

## CHARTER SCHOOLS: A PROGRESS REPORT PART III: THE RIPPLE EFFECT

Do charter schools improve public education? Some say that with 80,000 public schools nationwide, a mere 1,400 are just a passing fancy, another fad. Not so. Although few have looked at the impact charter schools have upon public schools as a whole; charter schools are truly instigating systemic reform. Here the Center for Education Reform documents how charters are impacting individual schools, changing the attitudes of whole districts, and benefiting public education over all.

### The Idea

Charter schools are independent public schools designed and operated by educators, parents, community leaders, educational entrepreneurs and others. They are sponsored by designated local or state educational organizations that monitor their quality and integrity, but allow them to operate freed from the traditional bureaucratic and regulatory red tape. Free from such micromanagement, charter schools are designed to deliver programs tailored to educational excellence and community needs. Because they are schools of choice, they are held to the accountability of consumer demand. And because they are chartered schools, they are legally accountable for their academic results, and their fiscal and legal integrity. If they do not meet the agreed upon standards and results, they may be closed down. (*See Charter Schools: A Progress Report Part II: The Closures.*)

Thirty-seven states have a charter law, and by September 1999 over 1,400 charter schools will be operating in 34 states and Washington, DC. The evidence now shows that these few schools are producing a ripple effect well beyond the approximately 300,000 students currently being so well served by them. (*See Charter Schools: A Progress Report Part I: Achievement.*)

### The Ripple Effect at Work – The Evidence

“Once upon a time, most people just assumed their kids would head for the public school down the street,” the *Christian Science Monitor* observes. “But today, many parents think long and hard and review a growing roster of choices before they make that decision.

“As a result, public schools in some areas are finding that they can’t just sit back and greet the kids as they walk through the door. Some schools are discovering that unless they’re out there working hard to bring families in—and offering the kinds of options those families want—they’ll be seeing fewer and fewer of them.”<sup>1</sup>

From enabling dedicated and gifted teachers to launch their own schools, to changing the perspectives of traditional public school administrators, to spurring districts and municipalities to operate their own charter schools or convert entire districts to charter status, charter schools are accelerating system-wide school improvement.

#### **Arizona:**

- In the **Mesa Public School District**, charters enroll over 2,000 students in a 70,000 student district. The district has 60 traditional schools. In response, the school district has undertaken a major information campaign in local newspapers and theatres in attempt to draw some of those students back and attract others to the district. The change in attitude can also be seen on their web page that includes “A Guide to Selecting the Best School to Meet Your Child’s Educational Needs,” ([www.mpsaz.org](http://www.mpsaz.org)).
- The **Queen Creek School District** began offering teacher training in phonics and additional phonics classroom instruction as a result of losing about 30% of its students to the *Benjamin Franklin Charter School* (BFCS). BFCS’s hallmark is traditional reading pedagogy.
- In an effort to remedy a near 50% drop out rate, **Isaac Elementary School District** and the **Maricopa Community Colleges** are partnering to create their own charter high school. *Isaac Charter High School* seeks to provide a more personal high school experience for the district’s elementary school graduates. The Isaac District also requires teachers and administrators to visit all district parents to address their concerns.
- The *Arizona Agribusiness & Equine Charter School* partners with the local community college to provide extended study opportunities. **The Phoenix Union High School District** is joining with the local community college to offer a similar program.
- The **Flagstaff Unified School District** (FUSD) created a magnet middle school to compete with the two preparatory charter schools in town. The district had fought over whether or not they needed a new middle school for a year, but did nothing until they lost students to the charter schools. FUSD also initiated a “Pathway” program based on the emergence and success of charter schools in the area. The program develops individualized curriculum paths for the students while maintaining required courses. In order to survive, we had to quit our whining and do a better job ourselves,” said Kent Matheson, former superintendent, who launched a variety of programs in his district to compete with the charter school programs.<sup>2</sup>

