

Charter Schools in United States of America

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Abstract: Charter schools obtain their name from the charter, or contract, the sponsor of the school sign with an authorizer. The concept of charter schools allows them to be innovative independent public schools that have to be accountable for improved student achievement. Charter schools exist in 41 states and the District of Columbia. Eight states have no charter school law. Number of the charter Schools has growth 100% since 2007–2008. A charter school's management policy and flexibility depends on the state in which the charter school resides; however, each charter school develops its own policies regarding the education of their students, such as the curriculum, pedagogy, discipline, and personal. To conclude that charter schools are essentially better or worse than traditional schools is to oversimplify the complexity of this public education issue.

Key words: charter school, educational policy, urban education

1. Introduction

Charter schools are public schools that operate with public funds and are managed by private organizations such as group of teachers, parents, community groups, businesses, universities, and others. A former schoolteacher, Ray Budde, develops the idea of charter schools. Budde developed his idea in the 1970s but did not formalize the charter school contract until 1988 (Bracey, 2003). When Former President of the American Federation of Teachers, Al Shanker, presented Budde's idea in Minnesota, several state legislators developed a charter strategy (Nathan, 1998).

In 1991, Minnesota became the first state to pass a charter school law that was supported by both Democrats and Republicans in Minnesota's House and Senate (Kolderie, 2001). By promoting a personalized learning environment the school stressed developing student responsibility and decision making (Arbogast, 2000). Arbogast (2000) also noted that the teachers that founded the school focused on drop-outs students. The charter school concept quickly expanded to several additional states and gained national attention when, in 1994, the federal government, with President Clinton's urging, passed the Charter School Grant Program, creating a pipeline for federal funding of charter schools which led to the proliferation of charter schools (Kolderie, 2005). Charter schools have grown significantly since their founding in 1991. Charter schools are intended to offer a specific academic focus, implement innovative strategies, and increase the academic performance of under-served, at-risk students. The increased autonomy of the charter schools causes great variability in their quality. This paper outlines the history of the charter schools in US, state charter school laws, characteristics of charter schools, and finally advantages and disadvantages of charter schools.

2. History of the Charter Schools

Charter schools obtain their name from the charter, or contract, the sponsor of the school sign with an authorizer. The concept of charter schools allows them to be innovative independent public schools that have to be accountable for improved student achievement. Charter schools are not bound by most traditional public schools regulations and therefore have greater flexibility in determining curriculum, allocating resources, and hiring staff (Gill et al., 2007). In case too many students want to enroll in a single charter school the charter laws require that students are admitted by a random lottery organized by the school district. Charters may not pick and choose their students, but they can choose programs and approaches. Charter schools must also meet the state and federal academic requirements that apply to all traditional public schools. Carpenter (2008) noted that “Charters are secular schools that in most states, must hire certified teachers, administer state and federal assessments of student performance, adhere to spending and auditing regulations, and meet the requirements of No Child Left Behind” (p. ii). Bierlein and Mulholland (1994) believed that charter schools can provide enhanced choice, decentralization, and new professional opportunities for teachers, while maintaining the common school ideals of providing education that is “tuition-free, non-sectarian, non-selective in student admissions, and non-discriminatory on the basis of race, religion, or disability” (p. 2).

Though still widely misunderstood by the public, charter schools are public schools. Charter schools are held accountable, not just in general issues, but in particular to achievement standards and goals embedded in their charters. This is the key difference between charter schools and regular schools. Charter schools board members are usually appointed rather than elected (The Center for Public Education, 2011). Bureaucratic procedures are loosened in the hope that they are able to place greater emphasis on academic focus (Education Bug, 2011).

The charter school movement has grown exponentially since the first two charter schools opened in Minnesota in 1992. According to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAFPC), there are 6,440 charter schools operating in the United States in 2013–2014 (estimate) school year are educating 2,569,029 students, which is 4.6 percent of all public schools students in 41 states and Washington, D.C. (NAFPC, 2014). As Figure 1 indicates growth in operational charter schools 1999–2000 through 2013–2014 (estimate).

