

**TAKING ACCOUNT
OF
CHARTER SCHOOLS**
*What's Happened
and
What's Next?*

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CHAPTER 4

Charter School Innovation in Theory and Practice: Autonomy, R&D, and Curricular Conformity

Christopher Lubienski

The idea of innovation undergirds the charter school concept. While charter schools represent a significant innovation in governance, even more importantly, many reformers and policymakers believe that such structural changes will foster new approaches in curriculum and instruction that will improve student achievement—an expectation that *motivated much of the charter movement at its origins and is still very much in evidence today*. In contrast to the uniformity associated with bureaucratic administration, charter advocates argued that reforms would create autonomy for individual schools, freeing them from burdensome top-down regulations and allowing educators to use resources as they saw fit. This autonomy would make them more flexible and responsive to local needs, thereby providing the opportunity to be innovative in responding to parents, raising academic achievement, and engaging students marginalized by standard practices. In view of these *new opportunities afforded by structural innovations in governance*, the question emerges as to how charter schools are using their autonomy to innovate around curriculum and instruction. Ironically, this analysis indicates that many schools may find themselves forced to exercise that autonomy in ways that undermine their innovative potential.

The chapter considers the theory and expectation that *autonomy positions charter schools to serve as “laboratories” or “R&D” (research and development) centers for innovative educational practices*. Theorists and policymakers advocate the reform of governance under the assumption that changes in school administrative structures lead to “different and innovative” classroom practices. Under that logic, charter enthusiasts anticipated not only that structural changes would *diversify options for parents in local*

communities but also, as demonstrated below, that greater school autonomy from higher levels of government would precipitate classroom innovations—that is, new or substantially altered practices *not available in the broader public school system*. A review of research on charter school practices in four key states suggests that this is not happening in the ways theorists and reformers predicted. Diversification is evident in all the states studied. Yet, the “innovative” part of the different *and* innovative mandate appears to be more elusive than reformers had anticipated. While administrative activities in many charter schools are innovative, states where charter schools enjoy greater autonomy demonstrate no particular propensity for innovation in the classroom—where reformers anticipated change. Instead, this analysis suggests that the theoretical assumptions regarding autonomy are not only unsubstantiated but possibly wrong. Development of innovations often depends on greater autonomy not only from higher levels of governance but also from the immediate demands of seemingly capricious marketlike forces.

The first section of the chapter outlines the theoretical foundations and perceived potential of charter schools. Specifically, I look at policy goals associated with charter schools in light of public-choice theory—the rational-economic understanding of public-sector endeavors—particularly as this theory offers a cogent critique of public administration. As the predominant analytical perspective prescribing decentralization and deregulation, public choice endorses institutional autonomy as the key to innovation and improvement in the provision of public services. While there are a number of arguments (such as efficiency and equity) that motivate school-choice reformers, charter schools in particular incorporate the essential elements of public-choice theorists’ advocacy of alternative institutional arrangements. Because they are premised on public-choice prescriptions for autonomy, charter schools can inform our understanding of the theoretical expectations of innovation and the types of changes we might expect from other forms of school deregulation that are consistent with public choice.

In the second part, I apply a framework for exploring the question of innovation in charter schools—consistent with the tenets of public-choice theory—in reviewing research on charter school practices in four states in order to understand the nature of change occurring in and through these institutions. I look for innovations that represent new or substantially altered practices in light of the R&D expectations of theoreticians, policymakers, and reformers for “different” *and* “innovative” educational methods. The final section considers patterns evident in charter school practices, focusing on the logic of autonomous schools as R&D centers in decentralized environments—indicating that the narrow and ideological focus on autonomy from higher levels of government may in effect undermine the innovative potential intended in charter schools.

THE THEORY OF CHARTER SCHOOL INNOVATION

Frustration with the state of public schooling over the last two decades mirrors the widespread dissatisfaction with “big government” in general and state administration and regulation in particular—a view popular with many policymakers (see, e.g., Bennett et al., 1998; Finn, 1997; Finn, Manno, & Bierlein, 1996; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). Indeed, these concerns represent a compelling critique of current approaches to public administration and a coherent theory offering alternative models of public service provision. As the predominant perspective for public policy analysis in recent years, public-choice theory has been influential in policymakers’ arguments for decentralizing, deregulating, or otherwise reforming the delivery of many public services through autonomous agencies. Much of the thinking behind charter schools embodies both the public-choice critique of public administration of education and its preferred remedy for the problems inherent in state-run schooling (Garn, 1998). For example, theorists and reformers note that the public school monopoly on state funding for education deprives bureaucratically administered schools of the incentives to serve their clients effectively; therefore, removing the “exclusive franchise” forces schools to respond to consumers or risk losing their funding (see, e.g., Kolderie, 1990; Nathan, 1996; see also Chubb & Moe, 1990). Advocates argue that these aspects of their design position charter schools as laboratories for innovative educational practices that are expected to benefit the school system as a whole.

