

## WILL THE DISTRICTS NOW MOVE TO THE CHARTER IDEA THEMSELVES?

"Charter schools" is an institutional innovation, not a pedagogical innovation. So when we ask "Is it working?" we should be looking for systemic-effects, not for learning-effects.

Most questions now are about learning-effects. But a charter school is not a kind of school: not a learning design; not an instructional method; not a technology. Kids don't learn from charters, just as they don't learn from buildings. A building is an empty physical structure; a charter is an empty institutional structure. The question about learning properly runs to the program put into it: How well does "Core Knowledge" work? Or the Sizer model? Or the Edison program?

To evaluate "charter schools" as an institutional innovation we need to start with the two new ideas built into it.

\* First is **the idea of the state opening up a non-district sector within public education.** The states with the 'complete' charter laws that generate live programs charter some public body other than the local board to create these new schools in the community. Kids may choose to attend, taking the money with them. Withdrawing the 'exclusive' challenges the districts; creating consequences for a district that tries to stand pat.

\* Second is **the idea of the board of education as the buyer of learning-services.** A charter school is to be autonomous and accountable; a discrete legal entity, started and run by somebody other than the district administration; chartered for a defined term of years and required to demonstrate student and fiscal performance as a condition for having its life extended. It is the idea of contract; of choice for boards of education; a way to respond to the challenge from that non-district sector, outside.

Together these ideas create a new institutional arrangement that can make public education a self-improving system.

The present arrangement suppresses improvement: The pattern of districts, each with an exclusive to offer public education in its area and able to take both its customers and its revenues for granted, assures the district-organization and the people in it their material success . . . whether or not the students learn. The board promises the best possible education; but in reality puts students into the only learning-business in town, which it owns and runs. It would be hard to design an arrangement less likely to maximize performance, innovation, productivity and accountability, and less likely to put student interests first.

Some argue that policy must work with this arrangement. The districts enroll 90 per cent of the kids, they say; the districts are where improvement must occur. 'Charter' is a structural change; "peripheral", a distraction. This misses the point: Organizations do need incentives, to improve.

The two ideas that go into "charter schools" may in fact be central to the effort to get districts to perform; providing the incentive and the mechanism needed for change; both requiring and enabling these organizations to do improvement -- on their own initiative, in their own interest, from their own resources.

\* Boards are beginning to respond to the appearance of that "non-district sector". The first, fascinating, research is now available from the University of California: Ask PACE [510/642-7223] for Eric Rofes' paper. John Gardner, the at-large member of the Milwaukee board of education, documents the effect of such incentives in causing change and improvement in the district [414/390-1389]. So do other superintendents where charter programs are operating, like Kent Matheson in Flagstaff AZ and Carl DeJulio in Keystone Oaks PA.

\* Districts are beginning to see their own interest in an essentially contract system. It offers a way to improve their own learning programs quickly, to help them meet the challenge both from the non-district sector and from the standards coming in. As the board in Duluth MN saw, it is also a way to challenge their 'owned' schools. Boards need to decide: Is our future in the school-operating business? Or in the student-performance business? The present arrangement maximizes the former; the contract arrangement maximizes the latter.

System-changes of this sort system must of course be made by state policymakers, in whose laws the system exists. The discussion about a charter-and-contract model, with the schools autonomous and accountable and the board in the role of buyer, has been sharpened by Paul Hill, Larry Pierce and Jim Guthrie in Reinventing Public Education. Contract arrangements start with consequences built in; so standards and measurement become essential. Strategically a country committed to standards would put all its schools as quickly as possible into essentially contract arrangements.

The transition to a charter-like arrangement will require some decisions. Will districts convert existing schools or create new schools? If superintendents propose such schools will their boards be the approving-authority? Or should the proposals for in-district charters go to the state (as with the "Horace Mann" charters in Massachusetts)? Should policy concentrate first on the big urban districts where the old arrangements are now (temporarily) being 'taken over' by the states and by mayors? Should the change come at the district's initiative, a school at a time? Or should state policymakers throw a lightning-bolt and divest the district of its school-operations? If boards no longer own and run the schools might the unions see this as a new professional opportunity for teachers?

Policymakers understand that the new district responses are driven by the new incentives the states have created; above all, by the challenge from that "non-district sector". No outside stimulus, no inside response. Read the Rofes and Gardner papers.