## California:

- In the spring of 1996, the **Kingsburg Joint Union Elementary School District** became the state's second charter school district. "This status, achieved by a combined effort of parents, teachers, and administrators, has resulted in the potential for tremendous innovation as well as preserving the traditional values and local control of public education in this small rural community," the district advertises. One of the principals commented, "I was a charter skeptic. But I now see how it's helped us do things that we could never have done under the umbrellas of the conventional district system."
- Similar reasons drove **Pioneer** to become the state's first charter district in 1993 and are the impetus behind **Delta View Elementary District's** effort to charter for the fall of 1999.
- **Capistrano Superintendent James Fleming** has been so impressed with charter schools that he also has begun planning for his 42,000-student school system to become one of California's charter districts.

"The continuing and increasing flow of paperwork demands is literally killing us out in the field," Fleming said. "While we're required to jump through all these hoops, I've been observing the charter school movement and thinking, 'If it's good for the goose, why couldn't it be good for the gander, as well?'"

Fleming said becoming a charter district "would bring a new spirit of entrepreneurship to the district. If we eliminate busywork and red tape, teachers and principals can function better and focus more time on teaching and learning."<sup>3</sup>

- Charter schools are making union officials take notice. "We're losing market share; the customers are bailing," said Day Higuchi, president of the United Teachers-Los Angeles. "So we need to say, 'What are the roots of the problem?'"<sup>4</sup>
- The *San Carlos Charter Learning Center*, California's first charter school, has had powerful ripple effects in three areas: curriculum, personnel practices, and organizational culture. According to the superintendent, the district has become more entrepreneurial since the appearance of the charter school. For example, nearly all district schools now seek grant money from local and regional foundations, a strategy pioneered by the charter school. A school-board member commented, "The innovations undertaken by the charter school are like viral infections in the body of the district. They're spreading themselves around."<sup>5</sup>
- Ron Prescott is deputy superintendent of government relations and legislation for **Los Angeles Unified School District**, the district with the most charter schools in the state. In a November 1998 community discussion on charter schools he commented on the ripple effect:

Charter schools at first were somewhat like a virus entering a body. It frightened the unions and challenged administrators. After all, the folks running charter

schools are obviously gifted people – what if they demonstrated that poor kids can learn?

Today, charter schools are beginning to change the public schools. We have 700,000 students, 650 schools and 13 charter schools. The charter schools have had an effect on how we do business with the other 650 schools. **We want to move away from focusing on process to ensuring outcomes.** Superintendent Ruben Zacarias has said he doesn't care which reform movement a school follows, 'just show me the reading scores.'...

... we have to give credit to charter schools for taking the lid off and making administrators think about what is possible.... believe the system will begin to look more and more like charter schools as all of us move to focus on results. In that regard, the charter school movement is more important as a philosophy than as an organizational structure.<sup>6</sup>

- Perhaps one of the nation's first known ripples came as a result of a CBS "Sixty Minutes" story about the *Vaughn Next Century Learning Center*, a conversion charter school. In an interview, principal Yvonne Chan said that the **Los Angeles Unified School District** — one of the country's largest and most cumbersome — typically took a year to buy computers for its classrooms. Ms. Chan thought that was ridiculous. It only took her charter school six days to purchase computers, and they did it for less money, and turned it into national publicity for the school. After the program aired, the Los Angeles Unified School District revised its purchasing system.