Public-Choice Theory and Educational Innovation

Although there are several variants of public choice, theorists generally draw their fundamental assumptions and approaches from neoclassical economic principles in analyzing law, political science, and public administration. This perspective has been widely influential in the last three decades, as evident in the critique and reform of public services—endeavors that have traditionally relied on nonmarket mechanisms outside the scope of economic discipline (Mueller, 1979). Public-choice theorists assume that people, motivated by self-interest, most effectively express their individual preferences in the public sphere much as they do when dissatisfied with services in the private business sector—by exercising the “exit” option and finding a more suitable provider. Moreover, government officials also look after their own individual self-interest. Rather than serving the illusory public interest, public institutions often direct their benefits toward their bureaucrats, or—since they are shielded from market discipline—the special-interest groups to which they are susceptible and whose interests may conflict with those of the gen-

eral public (Buchanan, Tollison, & Tullock, 1980; Kalt & Zupan, 1984; Romer & Rosenthal, 1979).

Public-choice theorists elevate the sovereignty of individual consumer preferences over other social or institutional goals, a priority often evident in, for instance, concern for user satisfaction indicators. Public institutions are thought to be most effectively organized if they are responsive to their immediate users rather than to messy and ineffective political and bureaucratic processes. Furthermore, people consuming public services are best arranged in small-scale groups of like-minded individuals—preference “bundles” or “clusters”—in order for their wishes to be most effectively heard and honored. These economic-style principles form the basis of public-choice analysis in its diagnosis of the problems of public administration and its prescription of market-style autonomy for providers.

Pathologies of Public Administration. A central tenet in public-choice theory is that there are certain institutional ills inherent in state provision of public services. Public-choice theory holds that self-interested officials will seek to enhance their own power by creating “empires” (a.k.a. fiefdoms, dictatorships) within and over bureaucracies and public resources (Niskanen, 1971; Romer & Rosenthal, 1979). Rather than promoting local autonomy in order to find new or more effective ways of serving local consumers, government administrators hope only to maintain the status quo or expand their budgets for their own sake; operating outside the incentives and discipline of a market environment, they are inherently incapable of considering true costs and benefits to the public, leading to inefficiencies and inflexibility (Greene, 1996; see also, e.g., Niskanen, 1971).

Similarly, public-choice scholars perceive regulations largely as a means by which entrenched interests insulate, enrich, and protect themselves, since these interest groups are better positioned to organize effectively in advancing their interests through regulatory institutions (Kalt & Zupan, 1984; Stigler, 1998). This line of reasoning presumes that public provision or regulation is fraught with anti-innovative constraints. As individuals, groups, or firms seek to control public resources, regulatory regimes are reoriented toward the needs of bureaucrats or the interests that control them (Borcherding, 1977; Buchanan et al., 1980; Rowley, Tollison, & Tullock, 1988). In the case of education, this notion is applied to the “education establishment”—teachers unions, school boards, administrators, and so on—as the entrenched interests that stand in the way of innovation and substantive reform (Levin, 1997). Thus, according to this view, the “over-regulation of traditional schools has stultified educational innovation and responsiveness” (Levin, 2000, p. 3; see also Chubb & Moe, 1990; Doyle, 1994; Peterson, 1990). The implicit solution is deregulation and enhanced autonomy for local providers.

As a consumer-oriented perspective, public choice emphasizes the diverse individual preferences of consumers and a perceived contradiction between those consumer preferences and the centralized monopolies that engender disincentives for developing different approaches. Indeed, particularly in the case of state schooling, public-choice theorists point to the uniformity associated with public provision (e.g., Peterson, 1990). Self-interested administrators employ top-down authority, which gives them control over inputs and processes, if not outcomes. Therefore, bureaucrats use such authority to impose standardized practices that maintain their power, rather than practices that may effectively educate diverse children. Minority ethnic groups, or marginal “affinity groups,” or “preference clusters” of like-minded individuals are effectively disenfranchised by the bureaucratic and majoritarian political systems that support the status quo—hence the popularity of choice in polls of minority groups (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Gee, 2001; Maranto, 1999; Walberg & Bast, 2001). Broader forms of input that directly influence institutions—referenda, legislated mandates, and so on—are more likely to lead to conflict between groups, produce more bureaucracy to manage those conflicts, and result in less responsiveness to consumer preferences. The result, according to this popular line of reasoning, is that public administration leads to a deadening uniformity whereby each school is “essentially identical to every other” (Finn & Gau, 1998, p. 79; see also Fitzgerald, 1995; Little Hoover Commission, 1996). Furthermore, in view of the widespread sentiment that children learn in different ways, there is a growing backlash in policymaking circles against the “one-size-fits-all” approach associated with common schooling and the administrative-progressive “one best system” reforms (e.g., Finn & Gau, 1998). Thus, in this theoretical perspective, the primary goal of public education is the satisfaction of individual consumer preferences; indeed, public choice does not recognize lofty, value-laden, and seemingly unattainable goals such as civic coherence, the public interest, or the common good—purposes that only invite conflict (Bobrow & Dryzek, 1987). Essentially, choice advocates argue against the old common school as an antiquated approach in a society now characterized by pluralism and diverse parental perspectives on education (e.g., Coleman, 1990; Doyle, 1994).

