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**TAKING ACCOUNT  
OF  
CHARTER SCHOOLS**

***What's Happened  
and  
What's Next?***

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## CONCLUSION

# Lighting Out for the Territory: Charter Schools and School Reform Strategy

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*But I reckon I got to light out for the territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before.*

—*Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain

There are a number of stories that have a permanent resonance in American politics. Among the most familiar is the one in which the virtuous people struggle to defend the public good against an array of powerful special interests. In another, the valiant sheriff stands tall against a host of villains and restores decency and order to the community. These stories echo through our political life, in debates over issues ranging from estate taxes to missile defense.

Perhaps the most powerful of all these stories, however, is the founding American story, the story about leaving the corruption and complexity of the Old World behind and creating a better, simpler, freer life beyond the frontier. This story has animated pioneers and reformers since the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock to build their city on a hill. The opportunity to start over, to dispense with entanglements, to shake off the burden of past mistakes and “light out for the territory” and a new life is the essential American story. It is repeated over and over again, in sermons, folk songs, novels, and movies. It is a recurrent theme in our politics as well.

In education policy debates, the founding American story finds its clearest recent expression in the movement to establish charter schools. The prospect of starting over with a clean slate, freed from school codes and union

rules, is as irresistible to contemporary reformers as was the prospect of settling a New World to the Pilgrims in 1620. Rather than struggling with the bitter and frustrating work of improving the public schools we have, reformers see in charter schools the tantalizing prospect of creating new schools, untainted by the corruption and complexity of the current system. The persistent appeal of this story attracts advocates and defenders for charter schools from nearly all points on the political spectrum, from the communitarian left to the fundamentalist right.

## CHARTER SCHOOLS AND SCHOOL REFORM STRATEGY

The founding American story is really two stories. First, of course, it is a story about leaving the Old World behind. In addition, though, it is a story about creating a New World, freed from the “sivilizing” constraint of Europe (or Hannibal, Missouri). The move to create charter schools relies on both of these stories. On the one hand, charter schools offer parents a way out, an opportunity to escape from schools they dislike and enroll their children in new schools, beyond the boundaries of the regular public school system. At the same time, reformers look to charter schools as pioneers, exploring new possibilities and offering inspiration and guidance to those left behind in traditional public schools.

The fundamental bargain behind the creation of charter schools is the exchange of increased autonomy for enhanced accountability. Charter schools are released from some of the rules and red tape that are believed to constrain the performance of traditional public schools. In return, they agree to be held to account for the accomplishment of specific outcomes, which are often spelled out in the schools’ authorizing documents. The idea behind this bargain is that charter schools should be held accountable for the results that they achieve, rather than for the means that they use to achieve them. Relief from the obligation to comply with the myriad regulations in the school code provides charter schools with greater administrative flexibility and frees them to experiment with new and perhaps better ways of educating young people.

Like the Puritans’ city on a hill, charter schools are expected to make the world better in two distinct ways. First of all, they are supposed to be successful schools in their own right, for their own students. Relieved of the burden of regulation and focused on results, charter schools are expected to provide better schooling for their students than those youngsters could obtain in the Old World of regular public schools. Beyond this, the advent of charter schools is supposed to encourage improvement in the traditional public school system. By taking advantage of their enhanced autonomy to

experiment and innovate, charter schools should provide examples to traditional public schools of new and different ways of organizing schools and delivering instruction. In addition, competition from charter schools is expected to provide a powerful incentive for traditional public schools to improve their own performance in order to protect their claims on students and revenues.

### WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT CHARTER SCHOOLS?

What do the preceding chapters tell us about the efficacy of charter schools as a strategy for school reform? Is the strategy working? Are charter schools better than traditional public schools? Are traditional public schools improving as they compete with charter schools? The authors of the preceding chapters deliver mixed reviews.

On the bright side, charter schools are often different—and sometimes very different—from traditional public schools in the ways in which they are organized and managed. As both Chapters 4 and 6 show, the administrative flexibility extended to charter schools by state legislatures has produced a widely varied assortment of schools. Some charter schools remain an integral part of traditional school districts, but many operate independently. Some charter schools have been founded by groups of teachers seeking a more productive or congenial work environment. Others have been founded by community groups aiming to create a more supportive learning environment for their children. For-profit private companies manage a growing number of charter schools under a variety of contractual arrangements. Charter school administrators have introduced a variety of innovations including alternative schedules, nontraditional hiring, and differential pay for teachers (Podgursky & Ballou, 2001). Many of these experiments remain local, but they nevertheless offer valuable examples of new ways of organizing schools.

