



THE ROAD TO INNOVATION IS PAVED WITH EXPERIENCE

THE PATH TO CHARTER SCHOOLS

What they are, how they got here,
and the real reason behind this
innovation in public education

June 2019

Chronicles of our first-hand research & experiences

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PUBLISHED BY

Center for Education Reform

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Background

The charter school idea is much misunderstood. Its purpose and its *raison d'être* is often misquoted and misrepresented, sometimes by accident, sometimes intentionally. For those who do not have the luxury of reading all that there is about charters - which could easily fill the Library of Congress; for those who were not there at the beginning, or who were and perhaps forget, here is some context to set the record straight. It starts, like all changes, in the beginning, with the very institution charters were designed to influence - traditional public education.

The Public Education Crusade

The great strength of US education is its vision that all citizens learn from and possess a shared understanding of historical, scientific and literary aspects or contributions to the nation and the world. Prior generations, unbridled by technology and living in a world where most of the touch points were in person, were able to engage in that strength in person, in classrooms and with educators who knew their craft, and were sought after individuals, with very few other opportunities for work or advancement in a simpler economy with fewer industries and thus occupations from which to choose.

Public education looked like it always had, served numerous constituencies, and for most advantaged people it pretty much did its job. The theory was that public education, when available to the great unwashed - those huddled masses yearning to breathe free - would turn them into better educated people, prepare them for life in America and set them on their way. And in many instances, it did.

We know now that the purpose of public education was to reduce differences, melt the melting pot into one concoction, to achieve uniformity and social unity through the acquisition of knowledge and purpose. The political leaders of the time – the Know-Nothings – sought to purge the distinct cultures brought here by immigration (which sounds all too familiar again today) into one. Proudly we coalesced. Proudly we improved our lot in life. But then life became more complicated. Our schools changed. And the great American dream the schools helped to cement for those not born into it, began to drift further away.

By the time the upheaval of the '60s was upon us, numerous attempts at equality and excellence for all failed and Horace Mann's dream for cohesion and unity had all but disappeared. School districts represented housing patterns between have and have-nots. Public education became the vehicle to fix all social ills, away from community engagement most often, and bureaucracy grew. By the 1980s, school-based learning yielded poor results from rich and poor alike.

It was 1983 when "A Nation at Risk" revealed that for most students, education was a mile wide and an inch deep. I could relate to that characterization. I had every conceivable elective and opportunity to dabble, but was able to graduate high school without a core American history course, and that was in a highly-desirable middle-class New Jersey town. Imagine, I thought, once I realized my deficiencies years later, what less-advantaged students were lacking!

Diane Ravitch and Chester Finn would tell us the answer in 1987 in their famous report "What Do Our 17-Year Olds Know?: A Report on the First National Assessment of History and Literature." The answer? "Not much." When tested on their knowledge of history and literature...our seniors in high schools could correctly answer only 54% of history and 52% of literature questions.

As the nation began to wake up from its conviction that US education was the best in the world, we were exposed to more traumatic statistics. In 1992, the Nation's Report Card (formally known as the National Assessment of Education Progress) revealed that only 29% and 18% of 4th grade students were proficient in reading and math respectively. The numbers dropped significantly when controlling for race and class. **By 2000, international assessments showed the US lagging in literacy and numeracy skills behind other industrialized countries.¹** The world's great super power was actually in the middle of the pack!

This was the backdrop against which the charter school idea was developed, not by presidents Bush and Trump or modern day politicians and pundits, but by an obscure educator in New Hampshire named Ray Budde, whose 1974 paper was published by one of the nation's education labs in response to the ongoing debate about educational failure in the nation at that time. "Education by Charter: Restructuring School Districts, the key to long term continuing improvement in American Education," argued after years of evaluation and study that nothing short of fundamental change in the internal organization of the school district will yield results. Budde, an English teacher and professor of education at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, developed the idea of granting teachers a charter to operate schools outside of their districts.