Public-Choice Prescriptions and Charter Schools. In order to be responsive to individual preferences—rather than to the interests of bureaucrats or politicians—public-choice theorists advocate an approach that has been very popular in recent years: limited government through small, local, autonomous institutions that respond to their consumers in the delivery of public services. The antibureaucracy sentiment of public-choice theory is apparent in school reformers’ concerns regarding uniformity in state-monopolized

education (Garn, 1998; see also, e.g., Kolderie, 1990). In essence, the charter is a grant of autonomy from regulation with the expectation that the school will improve academic results; the particular processes by which it will enhance learning are not specified but are delegated to the school. In theory, decentralization and autonomy encourage experimentation and diverse options in many consumer markets. Therefore, theorists suggest that similar dynamics would be useful in forcing schools away from rigid, top-heavy administrative models and encouraging new approaches for educating students (e.g., Coleman, 1990; Hoxby, 1994).

Charter schools are premised on individual (or family) choices where such choices are thought to best reflect the diverse preferences of the choosers. Since communities are shaped around common interests and values, charter schools give form to such communities around educational issues (Clayton Foundation, 1999; Viteritti, 1999)—what public-choice theorists would see as homogeneous preference clusters that reduce conflict over school issues in the wider context (e.g., Chubb & Moe, 1990). Theorists argue that, in a deregulated and decentralized system, schools will have to strive to attract these groups, resulting in innovations in both the *types* of education available and the *processes* by which more efficient and effective education is provided. And if a school fails to meet the diverse needs of consumers, parents have the right or responsibility to seek satisfaction of education preferences elsewhere—thereby holding publicly funded providers accountable to users through the threat or exercise of an exit option not available in pupil assignment systems (Manno, Finn, Bierlein, & Vanourek, 1998b; Vanourek, Manno, Finn, & Bierlein, 1997).

Therefore, although there are other motivations and justifications (such as parental involvement, teacher empowerment, etc.) that serve as catalysts for school choice, charter reforms bear the unmistakable imprint of public-choice theory in the diagnosis of the pathologies of state provision and the adoption of alternative institutional arrangements. In bypassing bureaucratic regulatory authority, charter schools are expected to unleash the innovative potential of educators as autonomous schools compete to meet diverse needs within their local area.

Innovation as a Policy Objective for Charter Schools

Innovation is a frequently cited goal in charter school advocacy for three related reasons, which, together, demonstrate the perceived need for new approaches in the education system. First, in keeping with the values of public-choice theorists, a system of school choice presupposes a range of options from which parents may choose. Quite often, innovation is cast as the means of developing and diversifying options that meet the preferences of users, and

charter schools are specifically designed to manifest the theoretical potential for innovation. Second, innovation may lead to improvements in educational practices, and, presumably, increased achievement. As laboratories or R&D centers for curricular and instructional strategies, charter schools have the autonomy to experiment with different approaches for finding more effective practices for educating children—"with the perceived assumption that such innovations will produce identifiable improvements in student achievement" (Wohlstetter & Griffin, 1998, p. 3; see also, e.g., Clayton Foundation, 1997, 1998; Lane, 1999). Finally, charter schools can innovate to meet the preferences of people traditionally marginalized by standard practices in the state system. Individuals and groups whose pedagogical or content preferences are not represented in the standard curriculum can choose a school geared to their needs.

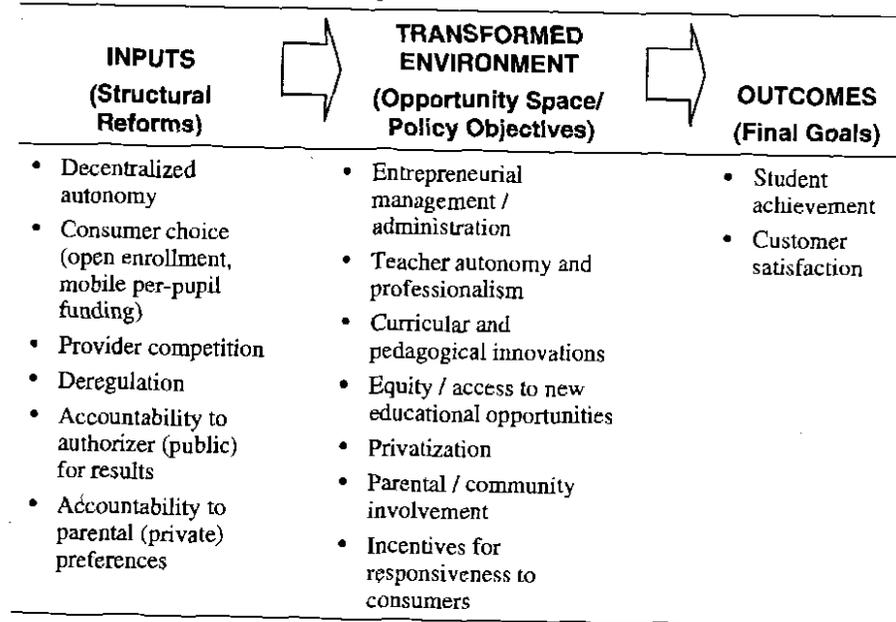
Thus, by changing the governing structures in which schools operate, charter school reforms change the environment—the institutional autonomy of schools from centralized bureaucratic regulations, the opportunities to try new approaches, and the incentive to attract and maintain interest. These changes are intended to secure the ultimate goals of increased achievement and parent satisfaction. The logic can be outlined as shown in Figure 4.1.