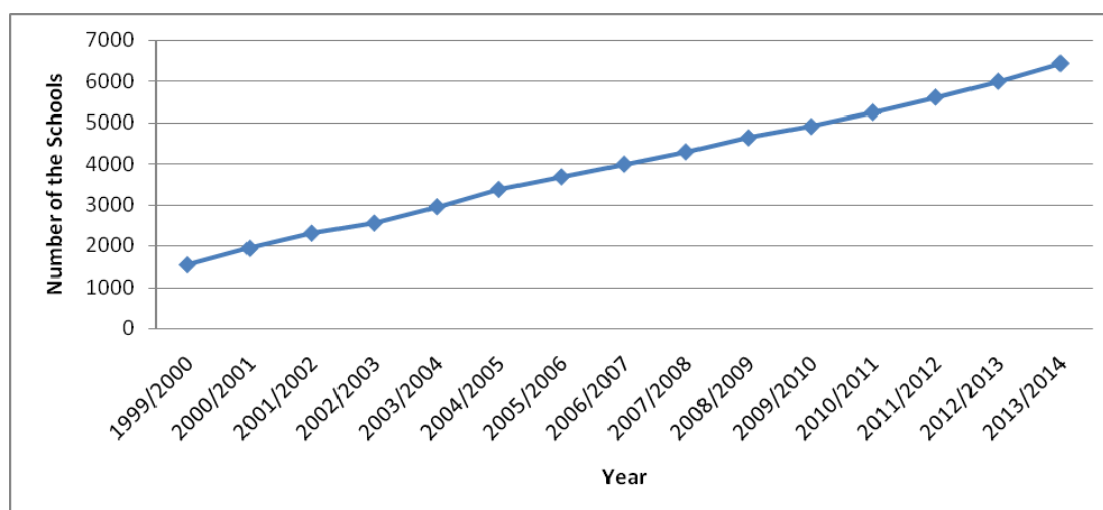


Figure 1 Growth in Operational Charter Schools 1999-2000 through 2013-14 (Estimate)

Sources: 1999-2000 through 2001-02 data: SRI International (2004), 2002-03 through 2013-14 data: NAFPCS (www.publiccharters.org)

Number of new charter schools in 2013 fall of academic year is 642 and 208 charter school closed during 2012–2013 academic year. Additionally, during 2012–2013 academic year percent of growth in number of charter schools is 6.7 in nationwide; however, Missouri, Kansas, Minnesota, and Georgia have negative percent of growth in number of charter schools. New Hampshire, with a 54 percent of growth, has only 19 charter schools. In addition, Tennessee has second largest growing percent, which is 20.5, and Tennessee had eighteen new charter schools in fall 2013. Also California had highest number of charter school with 109 new charter schools in fall 2013. Equally important to note, Minnesota which closed two schools has -50% growing percent which the higher negative percentage and also Florida state closed twenty six charter which is the maximum number in 2012–2013 academic year. As Figure 2 indicates the number of the new and closed charter schools from 2008–2009 through 2012–2013 academic year.

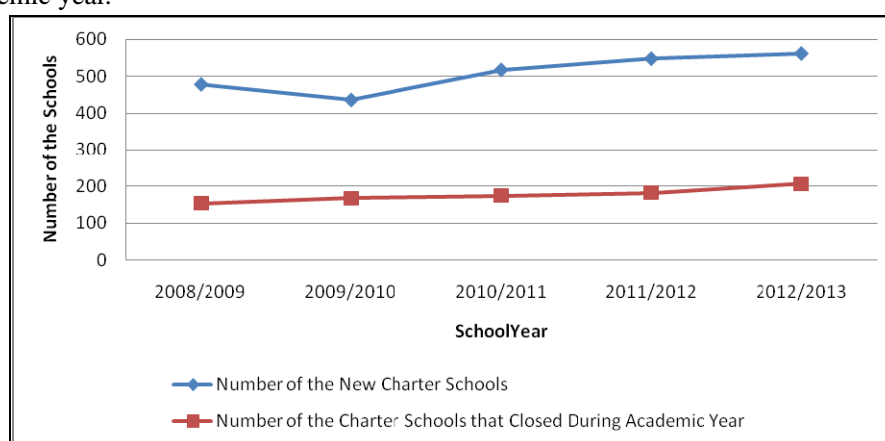


Figure 2 The Number of the New and Closed Charter Schools from 2008–2009 through 2012–2013

Sources: 2008-2009- through 2012-13 data NAFPCS (2014) (www.publiccharters.org)

