

THOUGHTS ON CHARTER SCHOOL ISSUES

I will provide some thoughts on each of the topics you listed, but would like to provide some context for my thinking first.

There are a few things that are important for any discussion of charter schools:

1. Each state has its own laws, regulations and policies for charter schools. These rules could include
 - The purpose of charter schools
 - Which level of government approves and monitors charter schools
 - Who can operate a charter school
 - How the schools are funded
 - How many and which students are eligible to attend charter schools
 - How charters can or must manage their enrollment
 - The extent to which the schools have to follow state laws and regulations

As a result, debates about charter schools are different based on the state context. For example, in Massachusetts the local school committee (same as a school board) has no vote in the establishment of a charter school even though local (and state) tax dollars will be transferred to a charter school for each student who enrolls in one. The State Board of Education is the sole authorizer for charters and interprets MA statutes as preventing them from considering whether a local superintendent or school committee supports or opposes the establishment of the charter school. Other states give the local school authority more control over whether a charter school is established in its district.

Other states allow many different authorizers – for example, a district could authorize a charter. Many of the complaints about charter school abuses (mostly financial) occur in states that allow substantial latitude in authorizing charters.

2. The purpose of charter schools – Again there are variations among the states in their written rules, but also in how these rules are implemented as far as what goals charter schools are supposed to serve. The Kahlenberg article I sent in the previous email covers this issue from an historical perspective that I think is useful.

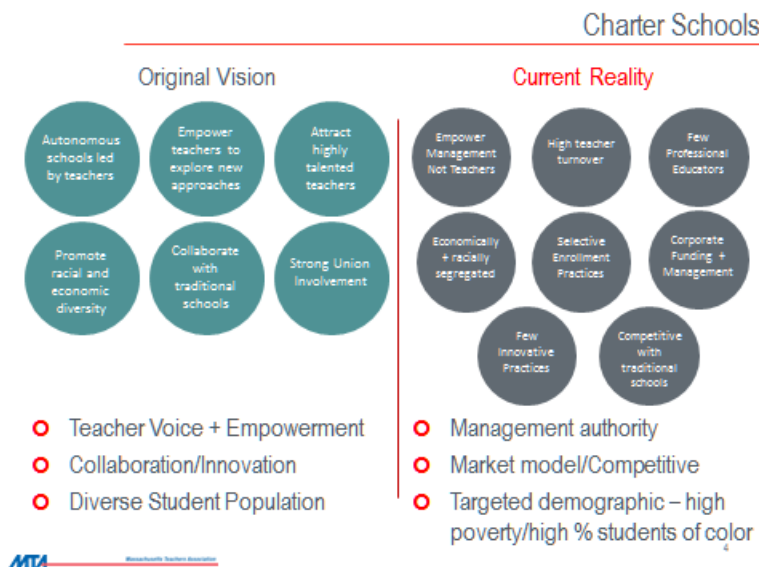
Charters were originally intended to be connected to a public school, serving as an “innovation lab” where experienced and skilled educators could experiment, outside of usual practices if necessary, to figure out how public schools could work better, particularly helping students with students from diverse backgrounds to learn together.

As the article goes on to describe, much of the original vision has changed. Charters are in competition with traditional public schools for students and funding, a market model that was never part of the charter school concept has predominated. Most charters have a top-down management structure and prefer to employ new teachers (often they do not have to be licensed - the case in MA) who stay for a short time. Some of these practices have come from the interest in delivering education at a reduced cost.

I have used the graphic at the right to show this switch in purpose and approach.

Educators have noticed how their profession and their voice have been diminished in the current charter school models. This is a significant part of their opposition to charter schools.

The anti-union practices of many charter schools are also a large deviation from their original purpose.



- Charter School Model – Obviously charter school programs vary a great deal. However, as the national charter school chains – for example, KIPP – expand, there are an increasing number of charter schools that employ a “no-excuses” model. This model is characterized by rigid discipline and instructional models, a narrow measure of success – usually standardized test scores, and strict and a strong and explicit culture – uniforms, acronyms, behaviors.

To some extent, this rigid model is used because the teachers who are hired to teach in charter schools often have no experience and no training in pedagogy. (or the business model of charters schools relies on teachers who do not receive high salaries and benefits – young, inexperienced, not qualified.) In Massachusetts, charter school teachers do not have to be licensed. Teachers learn on the students how to be a teacher and many, not surprisingly, do not stay long. Turnover in charters schools in MA is about 50% higher than in traditional public schools. There is research that shows the negative impact of teacher turnover, particularly among students in poverty.