While many school reform strategies specify particular processes, this approach reconfigures the institutional environment in which schools operate (Hentschke, 1997; Lubienski, 2001c). Such structural reforms are designed to create incentives and opportunity space for educators to use their autonomy and flexibility to develop processes for enhancing student achievement and meeting parental preferences. Many reformers frame choice, deregulation, and innovation as the intermediate goals necessary for increasing achievement. Moreover, innovation and diversification are primary goals for those reformers seeking to find ways of engaging children and communities traditionally marginalized by the one-size-fits-all uniformity associated with the status quo (e.g., Flaherty, 1995; Fulford, Raack, & Sunderman, 1997; Lane, 1999).

While not to be overstated, the significance of encouraging innovations in schooling should not be slighted, since it is often central to arguments for, and expectations of, school choice. Certainly, innovation should be seen as the means to other goals rather than as an end in itself (although its frequent and close association with charter schooling in the policy literature often suggests otherwise). Still, the notion that autonomous schools, motivated by competition, will develop innovative practices is an assumption widely embraced by many groups—theorists, legislators, teachers, and charter founders.

Such assumptions are explicit in the laws authorizing charter schools. The legislation varies across states, with laws allowing more autonomy and greater ease of entry generally regarded as "stronger" laws (Center for Edu-

Figure 4.1. Charter school logic model



Note: Adapted from Miron & Nelson, 2002.

cation Reform, 2001a; Viteritti, 1999). According to charter enthusiasts, stronger laws "shape the scope, adequacy, quality, innovativeness, and educational value of charter schools" by providing more opportunities and incentives for educators to exercise autonomy (Vanourek et al., 1997, p. 3). Under the assumption that "public schools must be provided with an option for more autonomy over their administration, operations, and expenditures," the law in Washington, D.C., authorizes charter schools in order to "stimulate the use and development of different and innovative teaching methods" (D.C. Law 11-135, § 103, 43 DCR 1699). California's charter school law also seeks to "encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods" (California Education Code 47600). In fact, innovation is specified as a policy goal in over 75% of the charter school laws, with virtually all of those explicitly seeking innovations in instructional practices such as teaching methods. No other goal—including academic achievement and the diversification of programmatic options—is mentioned more frequently.¹ Indeed, the rate at which this purpose is cited in legislation has increased substantially; it is cited in all laws passed since 1998. Hence, policymakers appear to assume a causal connection between structural reforms (e.g., school

autonomy, competition, choice) and innovations in classroom practice. This is significant: *Legislators, consistent with assumptions of public choice theory, expect that changes in school administrative structures will lead to "different and innovative" practices in the classroom.*

Charter school authorizers display similar assumptions. For instance, the schools authorized by Central Michigan University—the most active chartering agency in Michigan—must “be pillars of innovation in instruction” (cited in Khouri, Kleine, White, & Cummings, 1999, p. 25). In Colorado, over 42% of individual charter schools identified innovations in teaching and learning as a goal in their mission statements (Clayton Foundation, 1997). Indeed, teachers often seek employment at charter schools anticipating more freedom to try “innovative methods” in pursuing their educational philosophy (Clayton Foundation, 1998, 1999; Vanourek, Manno, Finn, & Bierlein, 1998). Parents and charter school founders express similar assumptions (Clayton Foundation, 1998, 1999; RPP International, 1998; RPP International, 1999; SRI International, 1997; Vanourek et al., 1997). Medler (1996), for example, reports from his survey of 110 charter schools that innovation was one of the top three reasons for founding a school, well ahead of other objectives such as increased autonomy (see Education Commission of the States & Nathan, 1995). Reform advocates, policymakers, and analysts endorse the expectation for educational innovations with remarkable frequency.

Thus, a substantial, bipartisan, and consistent consensus presumes that structural changes—the decentralization and deregulation manifested in charter school reform—have the potential to induce innovation in educational practices. Many people from a wide variety of backgrounds and perspectives concur in the presumption that the likelihood of achieving innovation and uniformity is a result of institutional design. Indeed, many reformers cast charter schools as R&D centers or laboratories to break the mold of standard classroom practices (Wohlstetter & Griffin, 1997; see also, e.g., Halpern & Culbertson, 1994). In fact, prominent charter advocates agree that the “R&D potential is an important part of any policy-oriented appraisal of the charter phenomenon” (Manno et al., 1998b, p. 490; emphasis added).

