California, Riverside, calls into question Wal-Mart’s consumer focus as the bottom line focus for company efforts. She says:

On the one hand, you can say that poor people need cheaper goods, and this is a tremendous service for the United States. But on the other hand, that is ignoring that people are not just consumers, but they also are workers, and they are citizens, and they have other interests besides being a consumer.

Applying this quotation to Forth Academy and American Legacy Charter Schools calls into question ALCS’s bottom-line focus on parents as consumers. Following this model, students become the second tier audience for ALCS products, and are in some sense little more than products themselves as school success and parent satisfaction are measured by student performance. While this characteristic is not necessarily unique to charter schools in contemporary educational culture, ALCS has chosen to intensify the importance of product by selling accelerated rates of student achievement as an indicator of their program’s effectiveness.

What remains to be determined are where the business model of schooling and *its* needs get in the way of what often attracts students and families to charter schools in the first place—including the small size and “family” feel as well as a responsive curriculum. If a significant contribution to the family culture of charter schools is the shared sense of purpose that motivated families to *develop* charters, what happens when that activity is assumed by a corporation with profit motives in mind? Parents, students, and educators at Forth Academy have embraced the principles and language of ALCS schools, but how long can a program that reproduces a model of schooling with questionable benefits to the cultural experiences of *all* students sustain support from a community of diverse families? Willinsky (1998) challenged educators to critically examine the curriculum that Hirsch and his neo-conservative colleagues would return us to, arguing with Foucault (1972) that Hirsch et al teach to “the great historico-transcendental destiny of the Occident” (Foucault, p. 210). This vision is borne of the imperial project, a “sense of destiny” (Willinsky, 1998, p. 251) that resulted in a division of the world.

Murphy (1999) argued that the culture of new consumerism is characterized by changes in the economic, social, and political landscape. The global phenomenon of Wal-Mart both reflects and drives the reemergence of market influences in economic, social and political decision making. Wal-Mart’s status as a model for late 20th century capitalism, however, is the subject of sustained and impassioned debate,

and its potential as a model for schooling merits continued study. This case of Forth Academy explores the exploitation of a school reform initiative to take schools back to a future that reinscribes traditional neo-conservative principles. Such principles have questionable merit for children in an increasingly multicultural world.

Notes

¹ Forth Academy is a pseudonym.

² A pseudonym.

³ North Carolina Charter school legislation requires licensure for 75% of K-5 charter teachers and 50% of 6-12 charter teachers.

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