3. State Charter School Laws

Current charter school laws are state determinations; the ways laws are enacted vary from one state to another. Research shows that some states have weak chartering laws (Center for Education Reform, 2010). Charter schools exist in 41 states and the District of Columbia. Eight states have no charter school law. The states that have no charter school law are: Alabama, Kentucky, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, and West Virginia (Center for Education Reform, 2014). Maine has only two-charter school, which is 0.3 percent to all public schools. There is an estimate of 1130 charter schools in California, the state that has the most of any state in 2014. Number of the charter schools has growth % percent since 2007–2008. In 2012–2013, California enrolled the most students in charter schools (470,578), and the District of Columbia enrolled the highest percentage of public school students in charter schools (43.2 percent), representing 34,674 students.

Some charter schools have limits or caps, according to the NAPCS, 23 states and DC are amongst these. President Obama stress, “state limit on number of charter schools aren’t good for our children, our economy or country” (2011). The President supports the growth of successful charter schools. Charter schools have access to resources from various local, state and federal bodies. The Chart Schools Grant Program is a federal source for example; under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), school systems are eligible to receive “School Improvement Grants” to transform their lowest-performing schools. Also, state programs such as Class Size Reduction (CSR) are not included in the block grant. Charter schools can also receive funding for

facilities; this is possible in fifteen states and DC.

4. Characteristics of Charter Schools

Charter schools are found predominately in large urban cities, which often serve large percentages of minority and economically disadvantaged students (Center for Education Reform, 2010; CREDO, 2009; Hansel, 2007). In 2010–2011, about 55.6 percent of charter schools were located in cities, 20.9 percent were in suburban areas, 7.5 percent were in towns, and 15.5 percent were in rural areas. 2010 National Charter School Survey showed that half of the students who attend charter schools could be categorized as at-risk students. The study demonstrated that 52 percent of charter school students are minorities and just over half of the charter population is from low-income families. Although charters attract a large percentage of minority students, a large number of those minority students are African Americans (Center for Education Reform, 2010). According to the NAFPCS (2014), 36 percent of the students in charter schools were white, 29.2 percent of the students in charter schools were Black and Hispanic children in charter schools represented approximately 27.6 percent of the population. Also, NAFPCS (2014) shows that about 50.6 percent of charter school students were eligible for free and reduced lunches. Charter schools have implemented a variety of configurations, including nontraditional configurations, such as K-8 and K-12 schools. They have the flexibility to choose grade level configurations based on mission, child development approach and the schools philosophy of teaching.

5. Advantages of Charter Schools

The autonomous structure of charter schools allow for school environments that are more conducive to student learning. Nelson and Miron (2002) identified the factors that distinguish academically successful charter schools as being, “teacher human capital (experience, degrees, and pupil teacher ratio), teacher professional autonomy, teacher academic focus, interaction between teacher skills and curriculum, altitudinal congruence, staff and student retention, parental involvement, and support from community groups or businesses (including Educational Management Organizations (EMO))” (pp. 46–47). Many of these things are possible due to the fact that most charter schools are run independently from the larger school district, and because the school-based management team is able to make a lot of decisions on their own. Specifically, corporations or individuals who incorporate the business model into the manner in which they run their school and this is seen as positive student outcome run many charter schools. A charter school's management policy and flexibility depends on the state in which the charter school resides; however, each charter school develops its own policies regarding the education of their students, such as the curriculum, pedagogy, discipline, and personal. In charter schools, parents, educators, and community leaders are involved in selecting the schools board, rather than the traditional method of boards being selected through a political process.

Parental involvement such as volunteering or serving on school council is opportunities given to parents. This allows parents to participate in the education market place (CMU, 2007). This helps community members believe that the charter school belongs to them and they belong to it; it helps them feel invested and produces a more unified school culture (Miron & Nelson, 2002). Teachers in charter schools are better able to match activities to their students’ needs, capabilities and ambitions because charter schools are free from regulations that dictate curriculum and design. Flexibility in curriculum is very important for student engagement, and, as a result, achievement. Since individuals and corporations start many charter schools, it is not uncommon for the governing

group to be from a background other than the educational field. Therefore, most charter schools leave pedagogical decisions up to teachers to supplement their regular academic programs with effective and organized extra-curricular activities, such as study support, to complement and enhance mainstream courses.