ANALYZING INNOVATION IN CHARTER SCHOOLS

Relatively clear expectations for innovation have become more problematic when observers try to appraise the charter school movement. Semantic debates over what we mean by “innovation” slight the important goal of understanding the *potential* of structural reforms to bring about substantive changes in the core practices of schooling. Some argue that innovation should be defined “as conventionally understood (e.g., something new)” (Good &

Braden, 2000, p. 145; see also Stout & Garn, 1999). Others believe diversification of options for local residents is sufficient (Hassel, 1999b; Manno et al., 1998b). However, the question here is not so much *whether* charter schools are innovative in their own *individual* contexts. Instead, in view of the public-choice concerns with the pathologies of public provision, the question is whether charter schools—as R&D centers—can develop practices that are new within the publicly funded school system.

To examine the expectation that autonomy would encourage innovation, I reviewed 39 research and/or evaluation reports on charter school practices in Arizona, California, Colorado, and Michigan. Together, these four states are home to over 45% of all charter schools in the United States. According to charter advocates, they are among the most dynamic sites for this reform in terms of the strength of their authorizing legislation and extent of charter activity (e.g., Center for Education Reform, 2001b). Furthermore, they have been the subject of numerous evaluations and studies, providing a broad and often longitudinal basis for this analysis. The reports used here are studies that dealt with the issue of innovation in charter schools as either a central or ancillary yet significant consideration, and presented primary evidence on charter school practices from one or more of these states.² These reports are based on a range of methods and data, including examinations of curricular materials, classroom observations, interviews with employees and parents, and innovations self-reported by charter school operators; they were produced by researchers with a range of perspectives on charter schools.

This chapter employs two considerations for analyzing and understanding the significance of charter school practices reported as innovations.

At what level within institutions does the practice represent change? I distinguished between administrative changes (organization-level practices and structural designs that do not directly impact classroom techniques or content) and educational changes (practices regarding curricular content and instructional strategies with immediate impact at the classroom level) (following Daft & Becker, 1978, ch. 5; regarding juxtaposing innovations in form and content, see also Meyer, 1992). Of course, there is room for interpretation in classifying specific practices as such; thus, some practices are listed in both categories.

To what extent does the practice represent change across educational sectors? If, as public-choice theorists have argued, the problems with public schools are symptomatic of a top-down bureaucratic culture, and if those problems appear in the classroom as stagnant and uncreative teaching and learning, then modifying that governance structure by increasing autonomy would induce innovations in classroom practices. Under this logic, innovative practices developed in charter schools would not be developed otherwise in schools administered directly by district bureaucracies. Thus, the

unit of comparative analysis is the school sector, as characterized by governance—that is, noncharter public schools (hereafter referred to as district schools) and charter schools. Therefore, I examined the unique and distinctive characteristics of charter school practices within the broader context of education.

According to the evidence reported in these studies, charter schools are engaging in a wide array of practices at many levels. Table 4.1 lists practices cited as innovations by charter schools and/or researchers in these states.

A survey of these practices suggests several discernible themes. First, charter schools are engaging in a number of activities at the administrative level that appear to be new and distinctive in the broader public sector. For instance, charter schools are experimenting with merit-pay plans, marketing, parental involvement contracts, and financial arrangements that give them access to private capital—most of which are substantially new to the publicly funded education sector. This notable list of innovations would seem to lend support to the public-choice thesis. However, under the charter school logic model (see Figure 4.1), these administrative innovations are an immediate result of the structural changes fashioned as policy *inputs* for charter schools, not an end in themselves. It is worth remembering that such changes in institutional conditions are intended to induce innovations in teaching methods, according to the expectations of policymakers, teachers, and others—as charter advocate and Education Leaders Council CEO (and former Arizona state superintendent) Lisa Graham Keegan (1999) notes in her critique of district schools, “You have to go beyond advertising and outreach and get down to the classroom level” (p. 193).

Second, by their nature, charter schools are increasing options for parents in specific localities. Whereas a district may have embraced new math, a charter school may now be offering Saxon math (a traditionalist curriculum emphasizing review and practice). In Colorado, charter schools were among the first to employ Hirsch’s “core knowledge” curriculum. Thus, by diversifying the range of programmatic options available for some parents, charter schools are embracing practices that can be seen as innovations from the perspective of parents in a local education market.

However, the R&D argument from public-choice theory posits that the autonomy afforded to charter schools will encourage practices that are innovative not simply at the local level but also within the broader publicly funded sector—that is, practices not already evident in district-administered schools. Most of the studies reviewed here described a number of educational practices as innovative. Yet, on closer inspection, virtually all these activities are already in use in bureaucratically administered districts. While a Montessori approach, block scheduling, or integrated themes may appear innovative in a local context, they have not been developed by the charter

