

The Paradox of Charter Schools: How Charters Get Support Despite Poor Performance

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This article argues that a paradox exists for U.S. charter schools in that they enjoy much support and advocacy despite 30 years of lackluster performance. This disconnect has serious consequences for families and students in charter schools that are underperforming. Of the 3 million students in charter schools across the country today, as many as 1 million of them on average are in schools that perform worse than comparable traditional public schools. This article traces the history of charter schools and compares the mixed performance of charters to the strong support from researchers, advocates and funders, making the case that neoliberals are more effectively presenting their case for innovation, freedom of choice and liberty than the social justice advocates who oppose charters. In light of this paradox, the article proposes an alternative role for charters that would build on and strengthen their original role as laboratories of innovation.

Keywords: charter schools, school choice, charter school performance, innovation

Introduction

I've consistently said we need to support charter schools. I think it is important to experiment, by looking at how we can reward excellence in the classroom.

—President Barack Obama (2008)

Twenty years after charter schools were created as an alternative to traditional public schools (Chubb & Moe, 1988; Gleason, 2019), President Barack Obama expressed his support for charters even though teachers' unions and many in his party were not supportive. But what is more striking, Obama supported and made charters a key factor in his signature education reform initiative, Race to the Top (Duncan, 2009; Nagel, 2009), two years later, even though the evidence was mixed at best that charter schools were succeeding as an education reform (e.g. CREDO, 2009). The unwavering support of this education reform despite limited evidence of success has been repeated time after time in the past 30 years since charter schools were created.

As Horsford et al. (2019) write:

In fact, despite the enthusiastic, bipartisan endorsement these schools have enjoyed in Washington, D.C., and the strong support they have received from philanthropic organizations... the record on charter school achievement outcomes is fairly modest, showing great variability within and across states, and even variability within charter school networks (see, e.g. CREDO, 2009, 2014).

This “modest” performance has significant consequences for students in underperforming charter schools. In Ohio, for instance, the average charter student attained the equivalent of 14 fewer days in reading and 43 fewer days of math in a 180-day school year compared to his or her public school peer (CREDO, 2014). Poor school outcomes hold students back, narrowing their life choices and contributing to social and economic inequalities. (e.g., Carter & Welner, 2003.) Charter schools, 30 years in as a reform for poor public school performance, still needs reforming of its own. (e.g., Betts et al., 2011; Carter & Welner, 2003; CREDO, 2019; Horsford, 2019).

Charter schools are public schools created as an alternative to traditional public schools and operate with fewer regulations than those schools they compete with. This article examines charter schools in the U.S. as continuing debates and controversy spill out of classrooms, court rooms, board rooms, and legislative hearing rooms. Over the past 30 years, charter schools have attracted the attention of education reformers and public school advocates, who both support and oppose this version of choice and alternative schools for families and parents.

I argue in this critical commentary that a paradox exists in this charter school debate. Charter schools have shown lackluster performance over three decades, yet support for charter schools has never been higher (Fabricant & Fine, 2011; Ladd, 2019; Stern, 2019). This disconnect has serious consequences for families and students in charter schools that are underperforming. Of the 3 million students in charter schools across the country, as many as 1 million of them on average are in schools that perform worse than comparable traditional public schools (CREDO, 2009; CREDO, 2013; Fabricant & Fine, 2011) This paradox leads me to propose a new and more focused role for charter schools that would reengage them on their core purpose and strengthen accountability for outcomes through new structures.

In this critical commentary article, I outline the conceptual framework of this review, and then I set out the historical roots of charters and the crux of the charter debate, showing how the promises of innovative charter schools were offered but then quickly opposed by teachers unions and supporters of traditional public schools. I review the extensive literature on the performance of charters schools compared to their traditional school peers. I then lay out the underpinnings of the paradox, using Ohio as a microcosm of the charter school issues, to highlight the disconnect between strong support by charter advocates despite weak performance by all but a third of the schools as compared to their traditional public school counterparts. Finally, in light of the underperformance of charter schools, I propose an alternative role for charters that would build on and strengthen their original role as laboratories of innovation and end the paradox that threatens children and families with schools that constitute a reform that largely performs worse or no better than the traditional public schools.

Conceptual Framework

This article relies on critical policy analysis as a conceptual framework. Critical policy analysis evolved from traditional policy analysis in as much as the focus is on exposing inconsistencies between what policy says it will do and what policy actually does. The approach looks particularly at power relationships in society (Diem et al., 2014; Young & Diem, 2017).

Diem et al., (2014) cite five fundamental concerns of critical policy analysis.

1. As noted, critical policy analysis (CPA) focuses on the difference between policy rhetoric and practiced reality.
2. The approach focuses on the policy's roots and development, how and why it was developed and its role in reinforcing the dominant culture.
3. CPA researchers are concerned with the distribution of power, resources and knowledge, and who wins and who loses.
4. A fourth and related concern centers on the broader effect a given policy has on relationships of privilege and inequality
5. Finally, many critical policy scholars are interested in groups who resist processes of domination and oppression and who are activists using participatory methods to increase agency within schools.