Eighty-two percent of charter school teachers rate their overall satisfaction as high, which is twice as high as their private counterparts and more than three times as high as their district counterparts (Murray, 2007). Factors that increase satisfaction include greater autonomy, productive collaboration with colleagues, higher salaries, more school safety, more professional development opportunities, more involvement in governance and decision-making, good student discipline, and their schools' good learning environments (Miron & Nelson, 2002). The National Resource Center on Charter Schools (2008) reports that charter schoolteachers are like stakeholders, engaging in decision-making roles that are not typically afforded in traditional public schools. They have the option of funding their own schools, have input into the shape of the vision and mission of the school, can serve on governing boards, and are allowed to prioritize the working conditions that matter most to them. Furthermore, charter schools free teachers from educational bureaucracies by giving teachers the autonomy to decide to engage in creative and innovative educational practices. For example, teachers have great control of curriculum and are encouraged to carry out their own classroom-based instructional reform initiatives (Gawlik, 2007). In addition, charter schools offer higher salaries than traditional public schools. Charter schoolteachers seem to be offered more frequent and site-based professional development opportunities. Teachers also have opportunities to attend conferences (Miron & Gary, 2007) and engage in individualized professional development activities on a need basis, as well.

Several research studies have examined charter schools' effectiveness in terms of both student achievement and the level to which students are satisfied with their school. Charter school partnerships can be focused on specific areas of student interest or need, thus allowing them to reach out to at-risk students (Wohlstetter & Smith, 2006). However, it is important to note that not all charter schools are able to develop and maintain effective and lucrative partnerships with outside organizations.

Fleischman & Heppen (2009) examined charter schools and the Educational Management Organizations that run them in a study of school reform efforts in American schools. They argue that a lack of definitive research comparing test scores of charter school students to those of their traditional public schools counterparts makes it difficult to examine the success of charter schools as a whole. The authors define an effective charter school as one that creates a safe, orderly learning environment with a positive, supportive school culture (Fleischman & Heppen, 2009). Barrett (2003) conducted a study of charter school students' satisfaction with their schools, noting that the level to which students enjoy and feel supported in their school can affect academic achievement. In this study, just over half of the students surveyed felt more satisfied with their current charter school than they had previously in traditional public schools. Interestingly, students who had been struggling or at-risk for dropping out in traditional public schools were more likely to report increased satisfaction in charter school, suggesting that charter schools may provide an important niche for students who are not successful in traditional schools. While test scores are inconclusive regarding whether or not students are better off at charter schools, students' level of satisfaction, and higher graduation rates suggest that charter schools do address student' needs to feel connected to their school community, which ultimately result in higher student achievement (Ravitch, 2010).

6. Disadvantage of Charter Schools

Though the increased influence of the business community on education and the privatization of public education can certainly offer an advantage, these reforms often detract from the democratic equality and social mobility purposes of schooling. While the privatization of schools allows for certain freedoms that many feel will benefit students, charter schools — under the management of entrepreneurial forces — epitomize the reshaping of education as an avenue for social efficiency.

The business community and entrepreneurs encourage schools to embrace market-based reforms, but as of yet, there is limited evidence that this model increases student achievement. According to Ravitch (2010), Bill and Melinda Gates, “invest millions in performance-based teacher pay programs; creating data systems; supporting advocacy work; promoting national standards and tests; and finding ways for school districts to measure teacher effectiveness and to fire ineffective teachers” (p. 211). This emphasis on focusing on teachers as the problem is consistent with the practices of the business community; specifically, blaming the exploitation of the unions as the main contributor to the lack of traditional public schools’ effectiveness. Corporate or entrepreneurial leadership in charter schools felt that union interference directly prevented students from receiving the best quality teachers. In order to eradicate this problem, Ravitch (2010) suggests that,

Charter operators wanted to be able to hire and fire teachers at will, control working conditions, and to require long working hours; with few exceptions, they did not want to be subject to a union contract that interfered with their prerogatives as management (p. 124)