Table 4.1. Charter school practices reported as innovations in four states

STATE	ADMINISTRATIVE INNOVATIONS	EDUCATIONAL INNOVATIONS
States granting <i>high</i> degrees of autonomy to charter schools ¹		
Arizona ²	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • employment practices • block scheduling • nongraded classes • smaller class size • use of advertising • computer-based 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • arts focus/integrated arts • back-to-basics • computer-based • core knowledge • great books focus • Montessori • multiple intelligences emphasis • Saxon math • Waldorf • thematic curriculum • business focus • portfolios • child-centered • active learning • block scheduling • nongraded classes • smaller class size
Michigan ³	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • management and operations • corporate governance • smaller school/class size • employment practices • parent involvement • contracting-out services • advertising • all-day kindergarten • finance arrangements • student uniforms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ethnic-based curricula • technology theme • school-to-work focus • whole-school programs • theme-based • basics/core knowledge focus • character/citizenship focus • multicultural emphasis • parent involvement • smaller school/class size • all-day kindergarten • student uniforms

school sector but previously existed in district schools. Inasmuch as these practices are innovative, their prior existence in district schools challenges the R&D function for charter schools and undermines the public-choice diagnosis of bureaucratic administration from which it emerges.

Third, despite differences in the degree of autonomy afforded to charter schools in Arizona and Michigan, as opposed to California and Colorado,

Table 4.1. (continued)

States granting moderate degrees of autonomy to charter schools ⁴		
California ⁵	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • employment practices • finance arrangements • parental involvement requirements • home-based instruction • technology-based instruction • site-based decision making (SBDM) • focus on specific populations • individual education plans (IEPs) • block scheduling • multi-age classes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • parental involvement requirements • home-based instruction • project-based instruction • technology-based instruction • focus on specific populations • individual education plans (IEPs) • field trips • hands-on learning • arts focus • college prep • child-centered approach • leadership emphasis • basic math • block scheduling • service learning • Waldorf • Montessori • integrated curriculum • multi-age classes
Colorado ⁶	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • employment practices • merit pay • multi-age grouping • focus on at-risk/gifted students • extended schedule • block/nontraditional scheduling • SBDM • support for homeschooling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • thematic/ interdisciplinary instruction • technology focus • core knowledge curriculum • community-as-classroom • IEPs • multi-age grouping • focus on specific subjects • character education • hands-on/active learning • focus on at-risk/gifted students • extended schedule • block/nontraditional scheduling • foreign language requirements • student-centered • support for homeschooling

1. Center for Education Reform (2001a).
 2. Gifford, Phillips, & Ogle (2000); Glassman (1998); Stout & Garn (1999).
 3. Arsen, Plank, & Sykes (1999); Dykgraaf & Lewis (1998); Horn & Miron (1999, 2000); Khouri et al. (1999); Mintrom (2000); Miron & Nelson (2002); Plank & Sykes (1999); Reynolds (2000).
 4. Center for Education Reform (2001).
 5. Anderson & Marsh (1998); Becker, Nakagawa, & Corwin (1997); Corwin & Flaherty (1995); Flaherty (1995); Link, Gordon, & Khanna (1999); Little Hoover Commission (1996); SRI International (1997); Wells et al. (1998).
 6. Clayton Foundation (1997, 1998, 1999); Colorado Department of Education (2001); Fitzgerald (1995, 2000).

there do not appear to be substantial differences in the types of activities reported as innovative in these states. This is a significant point: Whereas public-choice theorists argue that autonomy from centralized bureaucratic mandates is an essential element in inducing innovations, the very real differences in autonomy (the degrees of deregulation, institutional sovereignty, legal and operational integrity, fiscal independence from the district, etc.) in these states do not appear to generate substantial differences in the types, nature, or extent of charter schools innovations. In Arizona, for instance, local districts sponsor 23% of the charter schools, and the figure is about 16% in Michigan. While these states are often noted for the dynamic nature of their education markets, practices reported as charter school innovations are quite comparable to those in California and Colorado, where charters are typically sponsored by local districts.

Theoretically, charters do offer educators the opportunity to sustain alternative practices apart from shifts in district policy. For example, many of the practices in charter schools reflect child-centered progressive ideas that have fallen in and out of favor in various public schools. On the other hand, *the largest discernible proportion of charter schools by far are using their autonomy to provide "basics" or traditional curricula* (see Center for Education Reform, 1997, as cited in Price, 1998; Center for Education Reform, 2000; Hassel, 1998). Likewise, some charters may have an impact through ethnic-oriented themes, since many are effectively (if controversially) exempted from ideological commitments to common schooling (Lubienski, 2001a). Another area where charters may outpace district schools over the long run is in online learning, since for-profits are looking at new ways of delivering distance education, particularly to homeschooling consumers. Nevertheless, despite the potential for charters to develop innovations in these specific areas, the public-choice predictions regarding an educational laboratory function for charter schools appear to be misguided.

