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ABSTRACT

Over the past few years, charter schools have received dramatic popular support. An overview of charter schools, including the arguments of their supporters and critics, is presented in this report. The text presents assumptions about the charter movement and discusses their strengths and weaknesses through a research-based synthesis. Advocates of charter schools claim that these schools illustrate the brute power of the market economy and that its principles can be applied to public schools. Critics, though, point to the tremendous variability of charter schools, and warn that it will be difficult to pinpoint educational outcomes when educational programs differ greatly from school to school. Interviews with Bruno V. Manno, Joe Schneider, Andrea Di Lorenzo, and Alex Medler, four individuals who have differing perspectives on charter schools are provided. In these interviews the misconceptions, concerns, purpose, evaluation, parental involvement, and broad educational purposes of charter schools are all addressed. It is hoped that the overview and interviews will expand available knowledge about schools and inform the current debate. A brief self-evaluation tool for school staff who are considering the option of charter schools is presented, followed by a selected 30-item bibliography of references and Internet sites that provide more information on charter schools. (RJM)

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New LEADERS
FOR TOMORROW'S SCHOOLS

Charter Schools: The Challenge To Public Education

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In only a few years, charter schools have received dramatic popular support. Their expansion has been equally noteworthy. Charter legislation exists in 21 states, and President Clinton has called for federal start-up funding for charter schools to be expanded to $100 million in 1998. Most education journals have featured articles on some aspect of charter schools, and Internet sites offering information continue to grow at an exponential pace. Clearly, charter schools have captured the nation's imagination.

What makes charter schools so attractive? Are the hopes of their advocates justified or myopic? What do they offer students, school staff, and parents? What are their limitations? Are charter schools an innovation that will spark widescale reform, or will their course be meteoric, brief, and disappointing?

In this issue, we view charter schools through a variety of lenses. In our opening essay, we examine the arguments of both charter school advocates and critics. We present assumptions about the charter movement and discuss their strengths and weaknesses through a research-based synthesis intended to provoke more questions about charter schools.

Next we present interviews with four individuals who have differing perspectives on charter schools: Bruno V. Manno of the Hudson Institute; Joe Schneider, Deputy Executive Director of the American Association of School Administrators; Andrea DiLorenzo, Co-Director of the National Education Association's Charter Schools Initiative; and Alex Medler, Policy Analyst for the Education Commission of the States.

Through the opening synthesis and the interviews, we hope both to expand the available knowledge base and inform the current debate. Following the interviews, we offer a brief self-evaluation tool for school staff who are considering the option of charter schools. Finally, we provide a selected bibliography of references and Internet sites intended to guide the reader to key information about charter schools.

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Charting New Waters

Anne Turnbaugh Lockwood

If you are a student who attends one of the nation's charter schools, your educational program was probably shaped directly by your parents and school staff—molded and fashioned to have a deliberate, distinct focus. Your school may be completely online, with all instruction conducted by computer—with a computer for every student. Alternatively, your school's curriculum might not seek educational solutions in technology; instead, it might focus on the tenets of good character, emphasize community service, or teach the precepts of E. D. Hirsch's cultural literacy.

Whether your school was a public school that converted to charter status or was created anew, it is most likely smaller than other schools in your district. Your parents have a vital interest in the daily life of your school. In fact, you see your parents and the parents of your friends both at home *and* at school, since they volunteer in your classroom, meet with teachers and administrators to decide business and educational matters for your school, and do additional school-related work at home.

Teachers and other staff work long hours and interact in a friendly, purposeful way that is guided by a shared vision—the essence of collaboration. Depending on your state, your teachers may come from fields other than education. Some may be recent college graduates from a variety of fields; others may have a particular expertise but no formal teacher certification. In short, flexibility abounds.

Although your school may be housed in a storefront or a business building rather than an actual school building, there are no gang graffiti, nor are there metal detectors. Everyone at your school wants to be there: your friends and peers, your parents and the parents of your classmates, and all school staff—from the principal to the cafeteria workers.

But an observer may see other facets to your life as a charter school student. If you attend a newly created charter school, it is possible that your fellow students are all just like you: if you are white and affluent, your classmates are white and affluent. If you are poor, an English language learner, or a student of color, so are your classmates. Or you may attend an alternative charter school that was created for students with behavioral problems, and you do not see mainstream students. Since your parents and others with similar views—and from similar socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds—were instrumental in forming your school, it is possible that you may rarely see or interact with students who are different from you.

Your parents are involved in your school's program, but they are exhausted. Long hours of volunteer work and the unexpected complexities of running a school have taken their toll. Your parents frequently observe that they just don't know enough about school finance or legal matters. Somehow, they didn't think that operating a charter school would be this demanding.

If you attend a newly created school, you may go to a substandard, crowded building that has never been used to house a school. Extracurricular activities have to be contracted out; much of what you took for granted at your former school simply isn't present.

What is the truth about charter schools? Do they breathe oxygen into a failing and moribund public school system, as their advocates believe, or do they represent renewed and vigorous divisiveness, a move away from the democratic ideals of public education, as their critics assert? Or are charter schools simply a well-intentioned but empty gesture toward reform that will fade from the contemporary educational scene?

In this essay, we attempt to provide a broad perspective on charter schools through an examination of the central arguments of both their advocates and critics. First, we look at charter schools and the forces that have propelled them to a position of national importance. Next, we present the arguments both for and against charter schools, supplementing those arguments with preliminary research findings from national reports. We conclude with questions that will become more critical as charter schools continue to grow in popularity.

Charter Schools and the Forces That Fuel Them

Charter schools emerged on the American educational landscape when the first charter school law was enacted in 1991. The total number of charter schools in existence

nationally has been estimated variously at 428 by the U. S. Department of Education (1997) and at 481 by the Education Commission of the States (1997) which counts charter schools in 16 states and the District of Columbia. Charter legislation has also burgeoned, with laws in place for charter schools in nine additional states (but no charter schools in operation) (Education Commission of the States, 1997). Perhaps the most appealing aspect of charter schools is the opportunity they extend to educators and parents to stay within the public system of education, yet create their own program and educational environment relatively free of bureaucratic restrictions.

Although people tend to refer to charter schools collectively, three distinct types exist: newly created charter schools, existing public schools that apply to convert to charter status (often called conversion schools), and private schools that convert to public, but charter, status. The most common of these are newly created schools and conversion schools.

The charter developed by the prospective operators of the charter school stipulates the learning outcomes that the school promises to achieve; in exchange for the charter, schools are freed from many of the regulations that apply to conventional public schools. Depending on the legislation in the state (commonly known as "strong" if it offers high autonomy to charter schools and "weak" if it extends low autonomy), charters are granted by a variety of entities (Wells, Grutzik, & Carnochan, 1996). Most commonly, either states or local school districts grant charters, although in states such as Michigan, universities and other organizations also have charter-granting authority. Below, we highlight some of the main beliefs that fuel the enthusiasm about charter schools.

Charter schools are seen by many as an attractive option; they offer choice but are publicly funded. Many parents and school staff find charter schools an appealing option. These individuals may have had particularly unhappy or frustrating experiences with the existing public school system or have educational dreams for their children that they do not believe will be accommodated by their local schools. They may have decided that changing their local schools is too cumbersome and difficult a process—if not impossible—and have chosen to fold their tents and move on completely to another educational option.

Although these individuals may share a general discontent with the condition of public education, they, in fact, may be an uneasy coalition of perspectives and politics drawn together under the broad umbrella of charter schools (Wells, et al., 1996). Although some reformers might prefer more aggressive choice options, such as vouchers, they will settle for charter schools because they are more acceptable to a range of people, and far less politically contentious than vouchers. As Wells and her colleagues point out, charter schools can represent an ideological compromise between reformers who believe that vouchers are key to any substantive reform of public education and those who totally oppose vouchers but are equally committed to educational reform.

Why would people with dissimilar beliefs unite under the rubric of charter schools? The apparent root of the current enthusiasm for charter schools is widespread dissatisfaction with the quality of public education and a desire for more choice (Nathan, 1996; U.S. Department of Education, 1997). Many parents, for example, who have decided that charter schools are the answer for their children are convinced that the educational programming available in their local schools is not adequately rigorous or sufficiently responsive to their children's needs. Of course, many other parents share that belief but do not plan to become active in the charter school movement.

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The charter developed by the prospective operators of the charter school stipulates the learning outcomes that the school promises to achieve; in exchange for the charter, schools are freed from many of the regulations that apply to conventional public schools.

But beyond that fundamental common bond, parents who share a common enthusiasm about charter schools may be very different. Some may be homeschoolers or Christian fundamentalists who look to the school to create an environment free from the influences of contemporary society—or they may be parents who have much more discrete goals. Some, for instance, may want a much more technologically sophisticated curriculum than that offered by the schools in their district. Some may be traditionalists and yearn for a return to basics, embracing the core knowledge and precepts of E. D. Hirsch's cultural literacy. Still others have even more finite goals: They simply want to see their children attend school, because they are poised at the brink of dropping out entirely. And there may be others who fear changing demographics in their communities, dread diversity, and want a sheltered, cloistered school existence for themselves and their children—whether they are white or minority parents. All of these individuals want a publicly funded option to the schools currently available to them through their local public school system, and they demand the opportunity to exert substantive influence over the educational program their children will receive.

School staff also approach charter schools weighted down with baggage from prior school experiences. They may have grown disenchanted with the amount of time it takes to accomplish anything new or different, no matter how small. They may find professional development unresponsive to their needs or desire more freedom to devise instruction with their colleagues and may find adequate planning time a luxury ill-afforded within the constraints of traditional public schools. Or they may simply want an authentic voice in the affairs and governance of their school.

Most charter school proponents believe that the educational bureaucracy inhibits and even prevents reform. These individuals maintain that charter schools offer flexibility, autonomy, and, therefore, change that in turn may result in improvement and freedom from bureaucratic handcuffs. Although the reasons that bring them to charter schools may vary, individuals committed to this educational option are convinced that one of the stumbling blocks to educational change can be found in the copious rules and regulations that burden public schools. In charter schools, with their increased deregulation, they see the autonomy that will permit the type of educational program that they desire.

