

Charter schools and the future of public education

It's time to refocus public policy on providing excellent public schools for all

Written by Stan Karp

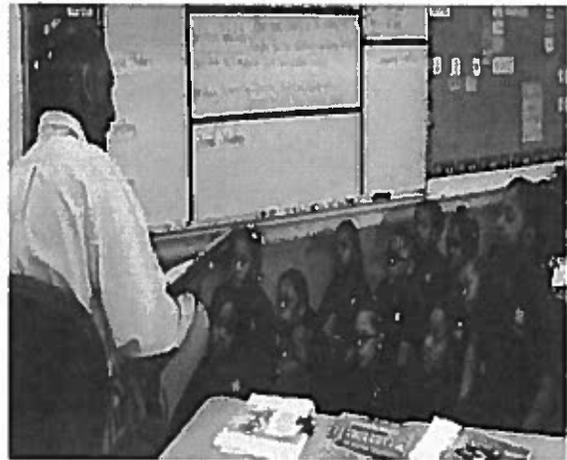
Somewhere along the way, nearly every teacher dreams of starting a school. I know I did.

More than once during the 30 years I taught English and journalism to high school students in Paterson, I imagined that creating my own school would open the door to everything I wanted as a teacher:

- Colleagues with a shared vision of teaching and learning
- Freedom from central office bureaucracy
- A welcoming school culture that reflected the lives of our students and families
- Professional autonomy that nourished innovation and individual and collective growth
- School-based decision-making that pushed choices about resources, priorities, time and staffing closer to the classrooms where it matters the most.

But reality can be hard on daydreams, and I got a glimpse of how complicated these issues are when my large comprehensive high school embraced the reform-trend-of-the-day and moved to create small theme academies inside the larger school. As the lead teacher of a new Communications Academy, I soon faced a host of thorny questions: Who would our new academy serve? What would the selection process be? How would the academy share space and resources with the rest of the school? How would our academy team be formed, and what impact would overlapping circles of authority have on teachers' contractual and evaluation processes? What would be the effect of the new academies on the larger school around us, which still opened its doors to everyone?

I think of this experience often as I follow the polarized debate over charter schools. I know there are many committed charter school teachers who share the dream of teaching in a progressive, student-centered school. But I also know the charter



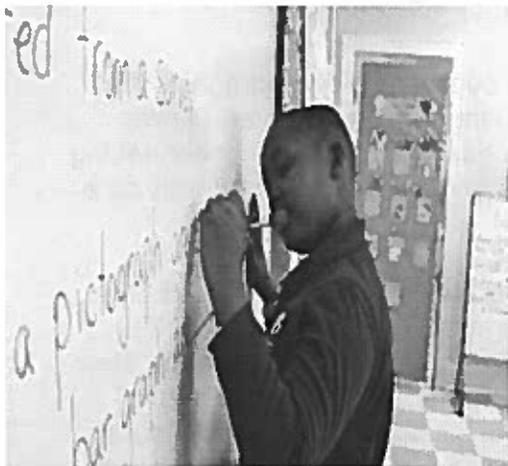
school movement has changed dramatically in recent years in ways that have undermined its original intentions.

While small schools and theme academies have faded as a focus of reform initiatives, charters have expanded rapidly. They raise similar issues and many more. In fact, given the growing promotion of charters by federal and state policymakers as a strategy to "reform" public education, the stakes are much higher.

According to *Education Week*, there are now more than 6,000 publicly funded charter schools in the United States enrolling about 4 percent of all students. Since 2008, the number of charter schools has grown by almost 50 percent, while over that same period nearly 4,000 traditional public schools have closed. [i] This represents a huge transfer of resources and students from our public education system to the publicly funded, but privately managed charter sector. These trends raise concerns about the future of public education and its promise of quality education for all.