UNDERSTANDING PATTERNS IN CHARTER SCHOOL PRACTICES

Explaining the Lack of Innovation in Charter Schools

There are two readily apparent but unsubstantiated explanations for the paucity of new educational innovations emerging from charter schools. The most obvious may be the relative newness of the reform, which has existed for only slightly more than a decade. However, one might expect innovations to occur *more rapidly* at the advent of these reforms, particularly with new or start-up schools where high proportions of new teachers are not yet

set in their instructional strategies. In fact, the patterns evident in U.S. charter schools are quite consistent with the outcomes of school reforms in other nations with a longer and more comprehensive track record of leveraging autonomy, deregulation, and decentralization. Research on comparable reforms in Chile, England/Wales, and New Zealand, for instance, indicates that anticipated innovations never really materialized in ways theorists and reformers predicted. Indeed, independent schools often used their administrative autonomy to *avoid* new and innovative educational practices, frequently embracing *traditionalist* approaches over time, while the bureaucratic sector often produced more innovations (Gauri, 1998; Lauder & Hughes, 1999; Lubienski, 2001b; Whitty, Power, & Halpin, 1998; Woods, Bagley, & Glatter, 1998).

The other obvious but unfounded explanation is that although policymakers may have wanted to promote innovation, in designating parents as choosers, they selected an *inherently* cautious group of consumers who are not particularly interested in innovation so much as a solid, basic academic education for their children (e.g., Arsen, Plank, & Sykes, 1999; Hassel, 1999b; Lane, 1999; Plank & Sykes, 1999). Apart from essentializing the motivations of parents, there may be some truth to this view. But it misses the point. The thinking behind charter schools is not simply that they will offer innovative “products” if parents want them. Instead, charter schools are granted autonomy with the expectation that they will use it to develop innovative *processes* for better satisfying consumers’ demands. That is, consumers may not be looking for innovations, but consumer demand is supposed to *cause* innovation, even if the demand is not for innovation itself (see Hill & Jones, 1989).

Rethinking the R&D Objective

Policy analysts seem to be at a loss for explaining the patterns of practice apparent in charter schools. Yet, inasmuch as ideals such as innovation and diversity are worthy goals, understanding these patterns is crucial as policymakers increasingly embrace autonomy, decentralization, and deregulation through this and other school-choice reforms. Most frequently, policy recommendations focus on either expanding deregulation to free up marketlike mechanisms or adding support structures so that charter schools can use their autonomy more effectively in developing innovations. In this view, if authority were more *decentralized*, and autonomous schools were put in more marketlike environments, they would likely fulfill their presumed potential in inducing substantive change in core practices. Their uneven record to this point, in this line of thinking, indicates only isolated incidents of market failure—in view of start-up effects, peculiar consumer preferences, or continued state regulation, for example. Consequently, while reformers did not

necessarily anticipate these problems, they believe they can address them through simple policy correctives (e.g., parent information centers, communication networks to diffuse innovations, etc.). Here I suggest another possibility: that the paucity of innovation in classroom practice evident in these states is not simply *in spite of* structural reforms. Instead, the very forces that were unleashed in the drive for autonomy may *encourage* curricular conformity and standardization.

Organizational Theory and Innovation. There is, in fact, an established perspective from organizational theory that considers the internal logic of marketlike environments—the conditions sought by structural reforms of school governance (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This descriptive theory suggests outcomes that are rather counterintuitive to public-choice prescriptions, but help explain the apparent disconnect between the seemingly tight logic of public-choice theory and the actual record of charter school innovation. While reformers have tried to make more schools autonomous within such environments, according to organizational ecologists, the uncertainties of these environments can have the unintended consequence of constraining innovation. Independent schools seeking to survive such conditions may more easily emulate successful models than engage in costly and risky innovations themselves.

For instance, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) observe that “in fields characterized by a high degree of uncertainty, new entrants, which could serve as sources of innovation and variation, will seek to overcome the liability of newness by imitating established practices within the field,” focusing their activity on “appearances” (p. 156; see also Hannan & Freeman, 1977). Furthermore, such trends are typical with *established organizations* in environments where multiple providers offer services in a recognizable “product field” such as schooling—conditions referred to as “monopolistic competition” by economists. While providers may differentiate their services, the distinctions are often symbolic matters of image and advertising rather than the result of substantive innovation (Mansfield, 1970). Thus, it is conceivable that similar forces may be promoting administrative, image-oriented innovations while constraining educational change, even for those schools specifically designed to develop innovations in classroom practices.

Indeed, many educators are attracted to the charter concept because of the perceived opportunities for professional independence, autonomy from bureaucratic control, and the chance to pursue a specific vision (Clayton Foundation, 1998, 1999; Fuller, 2000; Vanourek et al., 1998). Yet many teachers change their initially optimistic views after working in the schools. For example, in a study of Michigan charter schools, the percentage of teachers agreeing with the statement “The school will support/is supporting inno-

vative practices" declined significantly—down 25% from when they were surveyed on first joining a charter school (Khoury et al., 1999). Whereas teachers are often attracted by professional opportunities to develop new and exciting curricula in line with their educational philosophy, in some cases they simply implement curricular decisions made by bureaucrats in private organizations, such as educational management organizations, that are better positioned to survive in a capricious climate (Dykgraaf & Lewis, 1998; Horn & Miron, 2000; Triant, 2001). Innovation is often a costly undertaking, and larger organizations with the resources to withstand setbacks are often better equipped to shoulder the risks and expenses of innovation. The idealized small, independent, mom-and-pop charter school has less access to private capital, and thus its susceptibility to the immediate vagaries of the market may undermine its ability to pursue a distinct vision when attracting consumers is the critical consideration for start-ups.