¹Programme for International Student Assessment. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/>

The person to ensure that idea would make it into law was [Ted Kolderie](#), who corresponded often with Budde and became an intellectual co-champion of the charter concept. Contrary to some accounts, Budde remained a supporter of chartering until his death in 2005 and Kolderie remains a supporter today at age 91.

I corresponded with Ray Budde, from whom long-time America Federation of Teachers President [Al Shanker](#) said he drew inspiration. Shanker was later credited with the concept of charters, though his successors wholly reject the argument that Shanker would like what we see today.

The charter idea had only two simple but transformative goals in mind -

The first was that teachers, citizens and parents working together could create better programs and instruction tailored to the needs of kids than large amorphous unaccountable bureaucracies. This was in the words of liberals and progressives in the day, not free-market conservatives seeking to pay homage to [Milton Friedman](#) or attempting to undermine public education.

The second premise was that these diverse offerings would then be available to parents to choose from in order to ensure that whatever offerings were provided would best meet the needs of their students.

As Kolderie argues in his own timeline of chartering, *“asking ‘where did it start’ is like asking a river where it starts. You have to go upstream. You will probably find no single source, but several little streams flowing together. [Minnesota got it into law](#); seeing ‘charter’ not as a kind of school but a system of schools.”*

People would come together to study it, lawmakers would propose a law. People welcomed the idea and were intrigued - and it was truly bi-partisan. Democrats in DC, New Jersey, North Carolina and Florida. Republicans in Arizona, Ohio and Pennsylvania. The non-political Kolderie would point out that it all happened with no grand plan, little media attention, no foundation grants. It was word of mouth. They drew much from his writings and spontaneous meetings where he'd be invited to discuss how to restructure the district-school governance model. In [“States Will Have to Withdraw the Exclusive,”](#) Kolderie argues that states can drive the improvement of public education first by opening enrollment - creating choice - and then by establishing choices in the form of viable, recognized, diverse alternatives.

Yet despite this clarity and well-documented history, the origins of the charter movement have been widely distorted by critics and people posing as defenders of public education. Making public education work better for all kids - restructuring and reforming it - was indeed the point of the charter school idea. It's that very point that makes the charter movement a resounding success. Since its inception,

popular support for the concept has resulted in 45 laws, under which more than 8,500 schools were started (and several hundred closed or consolidated back into districts), which well over 10 million students cumulatively have attended, and dozens of cities and traditional school districts have partnered with charters and argue they have improved as a result.²

Many books have been written about the history. There were only a comparable few of us who knew how and when the concept was created, what drove it and why it still exists today.

Those Who Don't Know History are Doomed to Repeat it - or Ruin it

Contrary to what is written or posited these days in politics, the charter movement tells an incredible story of American ingenuity, resilience and dedication, that despite the odds has helped transform the lives of literally tens of millions of students who have gone through the schools since 1992.

I was on the grounds at the [San Carlos Charter Learning Center](#) as a Stanford physics professor helped erect its walls in 1994. When I asked him what he was doing there, he said he was attracted by the fact that he could finally teach in a public school. He had tried for years, but lacking the license or 'certification' required by state laws, he could not. Now these students would have a highly-qualified physics professor to teach science, rather than someone who simply went through education school with no science background, like more than 60% of students in traditional education today still have today. I watched as then - superintendent [Don Shalvey](#) - now the deputy director of the Gates Foundation - welcomed these new schools without feeling threatened the way so many district leaders do today. The school's founders wanted to give an alternative to parents who had been disappointed with the condition of public education, its cookie-cutter approach, its lack of rigor and its demand for uniformity. Shalvey applauded their effort.