#### Colorado:

- Parents in **Jefferson County** had urged the district to expand their popular alternative schools program to no avail until the charter school law allowed schools to be started independent of the district. Within a year and a half, the district launched three new schools of its own.
- Within eight months of opening, the success of the *Connect School* motivated **Pueblo School District** a neighboring district in southeastern Colorado to charter its own experimental school, the *Pueblo School for the Arts and Sciences*. The school is based on the Paideia model, and is one of three operating charter schools in the district.
- In 1998, the *Wyatt-Edison* charter opened in northeast Denver, making it the fifth charter school in a district of 111 traditional schools. The principals of the traditional schools closest to the charter welcomed the challenge. "We're Pepsi. They're Coke. . . It isn't business as usual in public schools. It's a sign of what's coming," said Lynn Spampinato of Mitchell Elementary. Garrett Wyman, project director for Edison, also welcomes the change. "It's a good type of competition. If they steal kids back from us and families want to stay in their school, that's what it's all about."<sup>7</sup>

### District of Columbia:

- In the fall of 1997, just two charter schools served 166 students in the District. In the 1999-2000 school year, 29 charter schools will serve as many as 7,000 students (nearly 10% of D.C.'s public school enrollment). "Competition is healthy," said **Superintendent Arlene Akerman**, dispelling the myth that charter schools harm the more traditional public schools. Since taking over as superintendent of D.C. Public Schools in 1998, Ackerman has made it clear that the system would show that it could improve and respond to the competition and demand for reform. Ackerman installed an academic plan that includes new learning standards for students, has begun to improve teaching skills and offer more staff responsibilities. She has implemented a weighted student formula allocation that bases school budgets on student enrollment and the individual needs of students, added a summer school program, published statistical profiles of individual schools, and started remediation programs for special-education students.

### Florida:

- In Orlando the *Orlando Princeton House Charter School* serves autistic children from Orange and Seminole County. In response to the demand for the programs, **Orange County Public Schools** launched two similar autistic programs of its own.
- The *Manatee School of Arts and Sciences* recently installed a computer lab that develops student abilities in math, science and reading. Now the school district is trying to update its own labs for training and remedial work.
- Florida's charter school law provides incentives for municipalities to improve their students' schooling. It allowed the city of **Pembroke Pines** to hold a charter that will be built and run by The Haskell Co. that designs, builds, and will assist charter schools in South Florida. According to City Manager Charles F. Dodge, the city plans to build smaller cost-effective schools that deliver high-quality education.
- Just the threat of charter schools is creating reform in **Florida**. Cities are negotiating with South Florida's large school districts to create charter schools. In a few cases, local school districts have persuaded city leaders to back off plans to start their own charter schools with promises of reform. According to Tracey Bailey, Director of Florida's Office of School Choice, **Miramar** leaders planned a charter school but eased off when the School Board promised them new schools.
- North Miami officials abandoned their plans for a city-run charter school when the **Miami-Dade School District** put their new school on the fast track. The School Board came and said, 'Look we'll work with you on building a school in your community,'" said Anita Holloway, deputy city manager. "We want to give the School Board an opportunity to work with us....The city wanted a new middle and high school and went so far as to request proposals from companies interested in building them," she said. The Dade district countered by promising the city a new

combined elementary and middle school campus in two years.<sup>8</sup>

- Many Florida charter schools are creating and using reporting alternatives such as portfolios and skill tracking programs for the students. Host districts are now looking into using similar programs. Charter schools are legitimizing new reporting methods and integrating them into traditional assessments systems.

#### Louisiana:

- In **Baton Rouge**, in response to the charter opportunity, innovative thinkers are surfacing within the system. In February 1998, the parish began looking for principals and teachers to experiment with new educational tactics in the form of district-run charter schools in the 1999-2000 school year. Associate superintendent Don Mercer said the system is hoping for proposals from groups that include teachers, parents, community members and principals. The system is more interested in a group other than the board running the school," he said. "This is one way we can demonstrate...that we are serious about trying to find creative ways to improve education for our children."<sup>9</sup>