Charter Schools: The Arguments

What do charter schools say about the ideals of democratic public education—that insist that equal access to a high-quality education for all students is paramount? To advocates and critics, charter schools make strong—but contradictory—statements about democracy. To advocates, charter schools represent perhaps the last great American educational hope within the public sector. They are not only an opportunity to secure publicly funded education for students, but also an avenue for parents, teachers, and administrators to exert more direct influence over what is taught and learned. Critics counter that charter schools and educational choice are proof positive that the ideals of the common school have been abandoned.

Advocates argue that for those parents who do not wish—or cannot afford—to opt completely out of the public school system, charter schools provide a viable, parent-driven option. They point to the parental opportunity—sometimes even a mandate—to influence significantly the educational course the school will follow, particularly in newly created charter schools (Nathan, 1996; Finn, Manno, & Bierlein, 1996). Advocates also contend that everyone in a charter school wants to be there (staff, students, and parents) and point to the power of motivation as a key factor in achieving academic success.

Charter schools have other attractive elements that appeal to advocates, particularly small school size. Advocates applaud flexibility in hiring practices, which in some states extends to hiring uncertified teaching staff. To charter school advocates this change in hiring practices offers a welcome release from ineffective teachers who cannot be readily dismissed because of tenure or union regulations. Finally, advocates contend that ineffective charter schools—unlike unsuccessful conventional public schools—will simply not be tolerated, but will be closed. In short, advocates believe that charter schools illustrate the brute power of the market economy and that its principles can be applied advantageously to public schools.

Critics, on the other hand, point to the tremendous variability of charter schools, warning that it will be difficult to pinpoint educational outcomes when educational programs differ greatly school to school. And although heightened accountability continues to be advanced as one of the strengths of charter schools, even their advocates point to the lack of uniform evaluation plans on the part of states and districts (Finn, et al., 1996). They warn that unless charter

schools are held to the accountability standards promised in their charters, they will amount to little more than institutions that may, in fact, not measure up to objective criteria. Since the degree to which student outcomes are stipulated varies from charter to charter—as does the way in which student performance will be assessed—determining whether charter schools actually deliver what they promise could be problematic. Although one could argue that the answer is to judge each charter school individually, such individualized evaluation presents another burden to an already overloaded state educational bureaucracy.

Some critics also caution that renewed and vigorous segregation of the student population could occur, because like-minded parents and educators have the freedom to create schools that cater to a specific, targeted clientele—a type of voluntary segregation that could cluster affluent students, students of color, or English language learners in their own schools. And although charter schools are not exempt from federal civil rights and special education legislation, if their operators and staff choose to market their programs only to a select clientele, they conceivably could avoid specific student populations. Advocates, of course, could counter that clustering students with similar needs in small schools with more opportunity to experience personal relationships with teachers will ensure that they will receive a better education than they would in larger, noncharter schools.

Do charter schools have the potential to resegregate the student population? Two recent reports present preliminary findings that indicate that students of color in charter schools may be represented in numbers either roughly typical of statewide averages of student racial representation or in numbers that are higher than average (U.S. Department of Education, 1997; Vanourek, Manno, Finn, & Bierlein, 1997). While neither report finds evidence of overt discriminatory practices, the meaning of this finding is open to interpretation by both advocates and critics of charter schools.

Advocates could find support for their contention that charter schools do not discriminate against students of color and, in fact, make special efforts to include them. Critics, on the other hand, could conclude that higher numbers of minority students in charter schools might represent a nascent and troubling trend toward resegregation of the student population.

In what ways do charter schools exemplify the principles of competition central to choice? A central tenet of the charter school movement is the belief that competition between schools will increase efficiency, effectiveness, and productivity (Brown, 1995; Nathan, 1997). Proponents of this view see public education as a monopoly since most families must rely upon public schools to educate their children. These advocates of choice maintain that parents and students should be able to choose their schools and still receive a publicly funded education. If parents and students select higher-performance schools, they argue, schools that do not meet performance criteria acceptable to their clients will be forced to improve or close (Hill, 1995; Nathan, 1997).

Although families usually, but not always, have some choice of their homes and neighborhoods (and thus, public school systems), advocates of choice argue that they have little or no choice about school assignments or educational programming. They maintain that excessive regulation strangles the creativity and entrepreneurial spirit needed in public schools and, in fact, is a primary reason why educational reform doesn't work long-term (Hill, 1995).

Critics of choice in its various manifestations—which include vouchers, charter schools, and magnet schools—warn that uninformed parents may lack the expertise to actively seek out information on schools other than the neighborhood schools to which their children are assigned (Moore & Davenport, 1989). These parents, they argue, are disproportionately people of color and/or low socioeconomic status. They caution that if movement out of neighborhood schools becomes too easy primarily for middle-class parents, urban schools will not close, but will serve only low-income students of color, many with special needs (Moore & Davenport, 1989).

Reformers who see choice as the answer to the woes that afflict public schools see a clear link between poor student outcomes and burdensome bureaucratic practices. They argue that practices common to public schools, such as hierarchical management and little or inadequate accountability to clients, are an impediment that can be removed—and once swept away, public schools will be able to achieve desired outcomes (Murphy, 1996). These reformers fervently believe that the solution lies in market-based reform initiatives, and thus find the appearance of charter schools to be an extremely promising innovation—as long as these schools can remain educational mavericks that will not have to comply with requirements that may accompany

federal dollars or excessively strong state requirements (Vanourek, Manno, & Finn, 1997).

But not all educators and researchers agree. Murphy (1996) points out that linking educational outcomes with the economy has made public schools and school staff convenient scapegoats and a locus of blame since they have little, if any, direct influence over the economy or employment prospects in their communities. Apple (Lockwood, 1997) asserts that placing the onus completely upon schools for poor student outcomes diverts attention from the culture of poverty found in most inner cities since businesses that formerly provided jobs to community members have relocated. He contends that poor educational outcomes need to be placed in a broader, more accurate context that recognizes that the intersection of education and the economy is more complex than pro-choice advocates would believe (Lockwood, 1997).

The promise of autonomy from regulation makes charter schools particularly appealing to people dissatisfied with the current status of public education. To educators and parents who have become frustrated with the slow pace and cumbersome bureaucracy of large school systems, deregulation equals freedom.

The arguments about choice and its potential to improve public education will continue, but one fundamental truth remains: The condition of public education does not satisfy many observers. There is a common public perception that many administrators and teachers are poorly prepared; that the curriculum is faulty and in need of reform; and that standards for academic performance are outdated, non-existent, or lack rigor. This perception has been documented in a stream of prestigious national reports, beginning with *A Nation At Risk* (1983). The key difference between reformers who believe in choice and those who do not is that advocates of choice look to schools to "jump-start the faltering economy" (Murphy, 1996, p. 151)—which critics of choice see as beyond the power of schools to effect.

Opponents of choice also believe that it has the potential to threaten communities (Margonis & Parker, 1995, p. 376). They argue that focusing on deregulation diverts attention from the possibility of even more segregation of racial and ethnic minorities (1995, p. 377), which may result from the public exercising its choice options. The practice of white flight, for example, can be transformed by choice advocates into a benign and legitimate search for more effective schools (Margonis & Parker, 1995, p. 378).

In what ways might the autonomy of charter schools lead to school success? The promise of autonomy from regulation makes charter schools particularly appealing to people dissatisfied with the current status of public education. To educators and parents who have become frustrated with the slow pace and cumbersome bureaucracy of large school systems, deregulation equals freedom. They point to the traditional public school system's general lack of flexibility in educational programming, its creaking and laborious pace, its inability to respond quickly and effectively to the concerns of parents and students, and its legal requirement to abide by union regulations that govern teacher contracts.

But what are the facts about charter schools and autonomy? Contrary to the perception that charter schools are a free educational enterprise zone, they actually enjoy autonomy in amounts that vary considerably from state to state (Wohlstetter, Wenning, & Briggs, 1995). If the state grants the charter, or if charters are available from entities other than the local school district, autonomy is usually more substantial. Arizona and Massachusetts, for example, are two states that have strong state legislation that guarantees considerable charter school autonomy.

What fiscal issues confront charter schools and might imperil their progress? A myriad of fiscal issues face charter schools; detailing each issue is beyond the scope of this publication. However, an overriding fiscal issue is apparent in funding disparities that could jeopardize the future of charter schools. These uneven policies and allocations result in marginal facilities, immediate cash flow problems,

and the perception that charter schools are lodged on the educational fringe—certainly not an entity to be taken seriously or that shows that it will endure.

Bierlein and Fulton (1996) point out that charter schools formed under weaker laws have few finance concerns; their charters are granted by the local district and their funding is secure. Apparently, the tradeoff for autonomy is funding that is more precarious. Schneider and Dianda (1995) have called this "reform on the cheap," pointing out that charter schools appeal to policymakers because they offer the opportunity to accomplish a type of educational reform and yet not cost additional money—an apparently ideal situation.

Although schools whose charters are granted by the local district have fewer financial woes, they face different financial concerns than do state-granted charter schools (Bierlein & Fulton, 1996). These include limited or no access to the fund for local operations, no access to capital funds, limited access to district-based state or federal funding, cash-flow problems, and reimbursement based on the time students spend in school (Bierlein & Fulton, 1996).

What do flexible staffing practices in charter schools suggest? Advocates of charter schools are particularly pleased with the opportunity to avoid union restrictions and the requirements of collective bargaining, although this freedom is dependent upon who grants the charter. They argue (Finn, et al., 1996) that many charter school teachers show little desire to be affiliated with a union, preferring whatever other benefits are offered by the school, such as an opportunity to personalize instruction, exert more influence over curricula, or participate in key decisions about the course of the school.

Teacher unions, on the other hand, are concerned with uneven hiring policies and unequal protection afforded charter school teachers and teachers in conventional public schools. In some states, charter schools can hire uncertified staff or even individuals without college educations (Education Commission of the States [ECS], 1996). Unions view this as a real danger to the quality of teachers' worklives and argue that the quality of instruction will suffer if charter schools do, in fact, hire uncertified instructional staff.

How prevalent are these hiring practices? In 13 states, it is permissible for a percentage of noncertified staff to teach in charter schools without alternative certification (ECS, 1996); and in all states that currently have charter schools (including the District of Columbia), teachers are the legal employees of the charter school, not the local district (ECS, 1996).