Sources of Innovation and Conformity. Contrary to the logic apparent in public-choice theory, innovation can emerge from different sources. For instance, many professions have been successful in cultivating innovations without relying on market models. Indeed, the previous existence of many charter school innovations in the public-school sector suggests that extramarket factors are also at work. In more marketlike fields—such as technology in recent years—individuals often advance innovations through start-up firms, which attract venture capital, and are frequently then incorporated into larger corporate conglomerates. However, this pattern is the exception, since larger firms have typically been more successful at R&D (see Hill & Jones, 1989).

But the idea of charters as educational laboratories or R&D centers may itself be a misconception. It is true that charter schools are granted a substantial degree of autonomy as an *opportunity* to innovate, with market-style forces intended to drive innovation. Yet charters are often positioned in some of the *most* competitive environments, where they are expected to sink or swim. In other sectors that invest in experimentation and innovation, the R&D component of a firm is often relatively immune from the immediate effects of competition. That is, R&D units are usually shielded from immediate competitive imperatives to attract and retain customers, to prove the direct value of every idea, or even to stay out of the red (Hill & Jones, 1989). Instead, such components are typically granted additional resources and expected to try different approaches—many of which will fail—that may cultivate improvements over time. Therefore, while we often assume that innovation will emerge when schools have a degree of autonomy from bureaucratic administration, it may very well be that charter schools will be

better able to develop educational innovations if they enjoy autonomy from the effects of marketlike conditions.

CONCLUSION

The issue of innovations in charter schools is complex and much more problematic than is presumed in the prescriptions of public-choice theory. Whereas theorists and policymakers expect decentralization, autonomy, and deregulation to encourage innovations, it appears that these forces may be more successful in inducing innovations in administrative behavior than in the classroom. In fact, many schools placed in uncertain conditions use their autonomy to pursue rather familiar conceptions of schooling. Thus, these structural reforms may generate incentive structures that have the unanticipated consequence of undermining the intended potential of charter schools to develop innovation in the classroom, where policymakers and reformers want to effect change. If charter schools are expected to serve as R&D centers, they may require autonomy not only from bureaucratic mandates but also from market-style imperatives.

Indeed, in some cases it appears that schools chartered by districts as the local lab or alternative school are often more successful in developing and sustaining a vision or approach outside the norm. In Arizona, for example, 77% of charters are granted by agencies other than local districts. Yet districts are disproportionately active in chartering schools that employ multi-age grouping, cultural themes, and extended calendars, for instance (Arizona Department of Education, n.d.). Inasmuch as these schools are established not to challenge but to accompany and complement district programs, many such charter schools may operate without immediate pressures impinging on their pursuit of unique or innovative practices. In that respect, further research is needed on how innovations emerge in charters in light of the nature of their relationship with local districts. The next step in this particular line of inquiry is to compare distinctive organizational and educational practices in schools enjoying greater degrees of autonomy from bureaucratic mandates to those practices in charter schools nurtured by their sponsoring district.

Charter schools often operate under uncertain conditions as a result of their position in an emerging quasi-market environment. However, the degree to which this new environment undermines the innovation it was intended to induce is an important factor in considering the potential of other market-oriented school reforms to develop new practices in teaching and learning. Theorists and reformers have given charter schools the Herculean

task of changing core activities, in a system where classroom practices have been remarkably resilient in the face of structural reforms of governance and administration. Still, as a policy innovation, they represent for many what Tyack (1974) aptly terms “the lure of the structural panacea” for policymakers seeking to reform the entrenched practices of schooling (p. 169).

NOTES

1. The pervasiveness of public-choice perspectives on publicly administered schools explains—at least in part—the popularity of the view that district schools are plagued by a lack of classroom innovation while market forces engender innovation and diversification. We might also consider the degree to which state legislators adopt legislative language from advocacy organizations that offer templates of model school reform legislation. But regardless of how the wording of state laws came to be so similar in so many instances, it is important to note that lawmakers accepted the assumed link between market forces and classroom innovation.

2. In addition to the single-state reports, I drew on evidence from multistate and national reports that encompass one or more of these four states (e.g., Good & Braden, 2000; Hassel, 1999a; Manno et al., 1998a; Podgursky & Ballou, 2001; Rebarber, 1997; RPP International, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001; RPP International & University of Minnesota, 1997; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1995; Vanourek et al., 1997, 1998). To manage the scope of this analysis, this chapter focuses on innovation in charter schools themselves rather than the intended “ripple effect” whereby innovative practices are expected to be adopted by other schools due to competition or other means of diffusion (e.g., Rofes, 1998; Vanourek et al., 1997; Wells et al., 1998). Furthermore, I did not analyze innovations in special education or assessment practices for this chapter. Otherwise, all studies known and available to the researcher as of 2001 were considered—regardless of how they defined “innovation”—so long as they presented evidence on the issue.

PART III

The Impact of Charter Schools on Governance