#### Massachusetts:

- *City on a Hill Charter School* is in its fourth year of operation. In that time standardized test scores have continued to show improvement, student attendance has reached 95%, and the waiting list remains long. The teacher leadership has been so promising that the US Department of Education awarded the charter a two year \$400,000 grant to launch a mathematics collaboration with Boston Public Schools. The grant allows teachers to share classroom research and refine teaching methods to improve all of **Boston's Public Schools**.
- According to the 1998 report *Innovation & Massachusetts Charter Schools*, the following are among the specific practices that individual charter school directors said area district schools were mirroring:
  - ❖ District schools now have uniforms.
  - ❖ An elementary school added an after-school program.
  - ❖ One district now offers all-day kindergarten.
  - ❖ A district high school added a dance course.
  - ❖ A local middle school added an alternative middle school curriculum.
  - ❖ An elementary school in a neighboring town is now teaching a foreign language.
  - ❖ A neighboring school has adopted a charter's "succeed anywhere" standard.
  - ❖ Nearby public schools have reduced class size.
  - ❖ Middle schools now do community service.
  - ❖ Two nearby districts have established alternative high schools, and
  - ❖ One district has added an alternative middle school.

Many observers interviewed (including superintendents and education reporters) said that charter schools have a positive affect. The presence of charter schools "[shakes] up the system."

The most positive thing to come out of the charter schools is that the public schools have become more introspective and self-conscious. Most people have an aversion to competition, but... it can be and has been helpful to the district. One superintendent noted that charters contributed to their desire to figure out a way to allow and reward innovation and creativity within the district.

- The most powerful example of a set of innovations that appear to have been stimulated by charter schools is the creation of pilot schools in the **Boston Public School** system. Currently nine pilot schools operate with substantial autonomy in the district and have waivers from union rules. These reform-oriented schools were created with union endorsement as a response to the emerging charter school movement in Massachusetts. Although the idea was generated and agreed upon several years earlier, the first pilot schools didn't open until the same year as the city's first charter schools.
- The *Lowell Middlesex Academy* offers an alternative contract with **Middlesex Community College** that provides remedial and academic instruction for dropout students. Hoping to model the program's success, the district also decided to contract with Lowell Middlesex Community College to start an alternative school for disruptive students, complete with much of the same flexibility that the charter school enjoys. The local high school also added a "life skills module" to its internship program with local businesses that's similar to the Lowell Middlesex Program.

#### Michigan:

- According to the February 1999 *Evaluation of the Michigan Public School Academy Initiative* by Western Michigan University, the state's charter schools are "clearly having an impact on their local school districts."

The presence of charters has put pressure on the traditional public schools to be more accountable. Even in areas with no charters in operation, evidence of the impact of the charter initiative can be seen in the renewed debate about the quality and performance of public schools.

The presence of new alternatives to the public schools have induced changes in the public school sector such as a stronger willingness on the part of education bureaucracies and teachers unions to seek new ways in which to make changes in the public schools.

Positive changes in local public schools that appear to be attributable to the presence of charters include the following:

- ❖ The introduction of all-day kindergarten,
- ❖ Increased emphasis on customer satisfaction,

- ❖ Provision of more before and after school programs,
  - ❖ More efforts to involve parents,
  - ❖ Increased efforts on the part of schools to communicate with the homes of their students,
  - ❖ Increased marketing of traditional public schools,
- 
- ❖ More emphasis on foreign language, and
  - ❖ More attention to performance on the MEAP.
- The **Lansing, MI** superintendent, upon calling in *the Edison Project* to manage an elementary school, told an Edison Vice President that he was motivated by the possibility that a charter could open across the street and show how it could be done better.
  - The **Hartland Consolidated School District** wrote to families who transferred their children to charter schools asking for constructive ideas on how the school system could improve its schools and what it should do to better serve its community.<sup>10</sup>
  - **Saugutuck Public Schools** is more consumer conscious as a result of charter schools. Three charter schools opened within ten miles of the two district schools making them much more aware of the needs and wants of parents, says Superintendent Tom Nowak. "We've had to take public relations seriously, to become more service-oriented, to keep our class sizes small. We've made an effort to offer Spanish, music, art, computer classes in elementary school." The school system also agreed to create a multi-age classroom in response to parental demand. "The desires of the parent group carried more weight because of the existence of charter schools," said Nowak.<sup>11</sup>
  - **Detroit Public Schools (DPS)**, which has lost thousands of students to the 35 charter schools in the city, responded by chartering some of its own. As of May 1999, it operates 10 charter schools. Former General Superintendent David Snead said, "We're finding the charter idea is helping encourage other schools in our district to examine what they are doing. I don't agree with those who are defensive. We are proud of many things about the Detroit schools. But we can, and must do better. Charter schools are helping us move in the right direction."
  - Other districts have also taken steps to keep up with charter school reforms. Soon after the charter school law passed, **Dearborn Public Schools** instituted a system of in-district choice and created thematic schools to improve school choice. The threat of what the charter school movement could mean to public education certainly did get us taking a second look at ourselves," said Superintendent Jeremy Hughes. He believes charter schools play an important role in piloting innovations.<sup>12</sup>
  - In response to the 9 charters in **Grand Rapids**, the public school system opened a new school with a focus on environmental education and is planning other theme-



