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Source: *The Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (Sep., 1996), pp. 72-73

Published by: [Phi Delta Kappa International](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20405708>

Accessed: 15-04-2015 18:16 UTC

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The Evolution of the Charter Concept

BY RAY BUDDE

Mr. Budde takes readers on a journey from his initial proposals in the early 1970s for education by charter to today's "once-in-many-generations opportunity" for educators and citizens to engage in one grand crusade to revitalize their schools and create the conditions for giant leaps in the quality of education.

RECENTLY someone asked me how I felt about the "charter schools movement." Over the past four years I have experienced a rather gradual change in my feelings and response. "This is not what I originally had in mind" has changed to "There are more powerful dynamics at work in creating a whole new school than there are in simply restructuring a department or starting a new program." My own changed attitude stems from the realization that, with state after state passing special charter schools legislation, we now have a rapidly expanding charter school movement that is challenging the traditional form of organization of the local school district.

Initial Proposals For Education by Charter

Back in the early 1970s I developed an outline for a book tentatively titled *Education by Charter: Key to a New Model of School District*. I circulated the outline to a number of my colleagues and friends, some of whom were superintendents and principals, and asked them, "Does this charter concept make any sense? Is it workable? Do you know any school districts that would be willing to give this a try?"

The response: zero. Nothing. Oh, some of my friends thought the idea was "interesting." But even though there was considerable dissatisfaction with the public schools, no one felt that things were so bad that the system itself needed to be changed. *Innovation* was the theme of the times, and innovation could take place within the

present system. Find some new idea or program, and then all that was needed was some inservice training and presto: education in your school would be improved!

It soon became evident that I was pushing something that was simply not going to happen. So I put the idea of "education by charter" on the shelf and went on to other things.

With all the studies and reports of the 1980s, I decided to take another look at the concept and try again. My efforts resulted in *Education by Charter: Restructuring School Districts*, which was published in 1988 by the Northeast Regional Laboratory.¹ In this book I proposed that teams of teachers could be "chartered" directly by a school board for a period of three to five years. No one — not the superintendent or the principal or any central office supervisors — would stand between the school board and the teachers when it came to matters of instruction. As in my first exploration of the idea, my focus was on chartering departments or programs. No mention was made of the idea of chartering whole schools.

This time around I decided I would go beyond just sending drafts of my efforts to colleagues and friends. Copies of the book were circulated widely. *Education by Charter* was sent to anyone who might be interested in the reorganization of public education at the local level. Then I waited . . . and waited . . . and waited. Weeks went by. Months went by.

Then one Sunday morning in July 1988, my wife, Pat, surprised me by calling out, "Hey, Ray, you've made the *New York Times*!" Albert Shanker in his 10 July 1988 "Where We Stand" column reported that the delegates to the 1988 national convention of the American Federation of Teachers had "proposed that local school boards and unions jointly develop a procedure

that would enable teams of teachers and others to submit and implement proposals to set up their own autonomous public schools within their school buildings. . . . But what name would capture all this? . . . The best answer so far is 'charter schools,' a suggestion made by Ray Budde in *Education by Charter*"!²

New Adaptations Of the Charter Concept

This was the first of a number of adaptations of the concept of "education by charter." I had mixed feelings about changing *chartering programs* to *chartering schools*. Then I reflected back on the starting of two independent schools. My wife had been a founding teacher in one school and had later developed the rationale and curriculum for a second school that she and a group of parents then proceeded to create. I had been an inside observer of the very beginnings of what, today, are two thriving independent schools.

Starting a brand-new school stirs the creative and adaptive juices of everyone involved. Starting a new school requires a deep sense of commitment and hours and hours of time. It's a truly unique peak experience, with frequent journeys down the mountain to valleys of anxiety and frustration. I had to admit that there was a much more powerful dynamic at work in chartering a whole school than in simply chartering a department or program. If everyone else had decided that it was more strategic to charter *schools* than *programs*, so be it.

Policy makers and citizen groups in Minnesota pushed the charter concept in another direction and, in a real sense, were the ones responsible for starting the nationwide charter school movement. Ted Kolderie explained the intent of the char-

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ter school idea in his September 1993 newsletter.

The essential idea is worth re-stating: It is to offer change-oriented educators or others the opportunity to go either to the local school board or to some other public body for a contract under which they would set up an autonomous (and therefore performance-based) public school which students could choose to attend without charge. The intent is not simply to produce a few new and hopefully better schools. It is to create dynamics that will cause the main-line system to change so as to improve education for all students.³

Given the way that states piggyback on one another when something seems to be politically popular, there is great potential for the growth of the charter school movement. I have tried predicting this growth until the year 2003. In just two years, there will probably be more than 30 states with special charter school legislation. By the year 2003, there may be as many as 5,000 charter schools enrolling 1.5 million students and supported by tax revenues approaching \$3 billion!

