

Ray Budde and the Origins of the 'Charter Concept'

When Ray Budde died the news made the New York Times. This is not easy to do. The Times obituary page is reserved for people of special interest and of significant accomplishment. Susan Saulny, who covers education, wrote the story. It was reprinted elsewhere. On the West Coast National Public Radio taped an interview about it. All this was important recognition for the charter idea.

The attention to Ray Budde did puzzle people. "Who was Ray Budde? What did he have to do with chartering?"

The story is an interesting one. It helps to explain where the charter idea began. It is also important for what it reveals about the way ideas start and spread, and about the way movements grow and develop.

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Ray been a teacher, then junior high principal in Michigan. In the late 1960s he was teaching educational administration at the University of Massachusetts when the dean reorganized its school of education. He had always had, he wrote, a strong interest in "the way things are organized" and in "how things work or don't work in organizations". In 1974 he presented the annual meeting of the Society for General Systems Research some ideas for the reorganization of school districts, in a paper he titled "*Education by Charter*".

As he told the story years later in a piece he wrote for The Kappan (September 1996) he asked colleagues and friends: "Does this make sense? Is it workable? Would a district be willing to give it a try?" The response? Zero. Nobody thought there was a problem significant enough to require such a restructuring. The attitude then was: Get a good new program idea, run some inservice training. That's change. So Ray put the 'charter' idea away and went on to other things.

Then came the 1980s: The *Nation At Risk* report and all the media attention and the Carnegie Forum report that followed. Suddenly everyone was talking about 'restructuring'. So Ray dusted off his paper and in early 1988 got it published by the Northeast Regional Lab. He sent it around widely; even to then-President George H.W. Bush. Then he waited. And waited.

One Sunday in July his wife put down the newspaper and said: "Hey, Ray, you've made the New York Times!" And she showed him the column reporting the support by the American Federation of Teachers for the idea of teachers setting up autonomous schools. Albert Shanker, president of the AFT, had in fact floated the proposal in a talk at the National Press Club in the spring of that year. The best name for these schools, he said, came from Ray Budde: charter schools.

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Budde's proposal was actually for a restructuring of the district: for moving from "a four-level line and staff organization" to "a two-level form in which groups of teachers would receive educational charters directly from the school board" and would carry the responsibility for instruction. It dealt with existing schools. This is the concept that Paul Hill later called the 'contract district'; that the Education Commission of the States later termed the "all-charter district". Shanker introduced the idea of the teachers starting schools new (though within existing school buildings). But like Budde, Shanker simply put his idea out there; did not move to implement it.

Implementation began in Minnesota. A study committee of the Citizens League, chaired by John Rollwagen, picked up the idea early after Shanker's talk to the Press Club. It further modified the idea, envisioning it in a framework of state policy and with schools being approved by the state or by universities as well as by a local board.

The League had a plan fairly well thought out by October 1988 when the Minneapolis Foundation brought Shanker to Minnesota for the Itasca Seminar. Two legislators present - Sen. Ember Reichgott and Rep. Ken Nelson - picked up the idea and, as legislators are wont to do, began thinking about state legislation.

Sen. Reichgott's charter provision got into the Senate education omnibus bill in 1989 and again in 1990. The House would not accept it. As the conference committee was breaking up in 1990 Rep. Becky Kelso went over to Reichgott and said, "If you'd like to try that charter idea again next year I'd like to help you". And in 1991 Kelso and Nelson did get a - compromised - version through the House. The Senate agreed. Gov. Arne Carlson signed it into law. (?)

In 1992 California enacted a chartering program, in somewhat different form. In 1993 six states acted, introducing more variations on the original idea. Through the 1990s the concept continued to evolve; an 'open system', like LINUX, continually changed and improved by all those working on it.

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As the new-schools idea spread, people asked Ray Budde how he felt about this new-schools idea. For some years he would say: "This is not what I originally had in mind". But by the time of his Kappan article his feelings had changed. "There are more powerful dynamics at work in creating a whole new school than in simply restructuring a department or starting a new program", he wrote. He saw that the states were creating an expanding movement "challenging the traditional form of organization of the local school district". Which in a way *was* what he originally had in mind.

He continued to hope the decentralized model would come to be used by districts, too; felt this was important, to revitalize district public education. Call it chartering or site-management, there is "a necessity of placing more decision-making at the school level, close to the classrooms", he wrote. "The charter schools movement was, indeed, the catalyst that brought about my writing *'Strengthen School-based Management by Chartering All Schools'*". That book was published in 1996.

Ray had come to believe, he wrote me in 1992, that "there has to be a formal, legal change that would . . . remove power from most central office positions and flow funds directly to schools" and that these changes would have to be "grounded in state law".

The last letter I have from him came in January 1998, attaching "my second-to-last effort in education reform". Its 17 "Action Areas" urged continued transfer of real authority to schools, smaller schools, and the transfer of instructional responsibility to groups of teachers.

The 25-year body of work by this obscure teacher/administrator in New England was strikingly prescient. He saw clearly the limitation of organizations; their essential conservatism and defensiveness. Also - unusually and importantly - he was open-minded enough to accept changes and improvements in the concept made later by others.

The whole story testifies to the usefulness of those who spend their time thinking creatively about problems and about solutions, and especially those who think about changing the structure of incentives for organizations and institutions. Structure does matter.

The 25-year-long story also makes clear how complex the origins of major change really are. Asking "Where did it start?" is like asking where a river starts. You have to go upstream, where you probably will find no single source, but several little streams flowing together as they run. Budde's work was one of those upstream sources.

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It is fascinating to watch the concept evolving now in ways that return to the central role of teachers, so important to Budde and to Shanker.

First in Minnesota and then in Milwaukee, teachers have been forming partnerships like those in other professional fields. The chartered school or (in Milwaukee) the board of education gives the teacher partnership the authority to organize the school and its learning program; the teachers in return accept collegially the responsibility for school and student success.

Like the charter concept itself, the idea of the teacher partnership having the responsibility for the school is 'a bumblebee'. All conventional opinion says the bumblebee cannot possibly fly. Except that it does. All conventional wisdom says a school must be run by an administrator; says that having to run the school would distract teachers from the important work of learning. But as RAND found to its surprise in a study of chartered schools in Pennsylvania, those noninstructional duties apparently create a "sense of engagement" that in fact enhances the success of learning in the school. The Milwaukee arrangement accommodates the interests of board, teachers, parents and union in a way that would have delighted, and amazed, Albert Shanker. It simply took some time and some experimentation for the arrangement to evolve.

Ray Budde's vision may yet be realized, in full.

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-- Ted Kolderie