I saw the same drive and purpose in the founders of [Benjamin Franklin Classical Public Charter School](#) in suburban Boston shortly after. The founders saw white upper-crusters send their kids to private classical schools, like those our presidents' and CEOs' kids attend. They thought if they could create the same kind of education for all kids, we'd be closer to achieving the real purpose of education - knowledge

² "Choice and Charter Schools: Laws and Legislation." Center for Education Reform, 2018, <https://edreform.com/issues/choice-charter-schools/laws-legislation/>.

as well as an equal playing field for all. Classical education rebounded throughout public education thanks to charters, as did progressive professor [E.D Hirsch's "Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know."](#)

When a long-time public school principal and education leader who emigrated from mainland China first learned about chartering, she left her traditional public school in Los Angeles to create the [Vaughn Next Century Learning Center](#), which now spans a square city block in Pacoima, California, with an array of building that house a “Baby Vaughn” daycare, schools for every level, a library, a health center and social supports for students. Once a troubled, crime-ridden area that [Yvonne Chan](#) proudly bulldozed as she grew, Vaughn’s 25th anniversary last year was a celebration for the entire community as this “little engine that could” (as it’s called) turned a community around almost overnight.

The Turnaround Miracle of Washington DC

The same is true throughout the District of Columbia. Million-dollar condos and high-end restaurants now sit where the dilapidated buildings, rats and poor, underprivileged DC outcasts lived, right across from where [Friendship Collegiate Academy](#) opened in 2000. When I showed up for my first visit during the first week of school, I was struck by all the students who got there on their own, the parents who had won the lottery, desperate for a chance to help their kids break out of traditional conventional lines of thinking. More than 100 charter schools would open in DC and begin to draw people back to neighborhoods and a city that became an economic, recession-proof engine long after it was considered a blight on the Nation’s Capital.

Where it was once ranked dead last, the District’s achievement growth has far outpaced national growth in reading and math scores since the early 2000s, according to the Nation’s Report Card. [Gains in the District averaged 9% between 2003 and 2017](#), compared to just 2 percent at the national level.³ The reason? Just as in several other cities after robust reform, charters have had an impact not only on student performance, but also on the broader economic landscape.

Business people will tell you that the dedication and commitment of the city’s new school revival inspired them to dig deeply into their pockets to support further development and economic expansion. DC’s expansion could never happen as long as education in DC continued to follow the same unaccountable, failing model that got the school board dismantled and saw a financial control board have to be inserted.

³ “Analysis: NAEP Scores Show D.C. Is a Leader in Educational Improvement - With Powerful Lessons for Other Cities.” the74million, 17 Apr. 2019, www.the74million.org/article/analysis-naep-scores-show-d-c-is-a-leader-in-educational-improvement-with-powerful-lessons-for-other-cities/.

Indeed, the educational success of DC charters led to the revival of DC public schools, not the other way around. And yet it is these very schools that people with less history, less experience, less knowledge want to banish from the District.

When people write of the failure of the charter idea to gain public acceptance, they ignore the millions of people that have engaged in redeveloping whole communities around charter schools. When people argue that charter schools drain money from “public” schools and that they should have to operate like a system that the most educated, studied and objective educators knew had lost its ability to deliver education, they do so out of sheer ignorance for where we’ve been and how far we have come.

Public education was dying in the ‘80s. It takes only a few keystrokes – or reading some books that are widely available from Amazon – to learn from national and international assessments and America’s competitive losses that our students were not keeping up. If we look at the last 30 years of assessments and scores, average proficiency rates in all subjects have moderately grown, but only by a few percentage points. It is the cities and states where charter schools are prevalent that have had the most gains across the board, and particularly for poor and minority kids.

Charter schools also delivered more parents back to public schools and reduced their growing commitment to private education where, no matter what their income, they were seeking refuge. Critics argue that charter schools are like private schools and therefore should not exist, but the reality is that charter schools have in fact drawn public money back to public education as private school enrollment has declined with new free competitive opportunities for parents and families.

Not only were diversity and choice the two primary motivations of the charter school movement, but the intended byproduct by providing these two distinctly American concepts was that innovations would in fact evolve from the non-bureaucratic highly accountable new public schools.