The origin of charter schools

Charter schools have an interesting history with origins that are often overlooked. The concept of charter schools was promoted by Albert Shanker and the American Federation of Teachers in New York City in the late 1980s and early 1990s. They were originally conceived as teacher-run schools that would serve students struggling inside the traditional system and would operate outside the reach of the administrative bureaucracy and the highly politicized big city school board. Charters also drew on early rounds of small school experiments initiated by teachers or community activists, often as alternatives to the city's large comprehensive high schools. [ii]



But within a few years, Shanker grew concerned that the charters and small specialty schools were fragmenting the district, creating tiers of schools serving decidedly different populations with unequal access. He also feared they were weakening the collective power of the teachers union to negotiate over district-wide concerns and policies. So he pulled back his support for charters, at a time when there were still very few, and focused on the standards movement, which became the primary reform framework for many teacher union leaders.

But charters continued to grow slowly, and beginning with Minnesota in 1991, states

began to pass laws to promote the formation of charters, partly as a model of reform and partly to build a parallel system outside the reach of both teacher unions and, in some cases, the federal and state requirements to serve and accept all students as the public system must do. Gradually this charter movement attracted the attention of political and financial interests who saw the public school system as a “government monopoly” ripe for market reform.

In the past decade, the character of the charter school movement has changed dramatically. It’s been transformed from community-based, educator-initiated local efforts designed to provide alternative approaches for a small number of students into nationally-funded efforts by foundations, investors and educational management companies to create a parallel, more privatized school system.

Charter laws are different in each state, but in general charter schools are publicly funded but privately run schools. Few justify the hype they have received in films like “Waiting for Superman,” and those that do are mostly highly-selective, privately-subsidized schools that have very limited relevance for the public system. It’s like looking for models of public housing by studying luxury condo developments.

How do charter schools measure up?

The most complete national study of charter school performance by CREDO, a research unit at Stanford University that supports charter reform, found that only about one in five charter schools had better test scores than comparable public schools and more than twice as many had lower ones. [iii] Unlike most charter schools, traditional public schools accept all children, including much larger numbers of high needs students. In most states charters also do not face the same public accountability and transparency requirements as public schools, which has led to serious problems of mismanagement, corruption and profiteering.

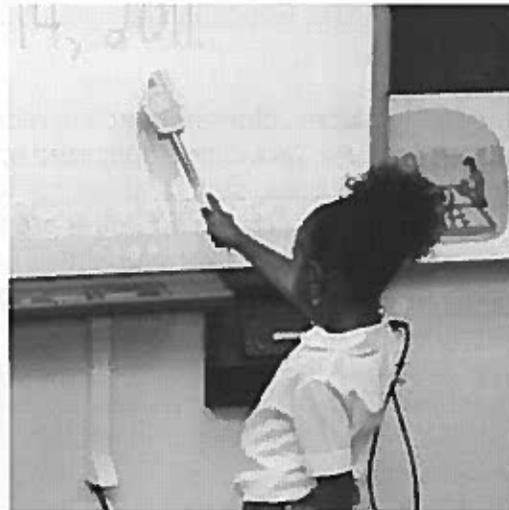
Invariably beneath accounts of spectacular charter success lie demographics that reveal fewer special needs children, fewer English language learners and fewer numbers of children from the poorest families. This hasn’t stopped the cheerleading for charters coming from some quarters, but it does undermine their credibility as a strategy for improving public schools overall.

Take, for example, the most recent report on New Jersey’s charters that CREDO produced in conjunction with the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE). The press release announcing this long-delayed study claimed it showed that “New Jersey charter public schools significantly outperform their district school peers.” [iv] Education Commissioner Chris Cerf echoed these claims, saying “the results are clear – on the whole, New Jersey charter school students make larger learning gains in both reading and math than their traditional public school peers.” [v]

But a closer look at the report raises familiar issues (even putting aside the dubious

premise that equates school success with test scores). The report showed that 70 percent of the New Jersey charters studied had the same or lower math scores as the traditional public schools they were compared to; 60 percent scored the same or lower on language arts.

The charters with the best results were clustered in Newark, which includes more selective “No Excuses” charters. These schools serve lower numbers of the highest needs students and have relatively high rates of attrition compared to traditional district schools. Typically, the CREDO report failed to distinguish between levels of student need, lumping students who receive speech therapy with those facing more severe disabilities like autism as “special education” students. “Reduced lunch” students are similarly equated with “free lunch” students facing much deeper levels of poverty. [vi]



More importantly, the report fails to identify a single school characteristic aside from the different demographics of the student population that accounts for the “success” in the limited number of charters where it appears at all. The study also fails to account for the “peer effects” of mixing limited numbers of high needs students with the more selective charter population, while the highest need students are increasingly left behind in growing concentrations in district schools.