How would such a development affect the rest of the education system? A school board, educators, and other citizens within a public school district would not be inclined to change the status quo for altruistic, idealistic reasons, such as enhancing student learning or providing a better working environment for teachers. Those who control the school district might, however, restructure the establishment if they felt that they were under severe pressure and that not changing would have more serious consequences than changing.

The possibilities of losing students to the new charter schools, losing thousands and thousands of dollars from scarce public funds, and allowing a situation to develop in which another public body could start a public school might be sufficiently threatening, as Kolderie put it, "to create dynamics that will cause the main-line system to change so as to improve education for all students."

Catalyst for Another Option

The charter school movement motivated me to start wrestling with two rather basic questions. 1) Is it possible to create

genuinely autonomous schools within an existing large school district and, at the same time, build a new infrastructure that would support those schools and free them from all the burdens of having to organize and function as separate legal entities? 2) Would education by charter be at all useful in an effort to radically restructure large, traditionally organized school districts?

It suddenly dawned on me, now that we are in the mid-1990s, that we have a once-in-a-lifetime — no, more than that, a once-in-many-generations — opportunity. The end of the millennium is sure to bring out those who will be predicting the end of the world. But what a wonderful opportunity for the educators and citizens of a large community to take advantage of this near-universal "get ready" frame of mind and engage in one grand crusade over two or three years to revitalize their schools and create the conditions for giant leaps in the quality of education!

There is a movement slowly taking hold within public education that indicates that policy makers in many medium-sized to large school districts are starting to see the necessity of placing more decision-making power at the school level, close to the classrooms, where the main function of education takes place. This movement goes under the name of site-based or school-based management (SBM). Scholars of school district decentralization report that more than half of the larger districts in the country are trying out some form of SBM, but that SBM is proceeding on a rather irregular front and at an uneven pace.

Perhaps the charter concept can be useful in strengthening this movement to decentralize medium-sized to large school districts. Many questions arose as I thought about how I might be able to link chartering schools with SBM.

- What is SBM, anyway? How do we know when we have achieved *genuine* school-based management?

- How about a "21st-Century Schools Commission" as a planning mechanism for this total reorganization of the district?

- How does the school board fit into this process of decentralizing the school district by chartering all the schools in the district?

- What happens to the central office if major decision-making authority is transferred to the school level? If the supervisory powers of the central office are diminished or eliminated and charter schools

are almost autonomous, how can we ensure accountability?

- How can we tap into the latest instructional and communications technology as we create near-autonomous schools and a new infrastructure to support those schools?

- If we undertake this radical kind of reorganization, do we need to change the way that resources are allocated and money spent?

- How will the roles of superintendents, teachers, principals, and parents change if the important decisions about personnel, curriculum, budget, and school operation are made by educators, parents, and other citizens in charter schools?

It took me more than three years before I was finally satisfied that I had come up with some kind of reasonably coherent total system that might have a chance of working. The charter schools movement was, indeed, the catalyst that brought about my writing of the book *Strengthen School-Based Management by Chartering All Schools*.⁴

I would like to conclude this rather personal journey with the last paragraph of this book. The thought here is for all who are creating exciting new settings for learning, whether these settings be in the new charter schools or in classrooms of school districts in which decentralization is starting to take hold.

We value what is ours, what belongs to us. Working together with other people in common purpose produces truly amazing results. We have to be responsible for wisely using the resources and opportunities given to us, and, in some significant measure, we must accomplish what we set out to do.⁵

1. Ray Budde, *Education by Charter: Restructuring School Districts* (Andover, Mass.: Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast & Islands, 1988).

2. Albert Shanker, "Convention Plots New Course — A Charter for Change," *New York Times*, 10 July 1988, sec. 4, p. 7.

3. Ted Kolderie, "Charter Schools: The States Begin to Withdraw the 'Exclusive,'" *Public Services Redesign Project Newsletter*, Center for Policy Studies, 59 W. 4th St., St. Paul, MN 55102, 26 September 1963, p. 1.

4. Ray Budde, *Strengthen School-Based Management by Chartering All Schools* (Andover, Mass.: Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast & Islands, 1996).

5. *Ibid.*, p. 116. **K**