Depending on the state, other issues that relate to staffing raise concerns for observers of charter schools. In Colorado, for example, teacher evaluations must be conducted by a licensed administrator, but charter schools have obtained waivers from this requirement because their staff did not always include licensed administrators. Instead, teacher evaluations have been conducted by parents, staff, and governing board members (Mulholland, 1996), which could give rise to many concerns about the level of expertise of the evaluators as well as possibly quixotic or whimsical evaluations. Advocates of this practice, however, could argue that administrator evaluations are equally questionable and that a broader evaluation process is inherently more democratic.

Do charter schools promote student achievement? Whether charter schools succeed in promoting student achievement is the central question to which their advocates will have to produce a positive answer. Although advocates of charter schools argue that improved student achievement and heightened accountability are perhaps the key elements of the schools—and contend that charter schools enjoy no security and may be closed if they do not meet the outcomes promised in their charters—there is no settled evidence to date on charter schools' effect on student achievement. A number of research projects are under way, however, to examine the achievement issue as well as other issues, including studies sponsored by the National Education Association, the U.S. Department of Education, and the Hudson Institute.

While most research on charter schools has focused on identifying barriers to implementation (Finn et al., 1996; Corwin & Flaherty, 1995), two current reports do reach preliminary conclusions about student achievement.

Vanourek, Manno, Finn, and Bierlein (1997), in their charter school study report for the Hudson Institute, conclude that in the 50 charter schools they studied in 10 states, achievement among students doing either "excellent" or "good" work rose 23.4 percent for African Americans and 21.8 percent for Hispanics (p. 1). In self-reports, charter school students in their study report their performance is better than in previous schools attended (p. 3).

In the same report, the authors report that the parents of charter school students report higher achievement for their children since they enrolled in charter schools. Of these parents, 8.2 percent whose children fell into the "below average" group at their previous schools indicate that their children are now doing work that could be rated "excellent," while 23.8 percent conclude that their children are now doing work that is "above average" (p. 3). The authors also write that out of 10,000 students in the 50 schools in the study, 814 have moved out of the poor/failing category (Vanourek, Manno, Finn, and Bierlein, 1997, p. 3). Although these reports of students and parents are encouraging, the authors note that the

achievement of students in their study needs to be demonstrated on statewide assessments.

The U.S. Department of Education (1997), in its four-year study of charter schools, will conduct an annual survey of all charter schools, conduct an ethnographic study of a stratified random sample of 72 charter schools, collect longitudinal data on student achievement at those 72 schools, and conduct site visits and student testing at 28 matched comparison schools (p. 1). In its first-year report, the Department did not include specific achievement data for students enrolled in charter schools.

Two other reports are worthy of mention because of concerns they raise about the issues of evaluation and accountability, which tie directly to improving student achievement. In a 1995 report, the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) examined the instructional programs of different charter schools, their relationships with districts, and their accountability systems. Perhaps most troubling to those in favor of heightened accountability was the finding that there was considerable diversity in the ways in which students were assessed; in addition, they found that the specificity with which outcomes were stated in charters varied considerably.

The Hudson Institute's preliminary report of research on selected charter schools (Finn et al., 1996) pointed to the lack of carefully conceived state evaluation plans for charter schools. Finn and his colleagues, who are staunch advocates of charter schools, are especially concerned that policymakers will want hard data that charter schools are living up to the terms of their charters and producing positive outcomes. But charter school critics might well argue that, sloppy accountability mechanisms will make it easier for charter schools to continue, and these critics could contend that since these schools are publicly funded, uniform evaluation of student progress needs to be ensured so that educational programs do not become whimsical.

The Future of Charter Schools

If charter schools continue to burgeon in popularity—which seems likely given increased federal support—key questions will emerge that will require the attention of educators and the public alike. As we conclude this essay, we point to a few of the especially compelling issues that face the operators of charter schools as well as local public school systems.

If a charter school is forced to close, how will its students be reabsorbed into the local public school system? Given the variability of educational programs inherent to charter schools—and advanced by advocates as a strength of charters—it is conceivable that a student who reenrolls in his or her local school may experience difficulties. It is theoretically possible for a student to be successful in a charter school with a particular emphasis and be equally unsuccessful if compelled to return to the local public school because the curricula of the two schools do not match.

How will charter schools be evaluated in ways that both avoid excessive regulation, yet adequately document student progress? Conventional public schools must comply with state regulations, providing various indicators of student progress, teacher qualifications, and the like on an annual basis. While advocates of charter schools decry excessive regulation, they also insist on heightened accountability. One can assume that, although the educational programs offered by charter schools continue to vary dramatically, the basics must be accomplished. Differences in the charter-granting body, however, lead to differences in how outcomes are assessed. It would seem that evaluation and accountability plans need to be developed that allow charters to enjoy their autonomy and yet ensure that high standards are met.

Is there special expertise that charter school administrators and teaching staff need to be adequately prepared for their work? Teacher education programs are just now beginning to deal with issues that relate to changing demographics and increasing diversity of the student population, as well as broader issues that relate to school restructuring and reform. Certainly the majority of teacher education programs are not equipped to deal with issues related to educational entrepreneurship. Prospective teachers and school administrators are trained to conform to state and district statutes. Even so, many teachers report that their teacher preparation was inadequate, out of date, or insufficient. The new demands of charter schools—the need to know more than curriculum and instruction; and governance, school finance, and legal issues—indicate that teacher and administrator preservice education will have to accommodate these needs. Professional development will need to follow suit, with a much broader-based and in-depth approach than is typical in conventional public schools, where "one-shot" workshops still are prevalent.

Clearly, both advocates and critics of charter schools find much about this publicly funded option to either embrace or dismiss. As charter schools continue to grow in popularity and key issues that relate directly to their educational effectiveness are submitted to the rigors of empirical research, the American public will learn whether the expectations and convictions of their advocates are justified, or whether charter schools are a Trojan horse they would be well-advised to avoid.

References can be found in the Selected Bibliography on page 30.

"Education is always imperfect, and however much we may appear to be succeeding, there are vast unrealized opportunities in the future for us and serious flaws in our present."

Derek Bok

Four Views of Charter Schools

Anne Turnbaugh Lockwood

In what ways is the development of charter schools a positive development for school leaders and school staff nationwide, and what aspects of the charter movement might be especially challenging? Do charter schools go far enough to extend choice to parents, school staff, and students? To what extent is innovation visible in charter schools? What are common start-up problems that charter schools experience, and how might these be solved? We asked these and other questions of four individuals, each with different points of view on the charter school movement. In the interviews that follow, we share their viewpoints on this timely and controversial topic.

Bruno V. Manno: The Best Is Yet to Come

Bruno Manno is one of the true advocates of charter schools, viewing them as a healthy—and vitally necessary—antidote to the ills plaguing conventional public schools. And although he and his colleagues at the Hudson Institute's Charter Schools in Action Project have identified key implementation problems that charter schools face, Manno refuses to allow these problems to drain his enthusiasm about the present and future course of charter schools.

"The overall implementation is going quite well," Manno begins judiciously, "although there are nuances that relate to the types of charter schools allowed by law. Conversion schools often have a different set of problems than newly created schools."

Conversion schools, he explains, typically do not have start-up problems related to facilities or finances, since they existed before they converted to charter status and did not have to seek a building or grapple with facilities-related issues. "Newly created charter schools confront a host of fiscal woes, especially related to the lack of capital funds and start-up funds," he points out. "Of course, this is a generalization, and some newly created charter schools do not have these problems. But in either case, nearly all charter schools receive less money per pupil than conventional schools."

Another problem is presented by the students that charter schools serve, which can cause unanticipated difficulties for school staff, Manno believes. "The work that we have done suggests that these schools are created for kids who have problems in the traditional system," he says, "so that they draw an overwhelming number of minority students, students with special needs, bilingual students, and students from poverty. All of these create unexpectedly difficult challenges for school staff."

He emphasizes, "These problems are certainly not insoluble."

Why are the needs of charter school students so surprising, especially since their needs must have been integral to the formation of the school? Manno maintains that while charter schools expect their students to have a set of pressing educational needs, staff simply may have underestimated the demands that would be placed on them.

"Administrators and staff have needed to focus immediately on staff development as it relates to issues raised by these students," he says. "The positive side is that the schools respond almost immediately to the problems that they see. They adapt to their circumstances and serve them well."

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This type of response, he maintains, is much more difficult—if not impossible—in traditional public schools because they are highly regulated, bureaucratic entities that preclude swift action and focused professional development tailored to fit each teacher's needs. "Charter schools do have problems with governance and staffing," he says, "but I don't want these problems to overshadow the fact that the schools are off to a fairly successful start, and the movement continues to grow. By the fall of 1997, we will see a total of approximately 700 charter schools around the country."

Myths and Misconceptions

To those familiar with charter schools, a source of frustration is the perpetuation of myths and misconceptions, Manno says, that continue to thrive. One of the most prevalent, and baffling to charter school advocates, is the perception that charter schools are not public schools.

"People involved with charter schools still say that they have to explain that they are public schools, they are open to all, that nobody pays tuition, and that they do not discriminate on any basis," he says. "Federal civil rights laws and special education laws are applicable to these schools.

"There is another misconception," he adds, "that charter schools 'cream' the best students. On a macro level, that is just not the case. Of course, since these schools tend to be community schools, some neighborhoods will be 75 to 80 percent Caucasian. Or, in L.A. Unified, there are charter schools that are 99 percent minority. At the micro level, there are these sorts of variations. But not only are charter schools *not* creaming off the best students, they are overwhelmingly serving special populations."

What about the potential—raised by some concerned observers of charter schools—that high concentrations of solely minority students could result in a new type of segregation? Are those concerns warranted?

"The opposite is the case," Manno says firmly. "The schools created for these kids are responding to the needs that are not met in conventional public schools. For example, Lowell Middlesex Academy in Lowell, Massachusetts, is a school of 100 students who were totally off the charts in the traditional system. They had dropped out and didn't show up on anybody's statistics. Now they are in school, even though a fourth of them have kids of their own."

This sort of charter school supports Manno's contention that charter schools are viable options for parents and students seeking choice within the public school system—parents who have not been well-served within the confines of the existing system. "It is a good example of how needs can be met that either aren't met in conventional public schools or aren't met very well," he adds.

Choice and Charters

Do charter schools go far enough in offering choice to parents, students, and educators, or should more extensive options be available?

To Manno, the variation in programs offered by charter schools is the secret to their viability as a choice option within public education and cannot be considered detrimental. It is also truly democratic, he believes, in its response to what the public wants.