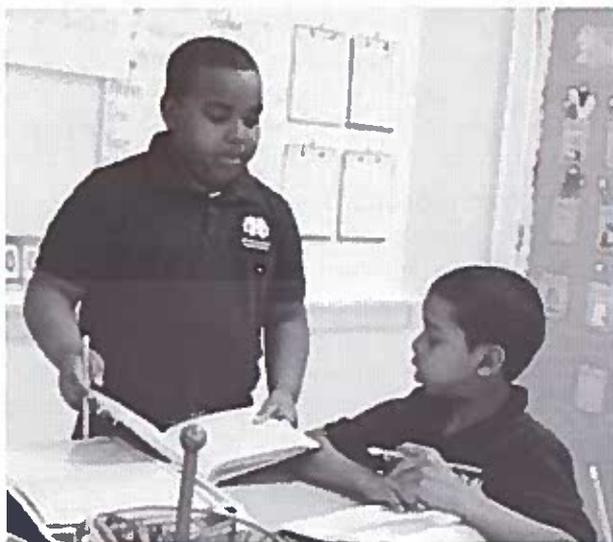
A return to segregated schools?

This is where the flaws of charters as a reform strategy start to come into focus. A plan that relies heavily on serving more selective student populations is not only not “scalable,” it has a decidedly negative effect on the district schools left in its wake. Rutgers Professor Bruce Baker has found that the selectivity of Newark charters is having a predictable effect on non-charter district enrollment. Newark charters now enroll about 19 percent of all students, but serve much lower levels of the highest need students. As a result, the percentage of ELL, very poor, and severely handicapped children in Newark Public Schools (NPS) is growing, and Baker notes, “we can expect that those left behind in district schools are becoming a higher and higher need group as charter enrollments expand.” [vii]

Another Newark study commissioned by the district focused on 14,000 students being educated in the 30 highest need elementary schools in the city, both charter and district. Ninety three percent of these students were in district-run schools and only 7 percent were in charter schools. This is segregation, not reform. [viii]

A strong case can be made that the rapid expansion of charters in large urban districts like Newark is undermining their ability to equitably serve all children. This year fund transfers from NPS to charter schools will top \$125 million. Even State District Superintendent Cami Anderson, a strong supporter of charters, admitted to the State Board of Education last year this was an unsustainable budget trend for the district. [ix]

In too many places, charters function more like deregulated “enterprise zones” than models of reform, providing subsidized spaces for a few at the expense of the many. They drain resources, staff, and energy for innovation away from other district schools, often while creaming better prepared students and more committed parents. This is especially a problem in big city public systems that urgently need renewal and resources but are increasingly being left behind with the biggest challenges.



equity.

None of this is meant to deny the reform impulse that is a real part of the charter movement, and no one questions the desire of parents to find the best options they can for their children. But the original idea behind charter schools was to create “laboratories for innovation” that would nurture reform strategies to improve the public system as a whole. That hasn’t happened. While there are some excellent individual charter schools, nowhere have charters produced a template for effective district-wide reform or

This doesn't mean charter school teachers and parents are our enemies. On the contrary, we should be allies in fighting some of the counter-productive assessment, curriculum and instructional practices raining down on all of us from above. Where practices like greater autonomy over curriculum or freedom from bureaucratic regulations are valid, they should be extended to all schools, without sacrificing the oversight we need to preserve equity and accountability.