And this point the critics seem to jump for joy when they assert or claim the charter schools have not accomplished that job. But take a look at any public school in your community and ask yourself – when did Montessori education return? Where did blended and technology-based instruction and assessment come from? Where did the longer school year and school day come from? When did our schools start focusing on not just graduation rates but what students learn in order to be passed to the next grade? Multilingual schools, adult schools, schools for pregnant teens, programs for adjudicated youth, restoring a focus on the liberal arts and classical education, focus on science and math – all of these things were incubated and proven in charter schools long before any traditional public schools were able or interested in doing them.

In the '90s, the superintendent in Flint, Michigan, welcomed charter schools because he said they gave him the ability to demand that his board help him do something differently. Scores of stories like this exist throughout the nation. They are not difficult to find except for those whose only interest is in making the public believe charter schools do not do what they were intended to do - which is to help students and families and communities access the best form of public education possible.

Public Education Redux

What is public education? This question has plagued academics and politicians for years. Is it, as the school board associations have said repeatedly when they file lawsuits year after year in states to prevent charter school laws from coming to the fore, only a district-run, one-model governance structure where students are zoned to schools by their ZIP Code and parents have no opportunity for other kinds of education unless they can buy private education?

Is public education public because people vote for that school board, even though **rarely does the voting percentage top 10%** and their biggest supporters are the unions that endorse and lobby for them?

Or is public education – as reformers and charter advocates argue - the presence or accessibility of education that is wholly compliant with public laws governing health, safety, discrimination and standards, but is highly democratic in engaging its parents, its educators and its boards in the development of schools and instruction that best fit the needs of our very public citizens?

Whether or not one believes in the traditional model that derives all of its authority from one centralized school board, or alternatively, appreciates the opportunity for students who are the main focus of education to find and attend schools that vary widely, are highly accountable to their parents, to the public and to a whole array of regulatory bodies that most charter critics tend to ignore, the facts about why the charter concept exists and what it does for the children they serve cannot be ignored. And if you ignore the facts and can't understand how these organizations have restored social community and economic health to cities like Washington, DC, then you need a history lesson and to go back to the 30 years of work and the 10 years of planning and ideating that preceded it.

Perhaps you believe it's best to go back to a world where families are compelled to attend their closest public school or others that the district alone decides are available to them. Or perhaps you believe that a parent and a student may have

different needs, wants and desires than you and your own family, and deserve to see their public education allocation provide the education they think best meets their needs – not the education some adults or people far from their own lives believe is most important.

Those who advocate for charter moratoriums, cutting more funds from the already underfunded institutions, limiting their opening and expansion or overregulating them so that they comply with idle busy work and not focus on education either do not understand the reality or are predisposed to an ideological conviction that uniformity is superior to diversity, no matter the outcome.

Whatever it is, the crux of the ideological argument we see playing out in the public today is not a liberal versus conservative argument; it is not a Republican versus Democratic argument. All of those plus more were at the table in 1988, 1991 and 1995 and as recently as last week in rooms, state halls and discussion boards around the country deliberating what charter schools do to serve kids.

I have done intensive visits at more than 300 charter schools, as early as 1992 and as recently as May. The sheer variety, size, scope, focus, community, population, teacher base, etc are unlike any other public institution in our history. I have studied hundreds more charters, done the actual research on laws (which have 45 different state varieties, all with thousands of different components). I have studied applicants, closures, service providers and data. There is no one conclusion to be drawn from the sheer volume these data points represent, any more than there is one conclusion to be drawn about any one kind of educational institution. Only those who have comparable, first hand knowledge and experience and do not rely on impersonal and second hand reports can understand that. But when the charter concept was first deployed into law, schools were literally failing to impart a basic education to most students.

The progress we've seen since then is the result of allowing the diverse array of options Budde and Kolderie first brought to the public's attention in the '80s and that courageous lawmakers of both parties were willing to provide and defend for so many years. Now is not the time to turn the clock back. Now is the time to help more students and more communities determine which education is right for them. "Education by charter" may be just one way to accomplish that goal; but it is an indispensable way that millions want to see continue and grow.