based schools. It also hired a director of communications to help keep local parents informed about new choices within mainstream public schools.

- The advent of charter schools has forced **Holland Public Schools** (HPS) to market their services and treat parents like consumers of education. I don't think education felt as a whole that they needed to tell what their assets were and what the effects were," said HPS Superintendent Marcia Bishop. Now they must be clear about the quality of their school. In response to the Holland charter schools, the district now provides flexible scheduling and Spanish to its middle school and added a communications arts curriculum.

#### **Minnesota:**

- Reports Joe Nathan, Executive Director of the Center for School Change at the Hubert Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota, just knowing that teachers and parents can start charter public schools in the state has:
  - ❖ encourage **Duluth** and **Rochester** boards to start Core Knowledge schools,
  - ❖ encouraged the **Forest Lake** board to start a Montessori school,
  - ❖ and encouraged St. Paul to start more small secondary schools.
- Duluth has two very popular charter schools operated by the Edison Project that serve 750 students in a 13,500 student district. In response, the rest of the Duluth system began adopting Edison's most successful features: a longer school day, upgraded technology, and special reading and math programs. Such changes, "wouldn't have happened without the charters," said former Duluth superintendent Mark Myles.<sup>13</sup>
- **St. Paul** is home to 14 charter schools, with several more opening next year. Due to the growth, the city school district has scaled back its building projects. According to assistant superintendent Cy Yusten, there are 1,000 kids in charter elementary schools, so there's less need to build new schools, saving the district and taxpayers considerable money.

#### **New Jersey:**

- Since 1989, the non-profit Institute for the Development of Education in the Arts has tried to convince the **Camden School District** to open a high school for the fine arts. They have presented proposals, offered conferences, and worked with the district to make this happen, to no avail. "The parents in Camden deserve a choice. In order to attend a quality arts program many have to leave and travel to Philadelphia or elsewhere, and that's not right," said Cynthia Primas, a founder of the Institute. When New Jersey passed its charter law in 1996 the institute decided to go ahead and apply to charter the *Camden Charter High School for the Fine Arts*. This spurred the district into action, and they soon announced their own plans to open a magnet high school for fine arts. The charter proposal was rejected, but they are encouraged

to reapply. For now, I'm tired but happy parents will have some choice," said Primas. I'm glad our work and the proposal brought this about."

- Since their state passed a charter law in 1996, the **Patterson School District** has created seven specialized academies, including four that will be opened by the 1999-2000 school year. Superintendent Edwin Duroy said "this will bring a greater level of choice to the children of Paterson, the parents of Paterson, and the staff. It is our hope that these innovative academies will offer new and exciting approaches to educating Patterson public school students."
- Maureen P. Quirk, a founder of the *Princeton Charter School* (PCS) and Vice President of its board of trustees, reports that the local school district has begun to use the charter's criteria for hiring teachers. These criteria require that teachers be well educated with strong academic backgrounds, and that they have subject expertise in the area they will teach.