"There are online charter schools in California," he observes, "that I refer to as schools in cyberspace. There are schools that deal solely with special needs, such as the Metro School for the Deaf in St. Paul. There is the International Studies Academy in San Francisco that has a heavy emphasis on preparing kids for international studies. Since some students do not thrive in regular classrooms, the option of individualized instruction with heavy components of independent study is also part of the program of some charter schools, like the Charter School of San Diego."

This richness and diversity of educational programming, he believes, revitalizes parents and families who have lost hope in the conventional public system, whether they have turned to charter schools because of previous bad experiences with unresponsive teachers or have simply become frustrated with the pace of a monolithic, slow-moving system. Manno points to the growing numbers of students from private schools who are joining the impetus toward charter schools.

"Our national data suggest around 8 percent of the kids enrolling in charter schools come from private schools. This incredible variation in approaches to schooling, curriculum, and all sorts of options for anyone involved in the life of the child are drawing people under the charter umbrella," he says.

This diversity, he believes, has brokered unlikely, amicable, and productive partnerships between people from very different ends of the political spectrum.

"We see parents working together who are fairly conservative or very liberal," he notes. "What they have found in the charter school mechanism is the opportunity to exercise an option, a choice. They now can participate in the design and support of a program that really meets the needs of their children."

Is there any danger that charter schools could suffer from extreme variability? Could their educational program become too quixotic, too parent-driven, too whimsical?

In his reply, Manno indicts a bureaucratic public system of education that creaks along at a tortoise's pace—perhaps

"Charter schools answer three questions in their evaluation plans: Is the academic program in this school a success? Is the school a viable organization? Is the school faithful to the terms of its charter?"

well-intentioned, but slowed by endless rules, regulations, and union restrictions. "The danger in public education is not that it will become too diverse," he comments. "Instead, the danger is that public education is such a monolithic system that it can't be flexible; it can't bend to the needs of parents and students."

Flexibility is not the foe, Manno maintains, pointing to threat that has the potential to jeopardize not only the future of charter schools but the whole promise he sees in educational choice. "The real danger," he says, "is that those involved in public education will see the charter movement as something that is on the boundaries or on the periphery and will see it as a threat, not as something to be emulated or welcomed."

Charter Schools and Broad-Scale Reform

If public educators refuse to welcome or legitimize the charter movement, Manno believes they turn their backs on a great deal of promising practices that could transform their own schools. Those who are receptive have already benefited from the charter movement, he believes, pointing to broader reform within the traditional system.

"The charter movement is already having a ripple effect," he asserts. "The issue is one of degree."

After charter legislation was passed in Massachusetts, he continues, Boston's Public School Committee paired with the teachers' unions and decided to create pilot schools, which bore a strong resemblance to already existing charter schools. "In other areas, we have seen districts mimicking what happened in the charter school. In one district, the charter school offered a full-day kindergarten program; the district did not. Several months later, the district added a full-day kindergarten program, even though they claimed for years they had no money to do this."

Although real reform may be related to issues of scale, to what extent is innovation a part of the mission of the charters he and his colleagues have studied?

"What may be an innovation to a school in Perris, California," Manno observes, "may be old hat to a school in L.A. Unified and vice versa. For example, a charter may give a school the opportunity to do different kinds of things where parent involvement is concerned. To an outsider, this may not look innovative, but for the people in that school, these practices are quite innovative."

Charter schools and their staff, used to being cramped within the constraints of traditional public schools, may choose practices that feel innovative to them because they would not have been possible before, he notes. "There is a collection of core knowledge schools in Colorado," he says, "that some may not consider innovative. They are, in fact, very innovative because the only option parents had prior to that was something much more progressive, more open-ended and free-floating in terms of curriculum. But now, teachers and administrators have the option to choose what is right for their students and their school."

Evaluation, Accountability, and Charter Schools

Since charter schools are part of the public educational system, yet enjoy varying degrees of autonomy and deregulation, what mechanisms should hold them accountable? Since increased accountability—with the threat of total shutdown if outcomes are not achieved—is integral to the rationale underpinning charter schools, what components of an evaluation plan should be present?

Most states, Manno notes, have grounded their evaluation plans for charter schools more heavily in theory than in practicality. "Typically, states establish three general criteria for accountability," he explains. "The first is reasonable progress that the school is making on meeting its goals for its students. The second involves a whole collection of standards that relate to fiscal management and the proper use of funds. And the third, generally found in most state charter laws, is the general notion of probity."

Many states require charter schools to file a public annual report for the state, the families of students, and the general public. "That is the general picture of state evaluation," he adds. "Massachusetts, however, has gone further than most states in trying to make charter schools accountable. The state has worked

with each of the charter schools in the state to develop an accountability and evaluation plan that makes these issues concrete."

The Massachusetts evaluation for charter schools, Manno believes, illustrates how charter schools should be held accountable for educational results. "Charter schools answer three questions in their evaluation plans: Is the academic program in this school a success? Is the school a viable organization? Is the school faithful to the terms of its charter?"

Massachusetts provided each school with a grant from the federal charter school money to develop these plans and also made available to them per-pupil reimbursement up to six dollars for any test the school used to gather information on student learning, Manno explains. "This type of plan assumes that one way to gauge the success of the school's academic program is to have a clear set of standards and then a testing system in place to see whether students learn up to those standards."

In the past year, Massachusetts added a series of site visits using external teams. "Team members included public school superintendents, teachers from noncharter schools, as well as parents and community members," he continues. "These teams went to each of the charter schools in the state and spent a day putting together a site visit report."

Unfortunately, careful and systematic evaluation has not been the norm in every state. But there is an explanation, he adds. "The laws are very different in states such as Massachusetts and California. Massachusetts issues the charter at the state level. In California, the charters are issued at a local level. Their approach to accountability will need to be tracked much more at the local level."

Manno believes that accountability and evaluation can be both uniform as well as varied. "The question about the extent to which the school is faithful to its charter—the micro level—allows a great deal of variation," he points out. "But the accountability and evaluation issue also has a macro level or state dimension to it reflecting the public interest—are kids learning what we expect them to learn?"

Broader issues related to accountability can be clearly drawn, he believes, and again, relate to their variability. "Charter schools constantly confront the problem about how to vary uniform approaches to evaluation to fit their programs. If your school is an online school, how do you document student attendance, which factors into reimbursements to the school? Charters clearly have a unique set of problems; the conventional state or district monitoring system is not equipped to deal with these problems."

Teachers, Charter Schools, and Unions

In their research, Manno and his colleagues found that many teachers who were attracted to charter schools had no particular desire to be affiliated with teacher unions. Why would teachers negate the security and protection afforded them from such powerful organizations?

"They see something in the charter that isn't possible in the conventional school," he replies. "Sometimes they see more instructional freedom; sometimes they see the ability to do things that cannot be achieved under a collective bargaining agreement. There are many reasons that charters are attractive to teachers, ranging from the ways in which teachers relate to students and families to the number of computers in the classroom."

The attraction of charters also extends to the quality and type of professional development that is possible, he adds. "This professional development is not monolithic; it does not present the six things you need to do in any situation. Instead, it is very standards and accountability-driven."

As charter schools continue to evolve and develop—and as their popularity expands—what are the thorniest issues with which they will have to contend? What will help them?

Manno identifies two issues of equal importance. "The first has to do with finances, in a broad sense. If the charter movement is to become more than a fringe element, we have to figure out and deal with a whole collection of fiscal issues.

"The second has to do with the ways in which the conventional system of public education relates to charters. Will they place a creeping regulatory burden on these schools as they try to hold them accountable for results? Will the system try to micro-manage these schools—just as they do other public schools? How will they hold these schools accountable for results without resorting to the conventional bureaucratic, rule-bound approach?"

The regulatory nature of traditional public schools, Manno fears, could pinch the creativity and diversity of charter schools and, ultimately, stunt parental and student choice. "The regulatory issues of regular public schools could burden the charter school in a way that makes it just like any other conventional school," he warns. "As an example, both the NEA and the AFT say that a good charter law is one that does not allow noncertified teachers. And they both believe that every charter school should be held to the bargaining agreement of the district."

Clearly, this prospect alarms Manno, and he lets his final question linger, unanswered, in the air. "If that is what a charter school has to do," he concludes, "what is the difference between the charter school and the public schools we already have?"

"There are always two sides to every question, both of which must be fully understood to understand either."

James Russell Lowell

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Andrea DiLorenzo: The Proof Is in the Pudding

Andrea DiLorenzo has no argument with the positive aspects of charter schools frequently advanced by their advocates, but she demands close, careful scrutiny of both the development of charter schools and their implications for the larger system. Even so, she is careful first to acknowledge the primary way in which charter schools show educational promise. "Charters take off the bureaucratic handcuffs and allow educators to do what they know is best within the classroom," she observes, "and this is a very positive development."

But the development of charter schools carries with it troublesome baggage, she believes, and the complexity of charter schools means that they should be evaluated not only carefully and precisely, but dispassionately and analytically as well. "This is not a black and white issue. It is as grey as they come," she emphasizes. "All of us—policymakers included—need to remove our emotions, step back, look at the pluses and minuses, and apply a critical analysis."

NEA's Charter Schools Initiative

This is precisely what the NEA plans to do within its five-year Charter Schools Initiative, DiLorenzo says. The NEA Initiative began in 1996, spurred by a constellation of factors. "We believed that the number of charter laws being passed clearly indicates a serious movement," she says, "and we also saw a positive potential in the charter movement, the possibility of freeing classroom teachers up. We also have a number of members who are interested in working in charters.

"This combination led us to decide on the charter initiative, which is just one of six restructuring projects in which the NEA is involved. We have invested a lot of money—approximately 70 million dollars—into helping members do restructuring and reform in the last decade."

The NEA initiative is accompanied by a comprehensive inquiry plan crafted by UCLA's Amy Stuart Wells. "We want to look at a myriad of things," DiLorenzo says. "Who comes forward to do this and why? What are they doing differently in these schools—pedagogically, methodologically, organizationally? What happens in terms of unions? What can we learn from places that decide not to continue with collective bargaining in the traditional sense? What new skills will our local associations need to help people create new schools?"

The three prongs of NEA's Charter Schools Initiative, DiLorenzo says, are student achievement, teacher professional development, and community engagement. "We think that schools should do positive things on all three fronts because—in the larger context of the NEA—unless public schools can revitalize the link more effectively with schools and community, we may not be able to save the institution of public education."