The need to focus on poverty and proven reforms

But the current push for deregulated charters and privatization is doing nothing to reduce the concentrations of 70, 80, and 90 percent poverty that remain the central problem in our urban schools. It's instructive to contrast charter-driven reform with

more equitable approaches. In North Carolina, reform efforts were based on integrating struggling schools in Raleigh with the schools in surrounding Wake County. Efforts were made to improve theme-based and magnet programs at all schools, and the concentration of free/reduced lunch students at any one school was limited to 40 percent or less. The plan led to some of the nation's best progress on closing gaps in achievement and opportunity. [x]

There are many other factors that make charters unsustainable as a general strategy for improving public education. Significant evidence suggests that charters are part of a market-driven plan to create a less stable, less secure and less expensive teaching staff. Other trends reflect the efforts of well-funded groups working to privatize everything from curriculum to professional development to the making of education policy.

Nationally, charter school teachers are, on average, less experienced, less unionized and less likely to hold state certification than teachers in traditional public schools.[xi] (In a word, cheaper.) Here in New Jersey, the Christie administration has proposed lowering certification standards for charter school teachers and insisted that charter schools be exempt from the much-heralded tenure and evaluation reforms in the TEACHNJ Act passed last year. [xii]

As many as one in four charter school teachers leave every year, about double the turnover rate in traditional public schools. The odds of a teacher leaving the profession altogether are 130 percent higher at charters than traditional public schools, and much of this teacher attrition is related to dissatisfaction with working conditions.[xiii]

Charter schools typically pay less for longer hours. But charter school administrators often earn more than their school-district counterparts. Geoffrey Canada of the Harlem Children's Zone and Eva Moskowitz of the Success Academy Schools, two widely heralded charter school leaders, are each paid close to half a million dollars a year.[xiv] In New Jersey, charter school administrators are exempt from the salary caps imposed on district superintendents.[xv]

Charters raise similar issues in suburban districts. Last year, an application to open a Quest Academy charter school in my hometown of Montclair was a finalist after being previously rejected four times. If approved, the charter would have drawn over \$2 million from the district budget. Quest promised to serve a small group of students with "small classes," "individualized instruction," and "cutting edge technology." But it would have left students at Montclair High School with larger classes, less individualized instruction, and less cutting edge technology. It would have eroded programs and staff at a high school that sends over 90 percent of its students to post-secondary education, including over 90 percent of its African-American students.[xvi]

Parents weigh in

This is why grassroots parents groups like Save Our Schools NJ have been pushing back against unwanted charter expansion that undermines the quality and budgets of district schools. Because current New Jersey charter policies do not give a voice to local districts and voters in deciding where to open charters and how to integrate them equitably into the public system, they promote polarization among parents and pockets of privilege instead of district-wide improvement.

I've attended too many meetings where polarized groups of charter and public school parents are pitted against each other in contentious, at times ugly debates over resources, facilities and priorities. This polarization has its roots, not just in clashing short-term interests and an inadequate pool of resources, but in conflicting conceptions of the role parents should play in public education. For the charter movement, parents are mainly customers seeking services with no major role in school governance or advocacy for all children. But in a system of universal public education, parents are citizens seeking rights and, collectively, the owner-managers of a fundamental public institution in a democratic society.

To be sure, many of the issues that public school advocates like me criticize in charters—like the tracking, creaming, and unequal resources—exist within the public system too. But public schools have federal, state and district obligations that can be brought to bear. School boards, public budgets, public policies and public officials can be subjected to pressure and held accountable in ways that privatized charters don't allow. In post-Katrina New Orleans, where next year virtually all students will attend unequal tiers of charter schools, there are now students and families who cannot find any schools to take them.^[xvii] We cannot let that happen here.

Still, the march continues

Commissioner Cerf has declared intentions to dramatically expand New Jersey's charter sector. An NJDOE grant application to the California-based Broad foundation, a major funder of charter school networks, promised, "The percent of high quality public charter schools in New Jersey, as measured by NJDOE's definition of high quality, will increase by 50 percent by 2014-15." The Christie Administration has proposed allowing for-profit charters to operate in the state, permitting existing charters to open "satellite campuses" in multiple districts, and opening the door to fly-by-night cyber charters. In recent years, New Jersey's charter approval process has been marked by inconsistency, secrecy, and scandal.^[xviii]