Before the PCS opened, many parents of high-achieving fifth-grade students continually asked for more advanced mathematics for their children. In only one of the four elementary schools was there any response, and this was limited to a single teacher offering an advanced program using a mathematics textbook supplied by founders of *Princeton Charter School*. When PCS opened the following year, the regional school district offered fifth-grade students the option of joining a sixth-grade mathematics class, or working with a small independent group of students in a pre-Algebra course.

#### **New York:**

- After being defeated on the charter school issue, the teachers' union in **New York** has changed its strategy and "donned the reformists' mantle."<sup>14</sup> In the May 19<sup>th</sup> issue of *New York Teacher*, UFT president Randi Weingarten wrote a column detailing the union's next project: developing a core curriculum in anticipation of future charter school demand.

#### **North Carolina:**

- **Cabarrus County Schools** is inspired by the opportunity that charter schools provide. They want to open and operate their own charter schools in the fall of 1999. "Most charter schools are created by folks in the community. We're trying to take an innovative approach," said Harold "Butch" Winkler, superintendent of Cabarrus County Schools. The school they are planning to open would use new methods to reach children who have been unable to learn well in regular classrooms.<sup>15</sup>
- In a speech to the North Carolina Charter School Conference, Kathryn Meyers, Chair of the Durham Board of Education, said "Many charter school students were, for whatever reason, not successful in the **Durham Public Schools**. If these same students are successful in a charter public school, I need to know how and why.

Maybe we can apply some of the same practices in our schools to help students succeed...I need to know what works." Referring to a survey that identifies many of the reasons parents choose charters, she said, "I intend to pay attention and make every effort to provide those same options for families in regular public schools."

- **Rocky Mount County** has long considered an International Baccalaureate program but has never acted on it. But when the *Rocky Mount Charter School* applied for a charter in the fall of 1997 for 800 students, the district was spurred into action. *Rocky Mountain Charter School* offers a successful International Baccalaureate program as a standard part of their program. Now so does the district.
- The mere possibility of charter schools instigated long overdue action on community wishes for the public schools in **Rutherford County**. In August of 1998, the *Thomas Jefferson Classical Academy* sent the School Board and the Superintendent its application, outlining a plan to create a foundation to involve the local businesses in the school and to solicit funds for teacher bonuses, school equipment, scholarships, etc. Three months later the superintendent formed a new foundation to solicit grants from the community for teacher bonuses, scholarships, etc.
- North Carolina's charter law allows five charter schools per district per year, with a maximum of 100 new schools. In 1998, the superintendents of **Wake County** and **Forsyth County** approached state House Representative Fern Shubert to sponsor legislation to allow their school districts to start an unlimited number of charter schools, arguing that this would give them the ability to compete with the new charter schools. Shubert agreed to sponsor the legislation, and it was incorporated into Representative Leo Daughtry's legislation. Unfortunately, the provision was killed in the Senate.
- **Wake County** Superintendent Jim Surratt took matters into his own hands. "If fewer rules and regulations make a better school, then we would like the same opportunity to run our schools that way," he said. During the summer of 1998, the county worked rigorously to open the Primary Partnership School. The school is Surratt's response to the challenge posed by charter schools: a program to prove the school system can do every bit as well as charters if given the same kind of freedom from red tape.
- The Public School Forum surveyed North Carolina's superintendents to gauge their perceptions of the impact that charter schools have on the district. Sixty-two percent of respondents said charter schools had a "very strong/strong" or "moderate" impact on the district. Nearly 40% of the superintendents said they were interested in the idea of setting up a district run charter school to gain charter school operational flexibility, some expressed interest in setting up a charter district.

## Ohio

- In **Toledo**, the Edison Project was invited in by State Representative Sally Perz to pitch the idea of starting a charter school. After several months of negotiation, the

district announced it would not do business with Edison, but would implement aspects of the Edison model, including extending the school day and year, offer extended math and reading periods, and other Edison program mainstays.