Concerns and Caveats

Are fears that the future of public education is in jeopardy justified? What in particular about the development of charters signals cause for alarm?

While the autonomy and freedom from burdensome rules and regulations offered by the charter movement appeals to many, DiLorenzo cautions that complete deregulation can lead to educational chaos. "We need to be careful," she warns, "because minimal oversight and complete deregulation can allow almost anybody to come forward and do whatever they want."

In particular, she is concerned that inequitable educational practices may take root and flourish—nurtured by "hands-off" state policies. "In some cases," she points out, "charter schools drain funds from local districts, and local school boards have no control over these expenditures."

This degree of financial autonomy is not positive, she believes, because it can lead to

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Andrea DiLorenzo is Senior Professional Associate with the National Education Association's (NEA) Center for the Advancement of Public Education. She co-directs NEA's Charter Schools Initiative, launched in 1996 to study the efficacy of charter schools as a model for improving student achievement, enhancing professional development for teachers, and strengthening the ties between public schools and their communities. Since 1985, her work has centered on the politics and economics of education reform, with a special focus on privatization, choice, and charters.

"For example, a recent Denver Post article on charters stated that two-thirds of the African American, Hispanic, and low-income students enrolled in charters in Colorado were in four of the state's 32 charter schools. We are concerned about that stratification and the possibility that it may become worse, rather than better, as charters become more popular."

an even greater polarization of the student population than is found already in noncharter public schools. "When states give funds directly to charter schools, they may end up as boutique schools for the more elite or affluent sectors of the school population," she explains, "or they may be designed as schools set apart for at-risk students. While students who have been labeled at risk may actually get more of what they need, they may be even more segregated from the mainstream population than they were previously."

She adds, "Charter schools allow movement away from the common school."

Charter Schools and Common Schools

Why is movement away from the common school problematic? If the common school isn't working, shouldn't parents and their children have options? If poor or minority students are housed in schools of their own parents' design, why should such clustering be troublesome?

If charter schools are ill-conceived and poorly implemented, DiLorenzo believes that their presence could dilute the ideals of the common school: providing equal access to a high-quality education for every student, rather than a special education for certain students who are set apart. She agrees with some critics of charter schools who point to the possibility that charter schools can provide a shelter for privileged children of adults uneasy with diversity.

"There are charters that are enclaves of affluent and politically savvy parents," she points out, "who come together to get what they feel their children need."

But equally worrisome, she believes, are clusters of poor students or students labeled at-risk bundled together into charter schools designed solely for them. In fact, DiLorenzo points to emerging statistics that show a heavier focus on poor and so-called at-risk students in charter schools than their numbers in the existing public schools would indicate. In this sense, the clustering of charters at both ends of the economic spectrum could be construed as a reflection of the much-lamented demise of the middle class.

"Except for the conversions of existing schools to charter status, there isn't a blending of students," DiLorenzo emphasizes. "For example, a recent Denver Post article on charters stated that two-thirds of the African American, Hispanic, and low-income students enrolled in charters in Colorado were in four of the state's 32 charter schools. We are concerned about that stratification and the possibility that it may become worse, rather than better, as charters become more popular."

She adds, "Some people would say: What difference does it make? The schools are segregated anyway. As long as students get a good education, why is stratification so critical? Our concern has to do with what type of education students receive in the different types of charters, and whether we really want to give up on the notion of bringing people together through public schools."

Charters and Student Stratification

DiLorenzo emphasizes that the NEA views charter schools with enthusiasm tempered with caution, a prudent blend that she believes educators, policymakers, and the public would be wise to adopt. It is critical not to leap to hasty conclusions about charter schools, she cautions, because of the potential to make incorrect or faulty assumptions. "If one looks at the available data only in a superficial way, it appears that charters are being set up to deal with poor and at-risk students—and the ones that are so designed are probably doing a fairly good job, maybe even a very good job. But there is no mandate that charters should mix students. In some cases, a few of the laws speak to that, especially about racial discrimination and racial segregation, but this issue is too often absent from the debate."

While charters may have relatively homogenous student populations—either affluent or poor, all-white

or all-minority—students with special needs are infrequently included, she maintains. "Studies are beginning to show that students with special needs are generally not accepted because charter schools don't feel equipped to deal with them, or they want to deal with them in ways that in some cases may in fact skirt federal law."

Charters and Their Purpose

Advocates argue that charter schools may be the last great educational hope for American citizens, offering the opportunity to design schools that truly respond to students' needs. To what extent is there a danger that charters could become too whimsical, too responsive to what might prove to be fleeting educational needs advocated by small coteries of parents? Could they become a haven for disgruntled parents who might be better advised to seek solutions within existing public schools?

To DiLorenzo, some of the sticking points that charter schools experience when they enter the start-up process are precisely the issues that must be dealt with equitably as charters continue to expand. "There are a lot of problems with governance in start-up charters," she observes. "I've been in meetings where charter board members said that there were problems with governance until they succeeded in 'getting teachers off the governing board.' Of course, we believe that teachers or the employees in the school should be represented in the governance."

This means, she adds, that "strong language" needs to be included in the legislation that governs charter schools—language that allows democratic governance to occur. "Financial soundness is another important piece," she notes, "and certification of teaching staff is yet another component. If the law is silent on who can be in the classroom—meaning a college education is not even a prerequisite—this will frustrate the people who teach and who do all they can to keep up with their profession."

These concerns, she says, make many teachers believe that the public education system will be divided into two stark tiers: one tier that will require teachers to have appropriate credentials and education, and a second tier—in charter schools—that will accept anyone as a teacher. Clearly, this is not acceptable to the NEA or its membership. "Many legislators are not sensitive to this concern," she observes," and don't seem very aware of the implications of hiring uncertified people."

Guidelines for technical assistance and professional development also ought to be in place for charters, she believes, because the people who are starting and working in charters need plenty of skilled assistance. In some cases, the eagerness of charter school developers to establish their schools quickly can actually work against them.

"I fear that the educational establishment is perceived as the enemy by many legislators," she notes, "and rather than bringing the establishment into the charter process the attitude is: We are going to do this to you, and if you don't like it, that's too bad."

While charters were initially sold to legislators as a relatively inexpensive way to achieve reform, DiLorenzo believes that charter school founders and staff are becoming more realistic about their financial needs and more assertive in claiming their piece of the financial pie. "Charter advocates say they need more money, especially when they are trying to get buildings for their schools. We also see the federal government will contribute one hundred million dollars this coming year and next year, while five years ago no federal monies went into charters.

"Some start-up funds are available from the states, but a lot of private funds are coming into the picture. There are many venture capitalists looking to make money, so there will be more funds coming from the private sector. These companies think there is a lot of money to be made so they are going after the charter movement in a big way. There are very real and complicated issues around funding that need to be addressed."

Evaluating Charter Schools

Given all the complicating factors, why are charters looked to with such hope? What components currently fuel the charter movement? Is parental dissatisfaction with public schooling the main reason people are flocking to charters, or do the underpinnings of charters run deeper and broader?

In her reply, DiLorenzo points to the research of Amy Stuart Wells, who will evaluate the NEA Charter Initiative over a five-year period. "Wells sees part of the energy behind charters as tied into this whole assault on government, the feeling that government is bad and we need to do what we can to break it down. She describes this sentiment as a type of post-welfare thinking."

In her work examining charters nationwide, Wells and her research team have identified three main strands of thinking that propel people toward charters. "On one end of the spectrum," DiLorenzo explains, "are people who believe that government doesn't work. Vouchers would be fine with them, but charters provide a way to have choice without the political liability."

At another place on the spectrum, DiLorenzo says, are people who see charters as an escape valve for those who are dissatisfied with the quality of public education. "Their

thinking is that these dissatisfied people can go off and create a few of these schools, and that will take pressure off the system."

The third position, she adds, is held by those who believe charters could help revitalize the current system if they are done in a particular way—and this is the position held by the NEA. "What I find particularly interesting in my work on charters," DiLorenzo reflects, "is that there are all sorts of people from all perspectives who are interested in them. There are people who are alternative educators, mainstream people who feel stymied by the system, homeschoolers who are Christian fundamentalists, and ideologues who have been pushing market solutions for a long time."

The NEA's role is distinct and purposeful, she says. "Our main goal is to make sure that charter schools stay public in every sense of the word. With magnet schools, for instance, although we know that many skim some students, we as a society see them as a route to racial integration. With charters, however, I don't see that overriding social goal.

"Instead, the goal for some people is to break apart the system, to force a so-called competitive model onto the school. The stew is a very interesting mix and makes it very difficult to apply one definition to people who are interested in charters."

Parental Involvement and the Charter Movement

From the perspective of a teachers' union and its professional concerns, are there particular issues that relate to parental involvement which is emphasized so heavily by charter schools? To what extent might teachers feel concern that their professionalism might be usurped?

"This is an area," DiLorenzo replies, "that is presenting the profession with a dilemma. Teachers realize that it is clear that parents are not sufficiently engaged in their children's schooling. Within the charter movement itself, one of the reasons both new schools and, to some degree, converted schools are having success in changing the climate is because of the increased involvement of parents.

"While we don't know about the achievement level of charter students yet, we have seen that some charters have been able to turn around attendance and retention because they have involved parents in different ways."

However, new schools are more likely to have parents who, as she puts it, "run the show." "I haven't spoken with the teachers in those situations, but in the conversion schools, where there is an expectation that parents will be involved, they find that parents are becoming part of the community in positive ways. There's more of a partnership between parents and school staff."

But parental involvement—while so positive in many respects—can also have unforeseen ramifications. "In California, for example, the law allows charters to mandate parental involvement. We have some concern about students who may not be admitted because their parents will not participate. Over the next few years, we will probably see a lot of corrections in the laws. It's important to note that there haven't been many out-and-out failures. While the charter phenomenon will most likely not go away, I believe there will be a movement to revamp some of the laws to include stronger oversight."

Stronger oversight, DiLorenzo maintains, does not equate with entrenched, antiquated, and unresponsive bureaucracy. "It means that the people working in charter schools have sound educational ideas," she explains, "that they know how to implement best practice, and that they know financially how to proceed."