Many experienced and skilled educators disagree with this model. Since many of the no-excuses charter schools serve primarily students in poverty and students of color, they see a substantial inequity between this type of education compared to that provided to students from affluent communities whose parents would not allow this education model in their public schools. Further, many of these schools have very high suspension rates.

www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2014/09/19/why-no-excuses-charter-schools-mold-very-submissive-students-starting-in-kindergarten/?utm_term=.7a05e49ce118

4. Are charter schools “public?”

The question of whether charter schools are public can be discussed from several different perspectives. Some offer a straightforward analysis – they receive public funds, so they are public. While that works for some people, there are lots of organizations/entities that receive public funds and that fact alone does not automatically make them public.

Another analysis looks at legal definitions. There was a case in Washington State last year that found, under Washington laws, that charter schools are not public schools. That case is currently being appealed.

I like to consider this question from a “purpose of public schools” argument. To me, public schools have to serve the common good; not individual gain. The common good of public schools is essential to a democracy and the value goes well beyond what an individual gains from being educated. I also have a strong belief that providing parents and students “choice” among schools is not compatible with what public education is trying to do as a common good. I understand that not all parents/students have the opportunity to attend schools that charge tuition, but I don’t believe that public education should make providing choice a value of our system. The “commonness” of public education is of high value to our democracy; choice divides. Further, it is impossible to draw a line between what kind of choice is acceptable. For example, many parents preferred segregated schools; that did not mean that public education should provide segregated schools to satisfy parents’ choice. (I do realize I am more extreme on this point than others – it is a hard one to debate – what about vocational schools? Exam schools?)

I have taken the following from Rethinking Schools, page 8 -15 “Charter Schools and the Values of Public Education.”

This chapter identifies four fundamental values of public education

- Equity – provide children with a public “equal opportunity” education
- Access - provide all children with access to the best education that is offered
- Public purpose – schools need to provide students with the skills for lifelong learning and for engaged citizenship.
- Public ownership – public has the responsibility to support and provide oversight

The authors of this chapter offer the following questions to guide a discussion of whether a school is meeting its public purpose:

- Are charter schools strategically used within a district to provide for more equitable treatment of students?
- Do charter schools provide for greater access to strong schools and a range of educational opportunities for all families in the community?
- Does the use of charter schools further the purpose of public education, to provide all our children with the tools necessary for lifelong learning and engaged citizenship?
- Do the charter schools operate as publicly owned schools with full transparency and community governance?

- The reason charters are granted exemptions to rules is to demonstrate a better way to educate children which all parts of the system can learn. Thus we must ask, do the public policies that authorize charters provide genuine regulatory relief, as well as a system to report widely on their innovations and results?

The chapter contains a good discussion of each of these questions as well as some background.

TOPICS:

1. Educational outcomes - As noted above, the charter school vs traditional public school competition is a significant part of the policy debates on charter schools (Years ago, the debate was public schools versus private schools.)
 - a. From my point of view, the “who is better” question is the wrong issue; charter schools have a different mission and serve different populations than do public schools. A few points on these ideas:
 - Social scientists, mostly economists, have jumped into this discussion trying to come up with methodology that could approximate a randomized experiment design, where students are assigned randomly to a charter school or a traditional public school. The problem is they can’t, but they still try.
 - So we end up with studies that try to approximate a randomized experiment – students who apply for a charter school lottery and enroll in the school and those who apply and do not get a seat. These studies get complicated and further, the only charters that can be in the study are those that are oversubscribed.
 - Then, social scientists debate whether the weaknesses in the methodology allow the generalizations that are made.
 - And the studies are not pure – almost every charter study on outcomes is supported by one side of the charter school debate or the other.
 - And despite all of that, the studies continue to show mixed results – some do well; some do not.
 - b. Another issue is how to define “educational outcomes?” In many instances, certainly in Massachusetts, charter schools point to performance on state standardized tests to show high performance. There are many issues with this approach:
 - State standardized test scores represent a very narrow range of what public schools should have as goals for its students. Much learning cannot be measured in this way. When these scores become the measure of success, schools will focus on them and charter schools do – and people are willing to declare them “high-performing” on this basis alone.
 - When other data is considered, the story becomes more complicated. A school in MA is a high performer based on our state standardized tests, but has a very low percentage of students who take and score above a 3 on AP tests.
 - Other studies have shown that students from charter schools using the “no-excuses” model do not have the same success in college as students from traditional schools. KIPP schools, for example, have acknowledged this issue.