#### Texas:

- The *North Hills Charter School* in Irving is an International Baccalaureate (IB) school that is demonstrating outstanding academic success. The **Irving School District** is now planning to build a multi-million dollar IB school.
- Also in Irving, the *Renaissance Charter* is operating a popular and successful career-orientated-program that the community loves. Like their response to the *North Hills Charter School*, the district is modeling a future school on their successful program.
- The **Houston School District** is developing 13 contract schools, in which personnel and curriculum decisions will be made independently of the district. The district has 18 charter schools. These schools are helping to alleviate chronic district problems by relieving overcrowding and providing more children the opportunity to attend school in a better learning environment.
- It's not just the schools that are inspiring change. *The Charter Resource Center of Texas* also contributes to the ripple effect. In compliance with the Texas Education Code, all schools submit school profile data to the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS). The traditional distributor of the required PEIMS software is the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and its 20 regional centers. Many of the program's queries, however, did not match the curriculum or innovations of Texas' charter schools, so the Charter Resource Center of Texas developed more flexible software for charter schools. They also provide the software at better rates with excellent support services. TEA now offers a more flexible software program at discounted rates with improved support services that mirror the resource center's. The TEA now works closely with the resource center to provide better services.

#### Wisconsin:

- In **Milwaukee**, it's understood that alternatives to traditional public education, are prompting Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) to reform. Without the contest for students that charter schools provide, it is unlikely that Superintendent Alan Brown would have issued his guarantee that second-graders would read at grade level or be given tutors.<sup>16</sup>

The thriving school choice environment in Milwaukee, created by the healthy competition of charters and other educational opportunity programs, has spurred the district's superintendent and school board to offer additional specialty programs, more choices among the public schools, and additional programs. "In the future, the Milwaukee school board will be chartering a lot of MPS schools," says school board member John Gardner. We're going to be giving any school that wants it the

authority to hire their own teachers. We're going to be creating before- and after-school childcare at every school where 12 or more parents want it."

## The Studies

Currently, there are seven national and state studies that consider the effect that charter schools have on their peer district. Six demonstrate a positive ripple effect; one does not.

- *Does the Public Sector Competition Stimulate Innovation? The Competitive Impacts of Arizona Charter Schools on Traditional Public Schools* (James Madison University, February 1999), Scott Millman, Frederick Hess, et al.

This study finds that charter school competition has made a positive impact on traditional school districts in Arizona. The *possibility* of charter schools competing with district schools prompt "low-cost" reforms such as informational campaigns and teacher in-service training. The *presence* of charter schools tends to result in "high-cost" reforms such as full day kindergarten programs, administrative changes or other significant modifications to school structure or curriculum. The results are especially apparent in sub-performing districts.

- *Evaluation of the Michigan Public School Academy Initiative* (Western Michigan University, February 1999), Jerry Horn and Gary Miron.

This study finds that Michigan's Public School Academies (PSAs) are having an impact on their local school districts by putting pressure on traditional public schools to become more accountable. Even in areas with no PSAs, evidence of the impact of the PSA initiative can be seen in the renewed debate about the quality and performance of public schools. Not surprisingly, PSA leaders were more apt to report positive impacts and the leaders of traditional public schools were more apt to report negative impacts attributable to the presence of PSAs.

- *Beyond the Rhetoric of Charter School Reform: A Study of 10 California School Districts* (UCLA, December 1998).  
Their interviews of 17 charter schools in 10 CA school districts found that "schools in districts with charter schools feel little to no pressure from the charter schools to change the way they do business."
- *Los Angeles Unified School District Charter School Evaluation* (USC, August 1998), WestEd's Policy Support & Studies Program in partnership with the University of Southern California (USC).

This study offers a case study of five of the 13 LA charter schools and profiles of the other eight schools. The cross-site report covers a variety of themes including the effect on district-wide school improvements. "Charter schools have influenced district reforms by heightening awareness, initiating dialog and focusing attention

on issues related to decentralized decision making and budget flexibility.... Charter schools have [also] made individual contributions to district reforms [that include innovative teaching workshops].”