The work of CPA scholars is similar in two other ways. First, they pay close attention to the complex system and environments in which policy is made and implemented. Second, CPA researchers are more likely to use qualitative research methods over quantitative methods.

Historical Roots

The genesis of charter schools and school choice came from Milton Friedman, the conservative economist who wrote in a groundbreaking 1955 article on school vouchers that school choice “would bring a healthy increase in the variety of educational institutions available and in competition among them. Private initiative and enterprise would quicken the pace of progress in this area as it has in so many others. Government would serve its proper function of improving the operation of the invisible hand without substituting the dead hand of bureaucracy” (Friedman, 1955, as cited in Locatelli, 2019, p. 75). Thirty years later, teacher union leader Albert Shanker, in a 1988 speech to the National Press Club, envisioned a charter school that would spark innovation to help improve public schools (Gleason, 2019). That same year, Chubb and Moe (1988) argued that private schools outperform public schools, and they focused on the characteristics of private schools that made them perform better: Lack of bureaucracy and union controls, parents as customers, and competition for students.

The allure of charter schools underscores the neoliberal response to the lagging performance of traditional public schools, especially in urban areas, by providing choice to parents and opportunities for teachers to innovate (Fabricant & Fine, 2011; Horsford et al., 2019). Charter schools operate outside the structures and regulations of traditional schools, often without unionized staff. The first charter schools opened in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1992 (Schroeder, 2004), ushering in three decades of charter schools being offered as a choice to local public schools. Charter schools have been described by proponents as the realization of a transformative social movement. Andrew Rotherman, then director of the 21st Century Schools Project at the Progressive Policy Institute, a pro-charter organization backed by philanthropies like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, described charters as “the first concrete iteration of a powerful, innovative idea—that public schools are defined by operating norms and public accountability rather than solely by who manages them” (Schroeder, 2004, p. 2). This fits the classic neoliberal political approach of free-market capitalism, deregulation, and less government spending.

The notion of replacing “government schools” with innovative new charter schools was appealing to a wide group of neoliberals from both political parties: Republican governors, Democratic mayors, philanthropists like Eli Broad, Bill Gates, and Sam Walton, and libertarian think tanks and scholars (Charles, 2019; Fabricant & Fine, 2011). They believe that unionized public school teachers, with tenure and other workplace protections, were averse to change and too complacent to improve practice and performance (Charles, 2019; Fabricant & Fine, 2011).

Charters took off under President George W. Bush, who, in part, made education reform a centerpiece of his administration via the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Under NCLB, states were encouraged to close underperforming schools and replace them with charter schools (Charles, 2019, Fabricant & Fine, 2011). Charters continued that momentum under President Barack Obama, who made charter schools a key part of his signature Race to the Top grant competition (Duncan, 2009; Fabricant & Fine, 2011; Nagel 2009). In Ohio, which won a \$400 million Race to the Top grant, Democratic Governor Ted Strickland lifted caps he placed on charter school growth in order to enhance the state’s chances to secure the competitive grant (Associated Press, 2010). As a result, charter schools in Ohio grew from 341 enrolling 99,658 students in 2010-11 to a high of 395 schools with 120,893 students in 2013-14 (Ohio Department of Education, 2018). Nationally, 3 million children attend charter schools today, representing about 6 percent of all public school students (Charles, 2019). But in many urban areas, charter schools enroll a larger percentage of students whose families are often seeking alternative schools that are safer and offer the promise of a better education. Thus, in Washington D.C., almost half of all students are in charters; in Detroit, 53 percent of students are in charters; and in hurricane-ravaged New Orleans, 93 percent attend charter schools (Gleason, 2019). This targeted growth of charters in selected urban cities was indeed part of the charter movement strategy to compete with and defeat traditional public schools for students and resources (Fabricant & Fine, 2011).

Charter school debates

The three main purposes of charter schools — choice, competition and innovation — were the call to arms for charter school advocates, but the campaign almost immediately drew the attention and ire of teachers’ unions and other public school advocates (Charles, 2019; Fabricant & Fine, 2011).

Charter school advocates advance the argument that charter schools provide parents and students a choice over attending the local public school, which in urban areas, are perceived as unsafe and underperforming. This option to attend an alternative yet public school gives low-income parents the kinds of choices that more affluent parents have, supporters maintain, and blue collar residents and racial minorities more often do prefer choice and charter schools (Brasington & Hite, 2014; Charles, 2019; Fabricant & Fine, 2011; Jason, 2017; Peterson, 2016). Advocates also argue that charter schools are incubators of innovative practices that help their students perform better but can also show other schools how to raise student achievement. The notion is that teachers, free from bureaucratic rules and regulations, can experiment and create innovations (Abowitz & Karaba, 2010; Fabricant & Fine, 2011; Fox, 2002; Jason, 2017; Payne & Knowles, 2009). Finally, advocates maintain that competition from charter schools will cause local public

schools to change their practices and improve when they would not normally pursue reforms. Advocates say that public schools, with bureaucratic rules and collective bargaining regulations, just won't make the changes necessary to raise student achievement on their own (Charles, 2019; Fabricant & Fine, 2011; Peterson, 2016).