- Richard Rothstein (Grading Accountability) identifies eight broad categories that have historically been identified as goals of public education:
 - Basic skills in reading, writing, and Basic academic knowledge and skills: math, and knowledge of science and history.
 - Critical thinking and problem solving: the ability to analyze information, apply ideas to new situations, and develop knowledge using computers.
 - Appreciation of the arts and literature: participation in and appreciation of musical, visual, and performing arts as well as a love of literature.
 - Preparation for skilled employment: workplace qualification for students not pursuing college education.
 - Social skills and work ethic: communication skills, personal responsibility, and the ability to get along with others from varied backgrounds.
 - Citizenship and community responsibility: public ethics; a knowledge of how government works; and participation by voting, volunteering, and becoming active in community life.
 - Physical health: good habits of exercise and nutrition.
 - Emotional health: self-confidence, respect for others, and the ability to resist peer pressure to engage in irresponsible personal behavior.
 - We should include all of these goals when considering how well schools are doing; not just standardized test schools.
- c. Charter schools have two enrollment practices that should always be investigated if looking at numeric outcomes – for example, test data, graduation rates.
- Differences in student populations
 - Charter schools typically do not enroll the same percentage of students with disabilities or English learners compared to the sending district. Further, of the charter students in these two categories, they are usually students with higher levels of English proficiency and lower level of disabilities.
 - In MA, since most charters are in urban areas, the schools often have a higher percentage of students of color and in poverty. However, similar to English learners and students with disabilities, the students in poverty are less poor than students in the sending district.
 - While some argue that charter schools select students via lottery, there are many examples where students with disabilities and English learners are discouraged from entering the lottery or enrolling.
 - Regardless of the reason, student demographics for most charters are not similar to those for sending districts; any comparison of outcomes would have to take this into account.
 - In some charter schools, a substantial number of students do not complete the program; the key information should be – of the students who enroll in the school, how many finish the last year of the program? Data from MA show some schools have a large drop off as students progress through the school. Many of these students return to the regular public

school. Clearly this information should also be considered when evaluating the performance of a school.

2. The struggle with teachers unions

- a. In the beginning, teachers unions were supportive of charter schools – see previous comments and Kahlenberg article.
- b. As charter school policies evolved, several changes in policy occurred:
 - Teacher voice diminished – charter school management became top down and not teacher driven.
 - Charter school policy did not incorporate unions or collective bargaining. In fact, charter schools identify collective bargaining as a barrier. Teachers, even those in unions, most often are committed educators who work hard at their craft and are dedicated to making sure that students learn. The denigration of unions and their teachers as being self-serving and uncaring does not play well with teachers.
 - Teachers see charter schools as having lower salaries and benefits and poorer working conditions than traditional public schools. They also see very high teacher turnover in charter schools. Charter schools often have very long days and demand commitment that employees with families and other obligations are often unable to sustain.
 - Teachers generally do not support the no-excuses model used in many charters.
 - Charter schools often do not view education as a profession; I quote from a charter school advocate in Massachusetts, “Teaching is something you do for a few years after you get out of college.”
 - Charter schools teachers sometimes do not have to be licensed; this means they do not need to have any training in pedagogy; nor do they have to renew their licenses over time. MA charter school teachers do not have to be licensed.
- c. Having said all that, in MA, charter school teachers can unionize. The Massachusetts Teachers Association has voted to organize charter school teachers. There have been a couple of instances of charter school teachers forming unions (although MTA has not organized any.) The biggest issue is that charters are not supportive of unions; charter teachers have no protection if they try to organize and charter teachers have a high turnover rate. Many leave and go to traditional public schools for better working conditions and salaries.
- d. I would argue that it is not that unions have a problem with charters, but that charters have a problem with unions.

3. Taking public funds from local communities

One area where unions do have a problem with charters is the funding policy. In many states (including MA), there is no “additional funding” for charter schools; funding is redistributed to charters from that allocated to traditional public schools based on student enrollment.

The policy is based on the “money follows the child” rule. This rule means that if a child leaves a traditional public school and goes to a charter, the dollars used to educate that child should now be allocated to the charter school. The problem is that, when a child leaves a school, it cannot realize savings equal to the money that is transferred. At the extremes, if one child leaves a grade 5

classroom and takes \$10,000 with her, the school will not find any savings due to this change in enrollment – it will still have to heat the school, the bus she takes will still run, the teacher will still be there, etc.