- *Innovation & Massachusetts Charter Schools* (July 1998), Rosenblum Brigham Associates for the Massachusetts Department of Education.

This study finds that district schools have been adopting innovative practices in the last two or three years that mirror charter school efforts. Charter school and district respondents disagree, however, on whether the changes have been stimulated by charter schools.

- *How are School Districts Responding to Charter Laws and Charter Schools?* (Policy Analysis for California Education, April 1998), Eric Rofes.

This study finds that 25% of the study districts showed significant signs of response to charters. It is a percentage that is impressive for such a young movement and unprecedented in the history of school reform over the last 30 years.

- *Evidence on School Choice: What We Learn from the Traditional Forms of School Choice in the U.S.* Harvard University, 1997), Caroline Hoxby.

The study found that public schools react to competition by offering better schooling and reducing costs. Increased competition results in significant improvements in student test scores, educational attainments, and wages. Parents with greater choice are more involved in their child’s schooling and prefer a higher standard of achievement for both their children (academic achievement) and their chosen school (standards and discipline).

### **Vested Interests: Pride Can Propel or Impede Reform**

The above studies and anecdotes look at but a fraction of the reform ripples that the charter school movement is sending out. As noted in several of the studies, some school district officials do not acknowledge that a charter spurred them into action, arguing (unconvincingly) that change and improvement would have happened even without the competition of charter schools. For example, the **Red Bank, NJ School District** was an annual poor performer, and community parents urged the district to concentrate on academics, to no avail. In the summer of 1995 the *Red Bank Charter School* applied to start a school that strives for early academic excellence. It was approved in 1997 just as the district hired Dr. J. Michael Rush as Superintendent. Since then, Rush has worked to turn the district around, implementing a slew of standards, curriculum, and staffing reforms that focus on early academic instruction and community involvement. Asked if the charter school was an impetus for the reforms, Dr. Rush replied, “The reforms were needed and would have occurred regardless of the charter school.”

Clearly, a common-sense reminder should accompany any review of the ripple effect. While it is not surprising that some school officials don’t admit the effects of

charters on their own actions, and it may be difficult to demonstrate a direct cause and effect relationship, as there are many variables, there is valid and ample proof that a comparably small number of charter school are causing dramatic systemic changes.

### **Catch a Wave**

The ripple effect of charter schools is significant because it demonstrates how charter schools are changing the operations of public education on an ever increasing scale. While 'Follow the money' is clearly the driving force behind much of the reassessment and reform, something less measurable is having an effect as well – pride. The “we can do it, too” attitude is reverberating across the country. In Connecticut, the school district is contributing to this attitude by contracting with Edison project for one school, while giving the other to the local union to run. Clearly, the unions are showing that “we can do it, too” attitude.

Describing the advent of several charter schools, a public-private scholarship program, an open-enrollment program, a “guarantee” of student achievement in reading, and other recent “ripples,” the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* captures the changing atmosphere of the city’s public education.

The very definition of public education has changed, and it has changed so quickly that many people still may not be able to grasp it...If a few words can sum up all the ferment on the education scene, perhaps they are these: Provide more options. Seek better results. Find proof that we’re getting them. Or make more changes in what already exists.<sup>17</sup>

Charter schools are not a silver bullet, to claim this is to set them up for a fall. But they are a necessary impetus for accountable, results-driven reform. The charter school movement is still in its nascent stage, but the ripple effect is already significant; and so we continue to advocate for their principles, and to watch and learn.

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*Part I of Center for Education Reform’s Charter Schools: A Progress Report series provides some of the new academic data that charter schools are producing. Part II looks at closures and accountability. To read these papers and learn more about school reform visit [www.edreform.com](http://www.edreform.com).*

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**Sources:**

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