Whether charter schools are developing promising new instructional practices is less certain. On the one hand, Chapter 3 suggests that charter schools use their autonomy to implement effective literacy practice. In contrast, Chapter 4 raises theoretical and empirical doubts about whether much innovation in instruction has occurred or will occur in charter schools. Chapter 1 shows that charter school teachers are generally less qualified and less experienced than their counterparts in traditional public schools, while Chapter 2 suggests that the professional opportunities provided for charter school teachers look very much like the professional opportunities available to teachers in traditional public schools.

According to the evidence presented in this volume, charter schools look very much like traditional public schools in terms of teacher qualifications

and professional commitment, student achievement, and instructional practice. So far, at least, flexibility and diversity in administration and governance do not seem to have produced generalized improvements in the education that charter schools provide for their students. Some charters are extraordinarily good and others are astonishingly bad—but this is equally true of traditional public schools. In the absence of generalized improvements in the academic performance of charter schools, however, there is little reason to believe that competition from charter schools will encourage general improvements in the academic performance in the rest of the public school system.

### WHAT DON'T WE KNOW ABOUT CHARTER SCHOOLS?

The original charter school is barely a decade old. Most charter schools have been in operation for only a few years. Because they are still a relatively new feature of the educational landscape, it is still too early to draw firm conclusions about how charter schools are doing or about how they are affecting the traditional public school system. In our view, three lines of research can begin to provide answers to some of the big questions about the long-term impact of charter schools on the American education system.

#### Charter Schools and the Emerging Market for Schooling

Charter schools mark an important first step toward the creation of a competitive market for schooling. Understanding how this market works is critically important for evaluating the performance of charter schools and for designing effective strategies for school improvement. At present we know relatively little about this market on either the demand side or the supply side. Additional research can help us to answer two key questions. First, how do parents choose schools? Second, how do traditional public schools respond to competition from charter schools?

On the demand side, understanding how charter schools will affect the education system requires us to understand how parents make choices among the schools available for their children. Markets produce what consumers want. If parents demand high-quality schooling for their children, then that is what charter schools will seek to produce. Parents who choose charter schools may base their choices on other considerations, however. If parents are seeking schools that are closer to home or that reflect and honor their own culture and values, the hope that charter schools will provide schooling of higher quality than that available in the traditional public schools is unlikely to be realized.

On the supply side, we need to know more about how charter schools compete with traditional public schools and how traditional public schools respond to the new competitive pressures introduced into the education system by charter schools. Do charter schools aspire to compete on the basis of academic performance or something else? For example, do they seek to target niche markets defined by communal affinities or shared values? If they seek to compete on quality, then we might expect to see charter schools leading the way toward the identification of new and better strategies for delivering instruction. If they seek to compete on other factors, however, there is little reason to suppose that charter schools will develop effective new instructional strategies or practices, or that they will achieve academic results that are generally superior to those observed in traditional public schools.

We also need to learn more about how traditional public schools respond in the newly competitive market for schooling. School-choice advocates often assume that public school educators will respond aggressively to competition, improving the performance of their schools in order to retain their claims on resources (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Hoxby, 2001). Other responses are also possible, however. As Hirschman (1970) observed many years ago, the way in which organizations respond to decline depends on a variety of factors, including the perceived character of the competitive challenge (i.e., why are parents leaving?) and the availability of organizational “slack” (i.e., does the organization have the capacity to reallocate resources and do things differently?). Some schools may indeed seek to improve their performance in order to attract prospective students, but others may respond differently. Some may deal with competition like Hirschman’s “lazy monopolist,” who is content to let troublesome students leave in order to minimize conflict and disruption. Still others may lack the capacity to mount an effective response; competition may launch these districts on an accelerating spiral of decline (Arsen, Plank, & Sykes, 1999). For now, we know too little about the distribution of these responses and about the likely consequences of increased competition for the performance of the traditional public school system.

### Diversity and Difference in Charter Schools

The observed diversity among charter schools may provide valuable leverage for researchers seeking to understand “what works” (and what doesn’t) in efforts to improve school performance. Considered as a class, the performance of charter schools when compared with traditional public schools is mixed, as the chapters in this volume show. There is nevertheless a growing body of anecdotal evidence from charter schools in several states which suggests that some schools may be quite effective at raising achievement for poor students, developing promising instructional practices,

involving parents in community formation, and other desirable outcomes. The next generation of studies should begin to disaggregate the population of charter schools on criteria including curricular choices, management status, governance arrangements, and so on in order to systematically explore the differences among schools that are associated with effective operation and successful outcomes.