Charters and Broad Educational Reform

Many charter school advocates believe that the movement will exert pressure on the larger educational system—pressure that will result in widespread reform. Is this a realistic goal, or are aspirations of broad-based educational reform too grandiose?

DiLorenzo believes it is far too early to detect larger systemic change directly related to the development of charter schools. "There have been some instances where the presence of charters has worked to pressure districts to add programs, but the jury is still out in terms of larger systemic change. The studies to date show that the degree to which charters affect systemic change is unclear.

"My sense is that charter schools are busy doing their own thing and there isn't much connection between them and the other schools in the district. In our project, we want to foster that collaboration between charters and other public schools. We don't believe, quite frankly, that the competitive model works very well."

To DiLorenzo and her colleagues at the NEA, everything translates back to the need to keep public schools strong, viable, and responsive to the needs of children. "Unless the public feels engaged in public schools in a very good and positive way," she concludes, "we may not have the support to keep our public schools strong, democratic institutions. The proof for us is in the pudding. The whole charter movement deserves a lot of study to determine its efficacy in improving public education across the board. The NEA hopes to contribute toward this end with its Charter Schools Initiative."

"A new idea is delicate. It can be killed by sneer or a yawn; it can be stabbed to death by quip and worried to death by a frown on the right man's brow."

Charles Brower

Joe Schneider: Analyze—Do Not Generalize

It is easy to generalize about charter schools, Joe Schneider warns, but such generalizations, based on conflicting or incomplete data, are not only misleading, but possibly dangerous for school leaders seeking accurate information. "One simply cannot, and should not, generalize about charter schools," he emphasizes.

But the temptation to present charter schools in a totally positive light, he believes, has led many to premature conclusions based on skimpy data. "Advocates, or charter school zealots, tend to use the data selectively to make whatever points they want to make about charter schools," he says tartly.

This use of data is not only flawed, but misleading, he insists, and doesn't ultimately advance the cause of charter schools. "It is critical to look at the data not only on a state-by-state basis, but also according to the type of charter school: whether it is a public school that has converted to charter status, a private school that has converted, or a newly created charter school. There are many differences," he adds, "between those three kinds of charter schools."

When the available data are analyzed scrupulously, the result is a clear-eyed view of both positives and negatives, he believes, and a targeted examination of issues that warrant further scrutiny. While he believes much about charter schools is positive, Schneider also sees problematic areas ahead—not the least of which relates directly to school staff in leadership positions.

Parents, Administrators, and Charter Schools

Focusing first on the positive, Schneider points to the opportunity parents have to exercise choice in public education and wield influence over what their children learn, particularly pronounced in newly created charter schools. "We know that many newly created charter schools," he says, "were influenced by parents who were unhappy with the education their kids were receiving in the public school system. The reasons vary greatly. In some cases, their kids weren't making it in the traditional public school. Some were bored; others had a disciplinary problem. And some might have been classified as special education students, and their parents didn't agree with that diagnosis."

Newly created charter schools, in particular, do offer dissatisfied educational consumers a positive option, he adds. Traditionally, unhappy parents deprived of the option of helping to form a charter school have been forced to resort to confrontational, adversarial relationships with school administrators and local boards of education. "Charter schools, on the whole, give parents the opportunity to continue in the public school system," Schneider says, "but also exert a lot more influence over the way their individual children are educated."

It is important to differentiate, however, between newly created charter schools and existing public schools that convert to charter status. The latter frequently are responding to different pressures, Schneider says, including the experiences of many school staff. Some public schools—and their school leaders—find that the tentacles of districtwide policies are too suffocating. "Usually public schools that convert to charters," he notes, "are led by an administrator who is really unhappy with the lack of autonomy he or she has to do interesting things.

"For example, we find charter school principals who know that they can raise money for programs in their schools, but the district will have a policy that no one school can pull out ahead of the other schools in the district. That notion of equality will frequently hamper a charismatic, entrepreneurial principal."

Joe Schneider is Deputy Executive Director of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA). He has been the Executive Director of the Council for Educational Development and Research (CEDaR) and deputy executive director of the Southwest Regional Laboratory (SWRL). A former journalist, Schneider is the co-author (with Paul Houston) of Exploding the Myths: Another Round in the Education Debate.

While he believes much about charter schools is positive, Schneider also sees problematic areas ahead—not the least of which relates directly to school staff in leadership positions.

Impatience with the amount of time it takes to enact any reform—no matter how modest—also nudges reform-minded administrators toward seeking charter school status. "What frequently happens," Schneider adds, "is that a school board wants to go back to basics at the same time that an enterprising principal wants to move ahead with a reform that wouldn't sound like basics to that school board. In those cases, charter schools offer a good release mechanism for school administrators. But being a charter school principal is not necessarily a ticket to success in the system, and I am concerned that some bright principals may dead-end themselves."

While some charter school principals may believe that they are placing themselves on a fast track to administrative success, Schneider fears that their administrative peers will perceive them as mavericks. "Frequently, other principals will resent them," he observes, "because there are many good things associated with charter schools, including increased autonomy and, frequently, control over your own budget. Unfortunately, many principals in noncharter schools will retort that if they had that freedom they could accomplish a lot too."

Superintendents who are skeptics about the benefits of charter schools can also impede the ambitious charter school principal. "Most superintendents are supportive of in-district charter schools," Schneider says, "but others want nothing to do with them."

Charter Schools and Their Students

While administrators of charter schools face their own difficulties, almost all observers agree that the hefty amount of parental involvement associated with charters—or actually mandated in some states—is a key ingredient that should predict academic success.

"When parents help form charter schools, we find parents who have a lot of concern about the education of their children," Schneider emphasizes, "particularly if they have not been well-served by public schools. As a result, these are parents who are willing to give extra on their own to help their kids."

But even the best-intentioned parents may actually do their children an educational disservice, particularly when categorical services are involved. "In some states, such as Arizona, almost anything goes," he observes. "There are parents who have formed charters to meet the immediate needs of their children, but they may not be realistic about what these schools can actually accomplish.

"In other words, if you are a parent who blames the school because your child was put in special education—and that is where the child actually belongs—you may not do your child a favor long-term by placing him or her in a charter school."

But many of the characteristics associated with charter schools seem to lead logically to improved academic achievement, Schneider points out. "These are very small schools," he notes, "with much more parental involvement and probably more student engagement. Since the research shows that good things happen in small schools and small classrooms, that criterion alone would suggest that charter schools would have increased achievement."

Another positive, Schneider points out, is that staff and students at charter schools tend to be highly motivated. "Teachers are there because they want to be; the principal is there because he or she wants to be; the students are there because their parents want them to be there. All of these criteria match those for a tremendously successful private school.

"Yet advocates hint that we shouldn't expect too much, because they fear that if we create charter schools and they aren't any better than existing public schools we have to wonder why we bother. Advocates are struggling to find evidence to support the expectation that charter school students will out-perform other public school students, and they are fearful that they may not have that evidence."

Since advocates of charter schools believe they will raise academic achievement, Schneider sees signs that they may be uneasy about serving predominantly students considered at risk. "These advocates would prefer to lower people's expectations about achieve-

ment," he says, "so that charters are not seen as failures if they do not succeed in raising achievement levels."

Charter Schools and Innovation

Given that charter schools are the embodiment of widely differing conceptions of education held by both parents and school staff, to what extent do their founders and leaders value innovation? Is there clear and compelling evidence that charter schools—freed from bureaucratic constraints—foster widescale educational reform and improvement?

To Schneider, there simply isn't credible evidence that this is so. "We don't find charter schools to be much more innovative than other public schools," he says. "When parents and administrators start charters, very few of their reasons for doing so have to do with unhappiness with the curriculum or with the ways in which their kids are taught."

Instead, parents want their children in charter schools for distinctly more limited—and perhaps more tangible—reasons, he suggests, that range from dissatisfaction with the existing public schools to a desire for more technology in the classroom. "When I was at the Southwest Regional Laboratory, we found in our studies of California schools that one of the primary reasons parents wanted their children in a charter school was to get computers for their kids. California is close to last in the country in terms of the number of computers per classroom, and that was a significant parental concern."

Wrestling their children back from the academic edge that leads to dropping out entirely is also a common motivating factor for parents who move their children into charter schools, Schneider adds, but ambitious goals about educational reform are not high on their agendas. "We applaud those parents who have the courage to go to the trouble to form a charter school," he adds. "One could also infer that if school boards were slightly more responsive to parents, they could address many of their concerns in the existing system."

Charter Schools and Success

Schneider predicts that if newly created charter schools are, on the whole, successful, they may eventually suffer the same problems as existing public schools. "Currently, these charter schools can use their money any way they want. They are sustained by the euphoria of starting a new school. The parents are on board, but will the next wave of parents be as involved as the current parents?"

Parents who were part of the school's beginnings may be reluctant to hand control to the next group of parents, he suggests. "The philosophy of the school could shift with new parents," he points out. "Nobody has come forward yet to say that this could be a large problem, but it is worth noting."

Rather than seeing charter schools maintain flexibility over time, continuing to be responsive to what parents want for their children, a certain rigidity could ensue, he adds. "In following Head Start, researchers have found that there are communities that have changed over time from African American to Latino. The mothers in the original community were hired as teacher aides and it became a career they wanted to keep.

"As a consequence, the next wave of students to enter were Latino, but there was no room for their mothers."

Charter Schools and Choice

Just as charter schools have the potential to become caste-like and rigid, subject to the ideals of the founding parents and school staff, could they also become too responsive—to the degree that they cannot sustain a firm and clear mission?

In his reply, Schneider points to two prevailing arguments. "Advocates argue that charter schools should be as free as possible, that they should escape everything associated with the public schools: the rules, regulations, unions, and bureaucracy. Arizona is the closest model to that type of freedom.

"The argument these advocates make is that the consumer is still the best judge of the work of the public schools. If the parents aren't satisfied with their public school, they will pull their kids out and the school will fail. That is the position taken by advocates of charter schools."

But the other argument, that advanced by Association of School Administrators, is that while a degree of autonomy should be available, there are benefits to staying in a school district. "Kids are going to be in and out of charters," he observes, "because parents move. If a charter school fails, the kid ought to be able to assimilate back into the neighborhood public school without a fuss.

"If," he emphasizes, "we are truly concerned about kids, keeping them in a charter school within the district is probably best in case things don't work out. The legal protection of the district is available, as well as special education and Title I services, among others."