Charter advocates believe two things – the school should adjust over time to the lower enrollment and find savings and the “competition” of the charter school will result in the traditional school getting better; loss of funding is an important “incentive.” However, given how the enrollment transfers to charters occur, traditional public schools will never be able to make “adjustments” that reduce costs sufficient to match the amount that is transferred.

Neither of these two beliefs makes sense in the context of public education. In Massachusetts, we have an example of a public school that has had to eliminate language instruction due to the loss of funds because students are attending a Chinese Immersion Charter School – a case of the public good being sacrificed for individual benefit.

In Massachusetts, \$450 million annually is moved from the budgets of traditional public schools to charter schools. Since students can attend most charter schools regardless of where they live, a high percentage of districts are losing money to charters; it is not just in urban areas. However, the impact in urban areas is significant. Boston, for example, transfers almost 18% of its budget to charters. In addition, since charters do not enroll students with disabilities and English language learners in the same percentage as does Boston, Boston is left with students that are more challenging to educate.

Educators also believe that they see that students transferring back to traditional public schools are disproportionately students with disabilities or English language learners. They do not believe that charters are operating as public schools where any student with any needs at any grade and at any time of the school year is enrolled when the student shows up at the door. Charter schools do not have to operate that way – see #6 Enrollment below.

A link to a Washington Post story that shows how that can play out.

www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2017/01/09/a-disturbing-look-at-how-charter-schools-are-hurting-a-traditional-school-district/?utm_term=.a5d827e05617

A link to a blog post that is an interesting take on why dollars belong to the system not the student is the way it should be:

<https://schoolfinance101.wordpress.com/2017/03/28/public-goods-the-money-belongs-to-the-child-fallacy-in-tweets/>

4. Parent engagement

Not sure what this topic involves, but I can think of two issues:

- In most instances, parent engagement is of great benefit to students and schools. Charter schools enroll students whose parents had to be engaged sufficiently to help them apply to the school. As a result, charter schools are likely to have more parent engagement.

- There are instances – hard to document – of charter schools that require parents to volunteer in the schools; traditional public schools educate all students whether or not their parents can volunteer or not.

5. The role of for profit companies in our schools

- State laws differ on this issue. In MA, for profit companies cannot be granted a charter; however a charter board of trustees can hire a for-profit company to manage the school and we have a few, Sabis, for example.
- I believe that for-profit operators have no place in our public education system. Some students will cost more to educate than others; public schools must educate all of them as part of the common good. For profit companies have an incentive not to enroll students who are expensive to educate.
- Further, there are many options for high investment return with charter schools. I am not a financial analysis, but much of this involves a federal New Market Tax Credit Program that provides incentives for investments in community development. Many charter school buildings (those in low income communities) qualify and private investors earn a guaranteed 39% yield over six years, as well as appreciation and rent from the public funding provided to charter schools through the tuition payment. This is an interesting story line; I have examined only a small piece of it.

6. Enrollment

Charter schools use enrollment management practices that are very different from public schools.

- In MA, charter schools can limit the grades in which students can enter the school. For example, a high school can say it only accepts students in grade 9.
- Charters can generally decide not to fill a seat when a student leaves the school.
- In order to make sure, the budget is sufficient (since most of their funding comes on a per pupil basis), the school can enroll a large number of students in the early grades of their program, assuming that students will leave. In that way, the school has a steady funding stream since the enrollment is controlled.
- Charters do not have to enroll a student in the middle of a school year.
- In practice, some charters in MA show a substantial decrease in enrollment as a cohort progresses through the school. Students who do not “fit” with the program (suspended, collect demerits, miss too many classes, have to repeat a year) end up going back to the traditional public schools. Many argue that schools use discipline (suspension) as a strategy to encourage “problem” students to leave. As a result, many charters end up with a higher percentage of girls in their higher grades and higher test scores. Girls typically score higher on standardized tests. I have attached a document that explores this issue.

7. Staffing

As described above, charter schools typically employ young, inexperienced and often unqualified individuals to teach in their schools. For some, it appears to be part of the business model – these individuals are cheaper and are more willing to work long hours (and will likely not stay very long.) This practice is consistent with the charter school belief that teaching is not a long term profession.