It has become impossible to separate the rapid expansion of charter networks from efforts to privatize public education. Commissioner Cerf has spoken of replacing the current "school system" with "a system of schools." Former deputy commissioner Andy Smarick campaigned to "replace the district-based system in America's large

cities with fluid, self-improving systems of charter schools." Governor Christie, a

longtime supporter of private school vouchers, was once a registered lobbyist for Cerf's former company, Edison, Inc., then the largest private education management firm in the nation. [xix]

Inevitably, charter schools have become part of this polarized debate about education policy. Those who believe that business models and market reforms hold the key to solving educational problems have made great strides in attaching their agenda to the urgent need of communities who have too often been poorly served by the current system. But left to its own bottom line logic, the market will do for education what it has done for housing, health care and employment: create fabulous profits and opportunities for a few and unequal access and outcomes for the many.

Our country has already had more than enough experience with separate and unequal school systems. The counterfeit claim that charter privatization is part of a new "civil rights movement" addressing the deep and historic inequality that surrounds our schools is belied by the real impact of rapid charter growth in cities across the country. At the level of state and federal education policy, charters are providing a reform cover for eroding the public school system and an investment opportunity for those who see education as a business rather than a fundamental institution of democratic civic life.

It's time to slow down charter expansion and refocus public policy on providing excellent public schools for all. Using charters as a reform strategy has become too much like planting weeds in the garden. Better to tend the soil and help all public schools flower to their full potential.

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[i] See Education Week, January, 1/15/13, National Alliance for Public Charter Schools Press Release, 1/15/13 and School Shutdowns Trigger Growing Backlash, Education Week, 10/16/12

[ii] Charter Schools, American Federation of Teachers

[iii] New Stanford Report Finds Serious Quality Challenge In National Charter School Sector, June 15, 2009

[iv] Study Finds New Jersey Charter Public Schools Significantly Outperform Their District School Peers

[v] Statement by Commissioner Cerf on New Report on New Jersey Charter Schools from The Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO)

[vi] Julia Sass Rubin, CREDO's Study of Charter Schools in NJ Leaves Many Unanswered Questions, Huffington Post, 12/10/12, and Bruce Baker, When Dummy Variables aren't Smart Enough: More Comments on the NJ CREDO Study, 12/3/12 and The Secrets to Charter School Success in Newark: Comments on the NJ CREDO Report, School Finance 101

[vii] Effects of Charter Enrollment on Newark District Enrollment, Baker, 8/6/12

[viii] School Performance in Newark, December, 2012, p. 10

[ix] Newark Public Schools "user friendly budget" 2012-13.

[x] Socioeconomic School Integration in the Nation and Wake County, Richard Kahlenberg, April 1, 2009

[xi] 10 Things Charter Schools Won't Tell You, Sarah Morgan, SmartMoney, 12/6/10

[xii] NJ Principals and Supervisors Association, Testimony on Proposed Regulation Regarding Professional Licensure & Standards Before the State Board of Education, November 14, 2012

[xiii] 10 Things Charter Schools Won't Tell You, Sarah Morgan, SmartMoney, 12/6/10

[xiv] Charter School Leader Paid \$553,000 Yearly, Diane Ravitch, 7/28/12

[xv] Capped Out: How Salary Ceilings Impact Education, New Jersey Monthly, 8/13/12

[xvi] Letter to NJ Education Commissioner Chris Cerf from Montclair Supt. Frank Alvarez, 12/15/11

[xvii] Access Denied: New Orleans Students and Parents Identify Barriers to Public Education Southern Poverty Law Center, December, 2010

[xviii] NJDOE Keeps Charter Review Process Shrouded In Secrecy, Education Law Center, 10/6/11, OPRA Request Reveals Charter Advocates' Role in Application Process, NJ Spotlight, 11/17/11, NJ Charter School Circus, Jersey Jazzman, 7/20/12, Worker at Camden's LEAP school files lawsuit, Courier-Post, 1/30/13

[xix] Cerf quoted in Newark Speaks, 6/13/11, Smarick: "Wave of the Future: Why Charter Schools Should Replace Failing Urban Schools." Education Next 8.1 (Winter 2008), Christie Worked For Firm That Represented For-Profit Schools, Now Pushing For School Privatization, Zaid Jilani 6/13/11