This tactic polarized school reform by identifying teacher unions as the “enemy”, while ignoring other significant auxiliary factors, such as socio-economic status that also contribute to the seeming unsuccessfulness of current reform measures, and ultimately disregard the valuable role teacher unions can play. Ravitch (2010) counters this view of unions by suggesting there is “no correlation” with unionism and student achievement and says, “Teachers... should have the right to organize and to bargain collectively for their compensation, working conditions and the right to due process” (p. 175). She views the purpose and benefits of teacher unions as outweighing their possible impediment to educational reform, and views unions as protectors of teachers’ civil and professional liberties. School leadership has also come under fire as a result of the school choice movement. This represents the possible dangers of injecting free-market philosophies into nation’s educational system. The idea that the leaders of an industry do not need experience in that industry, even at a basic level, seems ludicrous; especially if this same model was applied to other industries, such as medicine or law. When corporations and entrepreneurs are allowed to define the principles of education, it denigrates the professionalism of teachers and school leaders.

Though rumors of autonomy, teacher input, and curriculum decision making can easily entice teachers who remain in “failing” traditional public schools, there are clear disadvantages for teachers who abandon traditional schools. Many teachers initially choose to leave their jobs in traditional schools and apply to charter schools, in search of this something better. The realities of working in a charter school can be significantly different from the optimistic vision many teachers hold when they accept charter school positions (Glenn, 2002; Miron & Nelson, 2002). For example, the working hours are long, and the workload increased due to small staffs (Ravitch, 2010). The autonomy afforded the teachers can result in saddling them with the enormous task of writing entire curriculums, sometimes while they are teaching. Teachers easily burnout resulting in another negative aspect of working in charter schools, the fact that teacher attrition rates are high, keeping new and usually younger, less

experienced teachers constantly cycling (Dingerson, 2002; Fusarelli, 2002; Miner, 2002; Miron & Nelson, 2002).

Despite these professional problems and obstacles, in general, the most prevalent opinions of charter school teachers regarding their job satisfaction is that it is just different from what they expected (Miron & Nelson, 2002). The areas where the most teachers felt the realities did not meet their expectations were: ability to influence the direction of the school, good communication between the school and parents, effective leadership and administration, and students receiving enough individual attention (Miron & Nelson, 2002).

Critics of charter schools claim that charter schools are not accessible to all students because they attract and pull in students who are the “cream of the crop”. They suggest that, since there is often an application process or lottery system in order to enroll in charter schools, only the most motivated parents will consider entering their children into this pool. Others disagree, stating that the lottery system ensures that charter schools randomly select their student bodies and prevents the “cream skimming” that is commonly associated with magnet programs (Peterson, 2010). Peterson praises the lottery system employed by most public charter schools because in studies including students who were accepted into charter schools and those who applied but were not accepted, results show that the charter school accepted students who performed considerably higher than the non-lottery winners. However, the lottery system directly impacts a large number of students in a negative way since the ones excluded by the lottery are forced to attend the failing traditional public schools they were trying to escape. It is reasonable to assume that the lottery winners and losers are comparable since they both applied to the charter school in the first place and exhibit the same motivation towards education. However, Ravitch (2010) counters that, ultimately, the student populations in traditional and charter schools systematically differ as charters attract a larger percentage of the motivated students and traditional schools have no choice but to enroll every student regardless of his or her motivation. Estes (2000) also states that many charter schools open their doors to special education students without paying much attention to their Individualized Education Plans (IEP). She states, “Rather than an integral piece of the initial planning, competing interests and expenses may regulate special education to an afterthought” (p. 372). Though charter schools claim that they do not have the money or manpower to offer extensive services, lack of appropriate staffing or funding should not be used as an excuse to discriminate against special education students and keep them from the opportunities that charter schools have to offer.

In general, charter schools may not be meeting the needs of all students, and any positive gains may be unreliable due to the “cream-skimming” process, as well as the lack of student retention, especially for special education students.

7. Conclusion

Rather than focusing on the narrow debate of whether charter schools are superior to traditional schools, or on whether to increase or decrease the number of charter schools, the educational community should celebrate the successes of both traditional and charter schools and provide avenues for both models to work together in their local communities. I could attempt to bring some of the advantages of charter schools — such as increased teacher autonomy and leadership — to traditional schools, and charter schools could adopt policies from traditional schools that aim to serve all students, specifically special needs students. To conclude that charter schools are essentially better or worse than traditional schools is to oversimplify the complexity of this public education issue.

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