

Charter Schools: Option for Other 80 Percent

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Imagine a medical procedure which improved the condition of 20 percent of affected patients, but worsened the remaining 80 percent.

Now, suppose you sat on the medical board that decided how to handle this procedure. Would you vote to outlaw it? Or would you require it be administered to all patients, including the 80 percent you knew would be harmed?

These, of course, are not the only choices. A more logical thing to do would be to see whether an alternative could be developed for the majority of patients while continuing to use the procedure for the 20 percent helped.

In education, however, we don't always do the logical thing. We seesaw back and forth between periods of great experimentation and stultifying uniformity.

When we discover something that works for 20 percent of students, we demand the practice be imposed on everyone. When we discover it doesn't work for everyone, we "outlaw" the practice. As a result, we lose many promising and innovative ideas developed over the years. We end up suffering a kind of educational amnesia.

What can be done? We can allow teachers and parents the freedom to create public schools that meet the needs of individual students. We don't have to demand the same for everyone. We only have to see that those who want and have good reason to do the same are given the opportunity.

This is the motive behind "charter schools," an idea overwhelmingly endorsed by the 70th convention of the

American Federation of Teachers (AFT) this past July.

Charter schools incorporate two critical considerations. First, these schools are the product of a group of teachers, between six and 15, who have a defensible idea—a plan for students who aren't being reached.

Second, a policy mechanism is necessary so that charter schools happen routinely in a district. A way to avoid pitting the administration or other faculty in the host schools against the charter schools—as is now often the case with schools-within-schools—is essential.

I've discussed elsewhere the kinds of general guidelines I think proposals for charter schools ought to follow. I've suggested, for example, that the proposals include plans for shared decision making and for an organizational scheme that would enable teachers to work with students individually, coaching instead of lecturing most of the time.

In addition, these schools should be guaranteed to be left alone for a definite period of time, say five to 10 years. This provided, of course, that parents continue to send their chil-

dren, teachers want to continue teaching, and no precipitous drop in certain indicators occurs.

Incipient models now exist. Perhaps the best known is Community School District #1 in New York City. New ones are under way.

In Los Angeles' Griffith Junior High, for example, four teachers will begin a school-within-a-school this fall.

Peer tutoring, heterogenous cooperative grouping, and innovative scheduling are also part of the plan. Only missing is a policy mechanism to see that this school and other potential ones are given a fair chance to succeed.

Establishing policy mechanisms to bring charter schools about will require some boldness. Perhaps districts could create joint union-school board panels responsible for reviewing proposals and issuing charters. States or the federal government could help provide start-up support.

We'll also have to consider the legal status of these schools, and if charters should expire and be reissued.

Administrators and teachers should welcome the advent of charter schools as an opportunity to break out of the lock step and respond directly to those students for whom the general school program is not working.

Rather than reducing control, charter schools would actually extend responsibility for the success of the entire school by promoting a kind of disciplined diversity. Far from weakening authority, charter schools would present greater opportunities for leadership.