



CHARTER SCHOOLS, STILL MAKING WAVES

Throughout the United States many local and state school boards are beginning to consider authorizing what will amount to hundreds of new charter schools. Last year, 320 new charter schools were opened. In the 2005-2006 school year, as many as 350 new schools are expected to open. Policymakers weighing changes in charter laws are being pressed to identify the impact of these new public schools on existing schools. The impact of charter schools on conventional public schools has long been the subject of analysts and proponents. Since the first charter law in 1991, the answer remains the same—charter schools have an enormous, positive, ripple effect on schools in their neighborhoods. The evidence is compelling.

WHAT THE RESEARCH REVEALS

Quantifying the impact is difficult but it has been done several times. In 1998, University of California-Berkeley professor Eric Rofes studied this so-called ripple effect by conducting in depth surveys with a representative sample of conventional public school administrators. Rofes found that approximately 25 percent of those he consulted admitted doing something differently – something better – than they would have had charters not been opened in their district. That figure is low, however. It's unlikely that all school administrators were willing to say just how they had reacted differently in the face of new competition.

The effects of charters on conventional public schools is clear in two major charter states. Arizona and Michigan, home to 23 percent of the nation's charters, actually show higher annual test scores among conventional public schools most effected by charters.

Harvard professor Caroline Hoxby found in September 2001 that Arizona public schools that had charter schools nearby had math increases of more than three times that of schools that faced no competition from charter schools. The difference in reading scores is even more dramatic. In Michigan, she found increases in 4th and 8th grade reading scores were twice as high in schools affected by charters.

These results should be considered in light of the fact that about half of all charter schools are located in or around major cities and 55 percent of charter school students are minority. Compare that with the fact that only 29 per cent of all conventional public schools are in urban areas and only 45 per cent of the student population is minority. Charter school leaders (be they principals, teachers, board members, authorizers or parents) in thousands of schools have accepted the challenge to close the achievement gap by going into traditionally neglected neighborhoods. Instead of making excuses about teachability these schools are targeting those students that have been the hardest to reach and



bringing success stories back to a public education system that has too often been besmirched by news of failing test scores and teacher strikes.

Even as news begins to trickle in about decreasing urban flight numbers and increasing property values in areas of school choice, statistics alone do not tell the story of the effects charter schools are having on other public schools.

This school year 2 million parents and students experienced the benefits of charter schools and that number is steadily growing. Cyber charter schools are also helping to change the way Americans think of traditional schools districts.

REAL EXAMPLES — IF YOU CAN'T BEAT 'EM, JOIN 'EM

Many conventional public school districts often view charter schools as a threat but time has shown that these new schools present a valuable teaching role. Increasingly, members of the traditional public school system are turning to charter schools for examples of “best-practices” regarding everything from curriculum to staffing and teacher retention.

- Seemingly overwhelmed, the Dallas, TX School District approached The KIPP Academy about opening another successful at-risk student public school in Dallas. KIPP Truth Academy opened in the fall of 2003. The Class of 2011, which is 99 per cent minority and 81 per cent of which qualify for free/reduced lunch, has already averaged 20 point achievement gains on the SAT-10 tests.ⁱ
- The Los Angeles, CA Unified School District recognized the success that the CHIME charter school was having in teaching children with a range of learning disabilities. In an attempt to replicate this model the district announced a partnership with CHIME so that educational improvements could be realized in all schools.
- Last year Multi-cultural Academy Charter School in North Philadelphia received a \$50,000 grant from the state in order to share its best practices with other charter and conventional public schools through the departments dissemination program. The state has finally realized that it is better to learn from successful schools rather than attack them.
- Once the waiting list for Jefferson County, Colorado’s first Montessori charter school – Montessori Peaks – was in the hundreds, more parents in the middle-income Colorado community banded together and submitted applications for more charter schools. Now at least two other Montessori schools operate in the same, greater-Denver area.
- Charter schools in Ohio serve about 22 per cent of the Buckeye State’s K-12 students. About 1,000 students come from the Columbus area alone and in an effort to recapture students from innovative charter schools, the Columbus school district is set to offer online courses for some students.
- The Detroit school district is on the verge of collapse, yet charter schools in Detroit are flourishing. Last year, about 3,400 Detroit students left the district for charters. District officials have predicted that more students will try to leave this year because of the large number of Detroit schools closing. It's nearly six months before Detroiters LaSonya

Buckines' son will start kindergarten, but she is already looking for a school outside the city district. "(Charters) have a more structured environment. It is more personable." Janna Garrison, president of the Detroit Federation of Teachers, said the union is encouraging parents and kids to stick with their neighborhood schools. "The district will have to do more public relations about all the great things going on in our schools."