### The Rules Matter

From the point of view of school reform strategy, the wide variation in state laws governing charter schools provides a remarkable opportunity to examine how different policy choices affect the character and performance of charter schools across states. Different rules create different incentives for authorizers, educational management organizations (EMOs), educators, and parents, and different incentives are likely to produce different outcomes. Research that focuses on the relationship between the policy choices made by legislatures and the populations of charter schools produced by these choices promises important new insights into the efficacy of charter schools as a strategy for accomplishing specific reform objectives. In addition, of course, such research can offer valuable guidance for legislators and others engaged in the task of developing or revising charter school policies at the state level.

## WHAT’S NEXT FOR CHARTER SCHOOLS?

Having left Aunt Sally and the NEA behind, can charter school educators—at large beyond the frontier—resist the encroachments and blandishments of the civilization that they ostensibly left behind? Can they encourage general improvement in the American education system? What does the future hold for charter schools? In our view, the answers to these questions are likely to feature two complementary trends—social differentiation and institutional domestication.

First, charter schools reflect a response to a continuing trend toward social differentiation in the education system. As Chapter 5 suggests, the creation of charter schools can be interpreted as an effort to revive and protect “premodern” and “tribal” ideals of community, which can help to rescue their members from the homogenizing constraint of the modern secular state. In keeping with the founding American story, charter schools offer parents an opportunity to escape *from* the educational mistakes of the 20th century (Ravitch, 2000) by moving beyond the public school frontier. They simultaneously provide an opportunity to escape *to* a safer and more

comfortable world, in which schools better reflect the culture and values of the parents and students who patronize them. In this version of the charter school story, the traditional American ideal of the common school is discredited and abandoned in favor of providing a variety of schools that are better adapted to the values and interests of particular groups.

Second, policy and administrative realities are creating pressures for the institutional domestication of charter schools. The fundamental bargain that motivated the move to charter schools—increased autonomy in exchange for improved outcomes—is shifting decisively against autonomy and toward closer regulation of charter schools (Mintrom & Plank, 2001). As Chapter 4 points out and several other chapters echo, charter schools are coming to look more and more like regular public schools. The move to hire EMOs often has a standardizing effect, because charter schools subject to the profit-maximizing goals of EMOs may focus on the goal of attracting as many students as possible at the expense of a distinctive mission. The pressure to maximize enrollments and revenues introduces the same kinds of homogenizing pressures that oblige traditional public school systems to try to satisfy all the diverse preferences expressed by their clients and constituents. In addition, as Chapter 7 concludes, the federal rules that govern special education also limit the opportunities available to charter schools to look very different from traditional public schools.

One need not attribute the trend toward domestication to the malevolence of teachers unions or the cowardice of legislators; charter schools are public schools spending public money, and it is not surprising that citizens and taxpayers want to know where it goes. Moreover, state legislators now find themselves under intense and increasing pressure to demonstrate improvement in the performance of public schools, according to standardized criteria. The federal No Child Left Behind legislation reflects the recognition that leaving choices about schooling up to communities and states, let alone families and “tribes,” may not satisfy public expectations for student achievement. These pressures leave legislators disinclined to rely on local communities or the market to improve school performance.

### CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE HERE TO STAY

After a decade, charter schools are already an established part of the American educational system. In states including Arizona, California, and Michigan they enroll a significant share of all public school students, and the number of states adopting charter school legislation continues to grow. There is no reason to suppose that these trends will be reversed. Virtually all the available data indicate that charter school parents are considerably hap-

pier with their schools than traditional public school parents are with theirs. Parents like having choices, and they like the schools that they choose for their children. Charter schools provide educational options that many parents value, and it is hard to imagine circumstances in which these options might be withdrawn.

It is nevertheless increasingly unlikely that early hopes that charter schools will transform or revivify public education will be realized. Charter schools are free to experiment with new ways of organizing and managing schools, but the evidence presented in this volume suggests that they continue to resemble traditional public schools in most important respects, including the academic performance of their students. The authors offer no reason to suppose that dramatic improvements are in prospect.

At the end of the day, though, Americans like having choices. They like knowing that they can get away if they need to—or at least their children can. Lighting out for the territory will never lose its appeal, but by itself it is not likely to prove an effective strategy for improving American education.