Larger Systemic Reform and Charter Schools

If charter schools are not set up specifically as innovative educational environments in which new ideas about student learning and teaching practices can be tested, to what extent might they prod broader change within the existing educational system? Is it realistic to expect charter schools to provide the catalytic force that will charge widescale reform?

"The advocates believe," Schneider responds, "that charter schools will reform public schools through competition. If a

charter school does do something innovative, savvy administrators and other schools will adopt it and do the same."

But there is a caveat. "Charter schools are doing some interesting things, particularly in terms of lowering class and school size, something public schools would have a hard time accomplishing."

In their study of California charter schools, researchers at the Southwest Regional Laboratory asked why it was taking so long to get charter schools established, given the high degree of parental and administrative dissatisfaction with the existing public school system. The answer was somewhat surprising, Schneider says.

"Innovative administrators had already found ways around state rules and regulations. Many of the wonderful things done by charter schools could already be seen in other schools, and depend more on innovative, risk-taking principals and teachers than on other factors."

Converting to charter status or forming a new charter school may not be the easiest or surest paths to systemic change, he cautions. "Charters are really the last resort for a frustrated principal," he says. "But we need to realize that in some systems the school board is so bad that nothing innovative will succeed until major changes occur."

Reform on the Cheap?

In a much-cited article (Schneider & Dianda, 1995), Schneider bluntly called charter schools "reform on the cheap." In what ways do charter schools represent educational frugality?

"Most state laws that allow charter schools," Schneider explains, "don't give them any more money than they would have had in the district. In some cases, the state allows the district to take some money back to provide special education services, transportation, and the like. Charter schools are a way to satisfy very concerned parents, but they won't cost the state anything."

The federal government, however, has greatly increased the monies available to charter schools, which Schneider applauds. "One of the biggest problems charters have is getting the resources to get started. These federal funds will help. But outside those funds, states find charter schools a very inexpensive innovation. If existing public schools wanted to reduce class size, for example, it would cost a small fortune at the state level, but to keep charter schools small doesn't cost anything because they take the money out of the district budget."

The Future of Charter Schools

Schneider, who places himself firmly on a continuum between staunch advocates of charter schools and the completely skeptical, points to finance as the key issue with which politicians and the public need to contend if charters are to succeed. "They must be fiscally solvent," he says, "and they must attend to the basic health and safety of the students. If they don't, they should be closed, and we have seen instances where that has happened."

But the lack of compelling data about charter schools' success in raising student achievement is problematic. "We have no knowledge whether these schools work or not," he notes, "in the sense of increasing achievement. If success stories come out of Arizona, with the tremendous amount of freedom that they have, we will see more of Arizona's laws. If negative stories come from Arizona, policymakers will move away from that type of legislation."

Inclusiveness, or welcoming charters into the fold of existing public schools, is an action that Schneider believes could trigger broader reform and also remove some obstacles from the development of charter schools. "We might learn," he concludes with understatement, "a few things about how to treat our other schools."

"Innovative administrators had already found ways around state rules and regulations. Many of the wonderful things done by charter schools could already be seen in other schools, and depend more on innovative, risk-taking principals and teachers than on other factors."

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"Education is a kind of continuing dialogue, and a dialogue assumes, in the nature of the case, different points of view."

Robert M. Hutchins

Alex Medler: Choice, Policy, and Charter Schools

Alex Medler doesn't hesitate to endorse the whole notion of charter schools, as long as they are implemented with adequate accountability and are not regarded as a panacea. The surge of interest in forming charter schools is dominated by positives, he believes, not the least of which is an impressive renewed interest in public schooling demonstrated by parents and families. "Charter schools create a way in which hundreds of people can put thousands of hours of work and effort into public education," he says. "This is a plus in terms of the extra resources they offer, as well as the level of their general involvement."

Another positive that he sees emerging from the charter schools movement is the opportunity to tailor public schools to fit different notions of public education. "Charter schools," he observes, "provide a release valve. These schools fit not just into a context of choice and innovation, but also into a context of public schools not all looking the same. Charter schools offer an opportunity for people to engage in really significant educational reform."

In traditional public school systems, Medler believes that small groups of vocal, dissenting parents have only one difficult option: overturn the school board and then strive to elect those individuals who appear to be aligned with whatever reform or educational approach the parents endorse. Charter schools, he maintains, provide a mechanism to allow—and even encourage—that minority of dissenting voices to play a productive role in public education.

"The majority of schools in a district can be engaged in one reform," he explains, "and if a minority of people feel strongly that education should be different, the option of starting a charter gives them the opportunity to create a school that reflects their views."

Charter Schools and Homogeneous Student Populations

What about concerns of charter school critics who see a potential for homogeneous clusters of students—either bastions of affluence or ghettos comprised of racial and ethnic minorities? Does this present policymakers with the need to enact protective policies?

Because of the sheer diversity of charter schools, Medler says it is difficult to detect whether they, in fact, skim the most affluent students as some have maintained. "It is too early to know with certainty whether that is occurring," he says. "Maybe some charters do, but most charters probably don't. It is important to remember that charter schools are not allowed to discriminate in admissions on the basis of race, ethnicity, or gender; and that while charter schools receive considerable deregulation, they are not freed from civil rights rules.

While charter schools may serve only affluent students, policymakers are concerned about those schools that serve communities of color as well. Medler adds, "We do know that, in the aggregate, charter schools in many states serve larger proportions of minority students than traditional public schools in their state. In addition, there are quite a few charter schools that serve ethnically homogeneous student populations. For example, there are several charter schools in Michigan where almost every student is black.

"It is difficult to generalize," he continues, "because some of these schools were created by communities of color, while others are converted public schools that were homogeneous before they became charters. In other words, their current populations may be almost totally minority students—but they were almost totally minority students as traditional public schools. That is the case in some of California's largest charter schools."

Alex Medler is a policy analyst for the Education Commission of the States (ECS). ECS is a national nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that helps governors, legislators, and other state education leaders develop and implement policies to improve education. Medler directs ECS's effort to track the progress of charter schools, public school choice, and deregulation. He has researched the development of charter school legislation and the characteristics of charter schools nationwide. In addition, he coordinates an annual ECS assessment of the progress of education reform.

Medler believes that charter schools with deliberately homogeneous student populations do not necessarily signal increased divisiveness in public education, as some critics of charter schools fear, but instead are a reflection of complexities in contemporary American society. "Of course, charter schools with strongly homogeneous populations raise ethical questions," he says, "but if that is what 200 families in Detroit want to do, then I don't question it. There certainly are charter schools that will serve a particular ethnic or racial component of the population, but I view this as a response from communities of color to what they are getting in traditional public schools."

This response, Medler maintains, clearly reflects their disenchantment with the quality of schooling their children receive, and he views the concentration of racial and ethnic minorities in some charter schools as a matter of parental choice, not segregation.

"Whether or not it is a good thing for communities of color to create their own schools," he adds, "is not for me to judge. However, if an affluent or white community wants its own school and intends to keep other children out, that shouldn't be allowed in public education. It is the responsibility of policymakers and sponsors of charter schools to make sure that it doesn't happen."

Protection and Equal Access for All Students

But how do sponsors prevent affluent white families—some of whom may be bent upon flight from racially and ethnically diverse schools—from setting up an elite school? What if they want to create an educational environment that may conform legally to admissions requirements for all students, but deliberately market the school to their own children and their identical peers? Are there policy safeguards that can be enacted to ensure equal access for all students?

"Safeguards need to be built in," Medler replies, "so that all kids are welcome and invited to that school. Policies usually mandate open admission requirements, but equally significant is the marketing of the school."

Again, he returns to issues related to parental and student choice. "If a suburban community is primarily white and people have chosen their homes on the basis of the public schools in the community, they will want to control their school system. Is it right to blame a charter for serving an affluent community if the traditional public school system does the same thing? Suburban charter schools may reflect larger social patterns."

But are charters simply a benign reflection of society's wishes or do they actively help provide a mechanism to facilitate white flight? "The potential, however slight, is certainly there," he says, "but charter schools, like other schools of choice, can be more open to kids from outside the local area."

States and Charters

Why are charter schools more prevalent in some states than in others? Are there state policies that facilitate their development more in some states than in others? Or is the public in certain states more sensitized to, and receptive of, issues related to choice in public education?

Medler views the burgeoning of charter schools as a coalescence of both the policy and education environments, which come together in different ways state to state. "If you live in a state where many people would be interested in starting charter schools but the policies don't allow them to start from scratch, limit the overall number of charters in the state, or make the application process available only through local school districts, the result is fewer charter schools.

"The states that only allow public schools to convert to charter status, rather than starting new charter schools, also have few schools. States that allow people to start schools from scratch and also allow schools to convert to charter status tend to have more charter schools. And those states that have either an alternative sponsor in traditional local school districts or an appeals process tend to have many more charter schools."

While state policies exert considerable power over the development and course of charters, legislation could be considerably more facilitative of charter schools in many states. "States that allow existing private schools to convert to charter status, and then allow them multiple avenues for getting those schools approved," Medler continues, "have a large pool of people who potentially would like to become a charter school." In this way, he believes, state policies can play an active role in spurring the expansion of charter schools.

But policy, while potent, is not the sole influence. "The other component," he adds, "is the number of people in the state. In California, which is a large state, there are many people in public education who

are frustrated with the bureaucracy, who may disagree about the direction of public education in the state. That leads to more people interested in charter schools, even if the state policy falls somewhere in the middle, and the result will be more action on the charter schools' front."

Problems and Obstacles Facing Charters

From a policy perspective, what are the thorniest issues facing charters as they develop? Are there particular ways in which state legislation can help charter schools over initial rough spots of implementation?

Adversarial relationships at the outset with sponsors, particularly local school districts, are among the biggest burdens charter schools have to bear, Medler responds. "There are the normal barriers at the beginning, such as finances and issues related to buildings. But the really controversial issues relate to developing a working relationship with the sponsor, beginning with getting the charter school approved, and then figuring how to remain accountable but have sufficient freedom."

Medler adds, "While alternative sponsors, such as state boards of education or other nondistrict entities, would make it easier for most charters to get started, a lot of states are keeping local districts in charge of the chartering process. As a result, many charter schools will not be able to get around their local district no matter how much they would like to. This forces charters to build relationships with their sponsors that can work."

