



## **Charters: Should They Be Driving National Education Policy?**

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The question on the table is whether charters should be driving national education policy. The answer depends on your goals.

If your goal is to find one goal on which the two parties are agreed and therefore in which policy can be made in these hypercontentious times, then charters is what you should be focusing on.

If you think that the most important problem facing American education is lack of innovation, you should be focusing on charters.

If you think that the most important problem facing American education is the “blob,” the education bureaucracy and the administrators who populate it, then you should be focusing on charters.

If you think the most important problem facing American education is the teachers’ unions, then you will find charters an attractive strategy for diminishing their strength.

If you value parental choice of schools more than you value equal opportunity in education, then you should be very interested in charters.

But, if the goal you hold most dear is improving the performance of American schoolchildren, then you are barking up the wrong tree. That’s the conclusion I draw from looking at the evidence both in the United States and abroad.

Let’s take each of these propositions in turn.

Since Milton Friedman extolled the market as the best solution to the nation’s education problems, the Republican Party has joined in that embrace. It’s members would prefer vouchers as the ideal market solution, but, in a practical world, have settled, at least for time being, for charters. Beginning in the Clinton administration, there have been strong voices for charters in the Democratic party, especially among the “new” democrats, Many would have preferred no charters, but, like the Republicans, were willing to settle. Others, allied with entrepreneurs from Silicon Valley and the financial industry in New York, saw charters as a way to bring new ideas and new energy into an ossified establishment. In a world in which there seems to be stalemate on most of the domestic agenda, it seems a no-brainer to make the most of this bi-partisan agreement in the education arena.

For many people, in fact, it is a no-brainer to argue that lack of innovation is the problem and charters are the answer. Rick Hess has been an ardent and effective spokesman for this view for a long time. But I see no evidence at all for the proposition that lack of innovation is the problem in American education. Even though the performance of American students is middling at best, educational professionals from all over the world are constantly visiting schools, colleges and education intervention programs in the United States. Why? Because we have a vast array of interesting and exciting things to see and talk about. This country may be the world's most fertile hotbed of new ideas, being tried out in nooks and crannies in every state in the union. We lack for neither ideas nor demonstration sites where those ideas can be seen in action. Our problem is, Rick Hess notwithstanding, not lack of innovation, but the lack of a mature education system of the kind that the top-performing countries have in which new ideas can be systematically tried out and then systematically incorporated into the larger system at scale. We are terrible at that. And charters will not address that problem.

But you may not care about that at all. You may be interested in charters because you think that charters are the way to get around what former Education Secretary Bill Bennett called "the blob," the education bureaucracy. And why would you want to do that? Well, to introduce those innovations that we just talked about. But we don't lack for innovations, so maybe getting rid of the blob will solve a problem we don't have. But it is not that simple, of course. The United States has an administrative presence at the local level much larger than its counterpart in the world's best-performing education systems, and there is good reason to believe that that layer of administration, everything considered, is a hindrance to good education and not an asset. But, if that is true, wouldn't it make more sense to trim back that bureaucracy for all schools and not just some of them? My point is that the issue of too much and too sluggish an administrative presence at the local level is a real problem, but charter schools are not the answer.

But, as we all know, for many people, the primary goal of charters is not any of the above. It is to get out from under the teachers unions. But, as has often been pointed out, there is no correlation between the presence and strength of teachers' unions and student performance, either in the United States or abroad, among the best-performing countries. But, even if that were not so, we could be confident that, if schools get out from under the presumed "dead hand" of the teachers unions by becoming charters, then student performance would be much better in charter schools than in schools where the teachers are union members. But there is no evidence to support that proposition, either.

In some countries, parents have the right to set up their own schools at government expense. One could say that the entire system is composed of charter schools. That, to many Americans, is a contradiction in terms, since charters are supposed to be the antithesis of regular public schools. But if you can hold in your head the idea of universal choice among public schools in a situation in which such schools can have very different instructional methods, you can plausibly think about that as an entire system made up of nothing but charter schools.

That accurately describes the New Zealand education system, one of the highest-performing national education systems in the world. The best analysis of that system, in a class by itself, was done by Ted Fiske and Helen Ladd, in their book [\*When Schools Compete: A Cautionary Tale\*](#). Why cautionary? Because it turns out that when all schools are schools of choice, the strongest schools get even better, and the worst schools get worse. The best schools get better because they have a first rate staff that knows what to do to get better once they are freed of whatever restrictions they've been chafing under. The worst schools get even worse even when the best schools use lotteries to admit the students who apply. That happens for several reasons. First, most of the best teachers want to teach in the schools serving the best students. That produces shortages of teachers in the worst schools and, when those schools are able to find teachers, they have to take whatever they can get. Second, the most successful schools typically thrive on their relative standing and have no incentive to expand, so the supply is limited. Third, even when admission to the most desirable schools is by lottery, the low income and minority families who typically are the clients of the lowest-performing schools can't afford the expense of getting their children across town to the upper-crust communities where the best schools are; their children often get a frosty greeting from the wealthy, majority students who go to school there, and they don't get the special support services that they need and which might be available in the school they came from. New Zealand adopted a radical public choice system because they wanted schools that are genuinely owned by the people in their communities, not the professional educators who staff them. They got that. But they got that at the price of less equity in their school arrangements than they had before, and that concerns them. There is no reason, by the way, to believe that student performance in New Zealand was any higher after implementing their radical school choice plan than it was before it was introduced.

In my opinion, the only reason to prefer one form of school organization or governance over another is evidence that the preferred form produces better outcomes for students than the alternatives. What kind of evidence is appropriate here depends on which outcomes are most important to you. One thing is clear, though. There is no evidence, from the United States or any other country, that charters or their cousins produce, net-net, better outcomes for students at the national or state level. The record in the United States is amusing. First one side, then another undertakes a study, hoping to produce a knockout blow for its position. There have been plenty of studies showing a slight advantage first for this side and then for the other. But there have been no knockout blows for either side. And that is the point. It makes no sense to me at all for the federal government or any state government to have these knock-down, drag-out fights over a school reform strategy that no one has proven, anywhere on the globe, to produce decisive advantages for students at a national or state scale.

Then why are we doing it? Why do charter schools continue to be a centerpiece of the domestic education reform agenda? Because, like the New Zealanders, we see the education system as part of government and we do not want the government to tell us what to do. And because charters are virtually the only thing the Democrats and the Republicans can agree on. It is a sad state of affairs that the only reform measure the two parties can agree on is a strategy that no one, anywhere on the face of the earth, has

proven improves student achievement overall, and which research shows produces less education equity when implemented than when not implemented.

Well-designed education systems include features that enable the managers of the system to let good ideas bubble up from the field, provide labs for researching the effects of those ideas, and then, if they work, incorporate them in the larger system, in ways that strengthen, and not weaken that system. A greatly changed version of what we call charters should find a place in a system like that, but would by no stretch of the imagination be the primary engine of steady improvement.

I continue to hope that, at some point, we will ask ourselves what strategies have produced dramatic improvement in student performance at a state or national scale. That would be a useful start for education policy-making. Charters are a side-show.