- The Monroe County school district in Wisconsin witnessed the success of charter schools in the Milwaukee school district and decided to join ranks by opening four charter schools — Sparta Montessori Charter School, Sparta Charter Preschool, Sparta High Point Charter High School and Sparta Area Independent Learning School — thereby rejecting a "one-size-fits-all" approach to education. District superintendent John Hendricks likes the idea of charter programs, and believes "it frees up the program from a lot of regulations and requirements that ordinary programs have to adhere to, we're able to try new things that otherwise wouldn't be allowable," Hendricks said.
- In January 2004, George Holmes, Jeff DeSimone, and Nicholas Rupp used year-end test scores from North Carolina's statewide testing program to determine if the competition provided by charter schools had any impact on the test scores in conventional public schools. The authors found that "charter school competition raised test scores in district schools, even though the students leaving district schools for the charters tended to have above average test scores. The gain was relatively large, roughly two to five times greater than the gain from decreasing the student-faculty ratio by 1, and more than one-half of the average achievement gain of 1.7 percent in 1999-2000."
- Officials from Delaware's department of education visited one of the state's most successful charter schools, The Charter School of Wilmington, in an effort to learn more about the science curriculum. The sophomores at the charter schools scored at the top of the state in science, and Department of Education officials are learning more about the science program to improve the science education for all students in Delaware.
- A poster hanging in the entryway of the Fort Bowman Academy Charter School in Cahokia, Illinois, outlines changes in curriculum and programming in Cahokia public schools that reflect the influence of the charter school's own methodology. The poster sums up the ripple effect with one line: "I wonder where they got these great ideas?"
- Akron school district officials dropped their long-standing opposition to charter schools by deciding to open a virtual charter school. The district took this step due to a massive decline in the district's enrollment. The district experienced a 50-year low of 30,000 students in 2002 and blamed the low enrollment on the recent growth of charter schools (all of which maintained their enrollment goals).

FROM THE HORSE'S MOUTH

The attitudes of leading administrators in the conventional public school system are also changing. Instead of viewing charter schools as nuisances many realize the need for improvement spurred on by charter schools.

- Boston Superintendent of schools Thomas Payzant had this to say about charter schools: “The competition is real – for the resources and for the kids. We’ve got to meet it by saying we can do as well or better...Public schools have to remain competitive by remembering that the goal is not just to get kids out of level one but to get more students into levels three and four.”
- Long time Florida educator Jim Kidd is now the principal of South Tech Charter High School in Boynton Beach. Principal Kidd says, “We have more freedom and smaller class sizes, as opposed to being one of more than 160 schools and part of a big bureaucracy. The big advantage of being a charter school is that we’re able to respond to the needs of our student more quickly and to give them more individualized attention.”ⁱⁱ
- Recently the Detroit public schools ended a 20-year trend of declining enrollments. The Detroit school district’s CEO Dr. Kenneth Burnley credits the system’s re-energizing to the competition from charter schools and other non-public elementary schools, which forced his system to address the needs of Detroit’s families.
- Philadelphia’s reform efforts under the new superintendent were intended to take advantage of efforts already underway in some of the city’s more successful charter schools. Prior to charters opening, conventional schools remained fixed in time, and on a steady decline of achievement and financial ruin. The charters gave reform minded district officials the excuse they needed to push forward to create more innovations in conventional public schools.

Reform minded school leaders will always welcome the introduction of charter schools to stimulate improvement. From Milwaukee, WI to Miami, FL, the growth in charter schools are making traditional stakeholders, district employees and their leaders think and behave differently, which is better for all kids.

Shaka L. A. Mitchell
Associate Director Policy & Planning

ⁱ “KIPP: 2004 Report Card”, Appendix p. 15.

ⁱⁱ Kathi McFarland, “Charter school principal enjoys helping students learn life skills”, *Palm Beach Post*, 1/5/05.