Because of these relationships, Medler explains, issues relating to finance and governance often will be grounded less in policy and more in productive relationships with sponsors of charter schools, and the quality of these relationships can influence significantly the success or failure of charter schools. "These sponsors have to approve their finances and facilities," he notes. "As long as charter schools are antagonistic to their sponsors, the sponsors may approve what they do, but not like it." Acrimony may result, he suggests, that will not aid the evolution of charter schools.

Educators will be misguided if they seek help only from state-level policy, he adds. "Many charter schools do not get access to funds that they could use—that other schools have for facilities, for instance. Legislatures could help with that, but that particular type of action doesn't seem to happen often enough."

Charter Schools and Finance

Do charter schools represent an inexpensive way to approach educational reform? Are there perils associated with trying to implement charters in a way that is too frugal, that places too heavy a burden on unpaid and inexpert shoulders?

"We get what we pay for," Medler observes. "A study done by the Southwest Regional Laboratory (SWRL), in which they surveyed California charter schools, showed that the frequency of reforms was much higher in the charter schools than in the noncharter public schools in California. However, those same schools are a little underfunded, which means that charter schools in California appear to be doing a lot more reform and they are doing it more cheaply."

But although the SWRL findings would indicate that educational reform is possible with less money, the pressure of insufficient funds can divert educators and parents from paying adequate attention to the educational business of schools. "Charter schools may have obstacles that relate to being underfunded that detract from the business of figuring out how to do the educational part correctly," Medler points out. "The main conclusion is that charter schools need just as much money as other schools. Trying to run them for less is not a good investment. It certainly is not a wise way to save money."

"There are the normal barriers at the beginning, such as finances and issues related to buildings. But the really controversial issues relate to developing a working relationship with the sponsor, beginning with getting the charter school approved, and then figuring how to remain accountable but have sufficient freedom."

Many school districts hoping to save money with charter schools instead find them a poor bargain, he says, because they cannot save money for their remaining operations as hoped. "From the district perspective, even the charter schools that receive a little less money are a net increase in what has to be spent. Meanwhile, the charter school people are not getting as much money for their school and their students as the public school next door. They feel that they do not have a good financial deal because they are educating the same students as the public schools next door and doing it for a thousand dollars less."

Since charter schools often enroll students who previously were not in public schools, there are financial ramifications that stretch upward to the state level, he points out, which need to be recognized by legislators. "Ten to 15 percent of students in charter schools weren't in public schools before. They may have been enrolled in private schools, or had dropped out entirely, or were being home schooled. That ten to 15 percent represents a corresponding net increase in the number of students educated at the public's expense."

All of these financial considerations, he argues, make schools, districts, and states believe that charter schools will either be more expensive or that they will suffer from insufficient funding. However, most charter school proponents concur that saving money on inexperienced or uncertified staff is a mistake, he says.

"When charter school people are asked for advice, they typically emphasize the importance of hiring the most experienced, qualified staff possible," he emphasizes. "It is unfortunate that some schools with less money than others turn that into hiring more junior teachers or uncertified, unqualified people. But even if charter school operators resort to uncertified staff, they're not trying to hire just anybody off the street. They want to hire skilled individuals with some particular expertise. Hopefully, these would be the kind of teachers that fit into the alternative certification programs that states already have and endorse."

Freedom and Autonomy

While the ideal for charter schools—even the propelling force behind them—is autonomy or freedom from regulations perceived as restrictive, how much freedom do charter schools actually enjoy? Does the degree of autonomy provided charter schools vary dramatically state to state?

According to Medler, the degree of autonomy provided charter schools is yet another variant state to state. "Some states give blanket waivers to all charter schools for almost everything," he says, "and some don't provide any more deregulation than any other school. They encourage them to participate in existing waiver programs that are available to all schools. The degree to which charter schools have autonomy, in these states, depends on the school's interests and how much deregulation it wants to pursue."

The reason for such state-to-state variation, Medler believes, can be found in the differing ways in which states view charter schools—ranging from very enthusiastic and supportive to skeptical and distant. "For states with limited charter programs, being a public school means following all of the rules and regulations in the state's education code. The states that allow charters more freedom seem to define public education more broadly," he points out.

"For charter schools to be public schools in those states means that they must retain two-thirds of the state code of education. Other states probably define public education more broadly, in terms of not being sectarian, being free of cost, and not discriminatory in their admissions policies."

State Legislative Trends: The Future for Charter Schools

Medler is particularly interested in legislative trends that will affect the continuing evolution of charter schools. As charters grow in popularity and continue to evolve, what does he see as key, pivotal state policies that will influence their success or failure?

The laws governing charter schools, Medler predicts, will become stronger in the sense that they will allow more autonomy from state oversight and regulation. "However, most bills will not be as strong as those in Arizona or Michigan," he says, "which have some of the strongest, fastest-growing programs in the country. Instead, we will see states adopting slightly more accountability and a little more control over the charter school process than is the case in those states."

He is encouraged by trends that indicate both more choice and a growth in qualified staff. "We will see higher proportions of certified teachers hired at charter schools," he adds, "and more states will allow charter schools to begin from scratch rather than convert from an existing public school to charter status."

Finally, perhaps the most positive development on the horizon pertains to financing for charter schools—what Medler believes is a significant change. "There will be attempts to obtain full funding for charter schools," he concludes, "although it is difficult to predict how states will direct available monies for facilities. And there will be a continued effort to make sure that the schools are financially accountable and operating in a public and open way."

Charter Schools Checklist

The following checklist is devised as a self-evaluation tool for school leaders, staff, parents, and families to assess their readiness either to begin a charter school or to consider converting from an existing public school to charter status.

	Exhaustively	Adequately	Partially	Insufficiently
Expectations and Aspirations				
1. To what extent have we pursued all existing avenues provided by our local school district and by state law to accomplish educational change and reform?	❑	❑	❑	❑
2. To what extent have we mapped out an educational program for our school that includes discrete goals and objectives for student achievement?	❑	❑	❑	❑
3. To what extent have we participated in substantive discussions with school staff, administrators, and parents about the mission and academic program of the prospective charter school?	❑	❑	❑	❑
4. To what degree of specificity do we state student outcomes in our charter?	❑	❑	❑	❑
5. To what extent have we elicited feedback from key members of the community to drafts of our charter?	❑	❑	❑	❑
6. To what extent does our educational program reflect research and best practices?	❑	❑	❑	❑
Expertise and Preparation				
1. To what degree have we researched charter law in our state and, if applicable, local school district?	❑	❑	❑	❑
2. To what degree have we ensured that our charter school operators have financial and legal expertise—particularly applied to public schools?	❑	❑	❑	❑
3. To what extent have we planned a curriculum consistent with our proposed mission and vision?	❑	❑	❑	❑
4. To what degree have we held discussions and made decisions about the expertise and qualifications our staff must possess?	❑	❑	❑	❑
5. To what extent have we planned for special needs students, identified and consulted available resources on curriculum and assessment, and ensured that adequate transportation will be available?	❑	❑	❑	❑
Relationships and Cooperation				
1. To what extent have we established productive, cooperative working relationships with administrators and board members in our school district?	❑	❑	❑	❑
2. To what extent have we engaged in a planning process to ensure that collegiality and cooperation with local administrators and board members is high on our educational agenda?	❑	❑	❑	❑
3. To what degree have we planned and scheduled our professional development so that it will meet the instructional needs of the mission of our charter school?	❑	❑	❑	❑
4. To what extent have we planned the governance for our school and contingency plans in the event that problems arise?	❑	❑	❑	❑

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Center for Education Reform Home Page
http://www.edreform.com/index.html

Education Commission of the States Home Page
http://www.ecs.org/

Making public schools better/National Education Association
http://www.ftp.nea.org/3cur.htm

North Central Regional Educational Laboratory/Pathways to School Improvement
http://www.ncrel.org/pathways.htm

North Central Regional Educational Laboratory/Charter Site
http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/timely/charters.htm

Pioneer Institute for Public Policy Research
http://www.his.com/~chyden/pithink/csrc/cshand.htm

West Ed/U.S. Charter School Web Site
http://www.uscharterschools.org

Announcing . . .

Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement

April 23-24, 1998
Indian Lakes Resort
250 West Schick Road • Bloomingdale, Illinois 60108 • (West of Chicago)

Purpose: This first annual event will provide practitioners with a common base of knowledge about what is working in the field to enhance student achievement. The conference will focus on building the capacity of individual schools to function as results-oriented, professional learning communities.

Participants Will Learn How to:

- Gain parent and community support for school initiatives
- Effectively use technology to motivate student learning
- Move from isolation to collaborative teaming
- Build a professional learning community at the classroom, school, and district levels
- Create a professional climate focused on results
- Reach consensus and respond to resisters

Session and Action Lab Topics

- Conversations with Keynoters
- Restructuring Isn't Enough: Creating the Culture of a Professional Learning Community
- Building Support Systems to Foster Student Success
- Town Hall Meeting on Best Practices for Enhancing Achievement
- From Burnout to Buy-In: Tapping Intrinsic Motivation of Staff and Students
- Building Parent and Community Support for Your School

Keynotes and Workshops Include:

Michael Fullan—Enhancing Student Achievement Through Organizational Change
Dennis Sparks—Best Practices in Staff Development and Renewal
Rick DuFour—How Professional Learning Communities Work
Robert Eaker—Research into Practice: The Professional Learning Community at Work
Judson Hixson–Creating a Community Circle of Caring

Sponsored by the National Educational Service

For registration information, please call the National Educational Service at 800-733-6786.

Cosponsored by the **North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL)**, National Association of Secondary School Principals, National Middle School Association, National Association of Elementary School Principals, Phi Delta Kappa, Illinois Department of Education, and others.

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NEW LEADERS FOR TOMORROW'S SCHOOLS

Charter Schools: The Challenge To Public Education

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One of ten federally funded regional educational laboratories, NCREL provides resources to educators, policymakers, and communities in a seven-state region. Our goal is to support school restructuring to promote learning for all students, especially those most at risk of academic failure.

NCREL's Center for School and Community Development supports schools and communities as they undertake continuous, sustainable school development to improve learning. The Center identifies and organizes research information and best-practice models to help schools and communities improve their planning, decision making, and action so that students achieve at high levels. The Center also provides technical assistance, training, and consultation to help schools and communities invest in continuous growth while meeting today's needs.

NCREL
North Central Regional Educational Laboratory

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