Opponents point to mediocre student achievement in the charter school sector as a primary reason to block charter school growth (CREDO, 2009, 2014, 2019; Fabricant & Fine, 2011; Horsford, 2019; Ladd, 2019; Stern 2019). They maintain that an unstated goal of the charter community is to undermine collective bargaining since most charters are not unionized, and they argue that charters hurt local public schools by taking away resources and funding at a time when resources are tight (Ahn & McEachin, 2017; Fabricant & Fine, 2011; Jason, 2017). In many states, for instance, when students leave a traditional public school, money follows the child from the old school district to the new charter school. Teachers' unions oppose charter schools on the grounds that they drain resources from the traditional public schools (Charles, 2019; Fabricant & Fine, 2011). Opponents also cite that charters expand segregation in schools (Ertas, 2013; Ladd, 2019), and some scholars maintain that charter schools reflect the desires of their white patrons and offer little self-determination for Black communities (Stern & Hussain, 2014). In the end, studies found that many charter schools were no more innovative than traditional public schools (Duffy, 2014; Fabricant & Fine, 2011; Fox, 2002). With the entirety of unfulfilled promises of charter schools, Ladd (2019) argues, "In the absence of widespread evidence of significant and consistent private benefits from charter schools, policymakers should protect the public interest in education by limiting the growth of charter schools" (p. 1064). Others have called for the outright reduction in charter schools, closing those that are underperforming.

The Evidence of Charter School Performance

The evidence of charter school performance is mixed and generally inconclusive, even after 30 years of opportunities to make a strong case for charters as a better alternative to traditional public schools. In a series of meta-analyses, researchers found mixed results, with several studies showing little or no evidence of charters performing better than traditional public schools, and in other studies, researchers found charters modestly outperforming traditional public schools, especially for exemplar groups of charters.

"(A) number of national and city-specific studies demonstrate that on the basis of standardizing test results, charter performance is, in the aggregate, no better than that of public schools and often is worse," write Fabricant & Fine (2011) in an extensive review of charter school progress.

For example, in a meta-analysis of 24 studies on charter performance conducted from 2002 to 2010, the researchers found that all but two studies showed charters underperforming or not doing much better compared to traditional public schools (Fabricant & Fine, 2011, p. 41). Included among those studies is a national study by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University (CREDO) in 2009, which Fabricant and Fine (2011) described as the best evidence due to its comprehensiveness and the organization's affinity for the choice movement. The authors write,

CREDO (2009) partnered with 15 states and the District of Columbia producing a comprehensive national analysis of charter-school impact on student achievement. The data reveal that charters, in the aggregate, are as effective or less effective than public schools in delivering learning results. More specifically, 17% of charters produce superior outcomes on standardized tests than public schools. However, nearly half of the charter schools nationwide have results that are no different than those of public schools while more than a third (37%) of charters deliver testing results that are significantly worse (Fabricant & Fine, 2011, p. 40).

Other researchers conducting meta-analyses of charter schools also found mixed results, with studies reporting that charters underperform traditional public schools in some locations, grades and subjects and outperform traditional public schools in other locations, grades and subjects, such as middle school math and reading and elementary school reading (Betts & Tang, 2011). Still more studies also found that the impact of charter schools is contextual, some are better than others and some are not as effective, leading the authors to conclude that “there is not definite knowledge about the impacts of public charter schools on students and existing schools” (Silvernail & Johnson, 2014). In an extensive meta-analysis, including 90 studies on the effects of religious private schools, charter schools, and public schools, researchers found that private religious schools outperformed all others but that students from public charter schools performed no better than their counterparts in other public schools (Jeynes, 2012).

However, another meta-analysis found modest gains for charter schools over traditional public schools. Chung et al. (2009) synthesized 395 mean-change effect sizes of 13 studies and found that charter school students’ test scores over time are slightly higher than those of public schools by 0.06 standard deviations – a small difference.

More recently, researchers have experienced similar mixed results, with studies on charter school performance showing some modest success, especially in some exemplar groups of charters, but other studies finding underperformance for charter schools compared to their traditional public school counterparts.

Two separate studies in 2019 reported that charters initially performed worse than traditional public schools but caught up with and then surpassed them at the end of the study periods. For instance, a study of 31 Midwestern urban school districts from 2008 to 2012 found that students who transferred from traditional public schools to charter schools did not outperform academically as their corresponding counterparts in math and reading and had lower attendance rates. However, the charter students improved in the succeeding two years and eventually outperformed traditional public students (Clarke & Burt, 2019). In a study of Michigan charters and traditional public schools over 10 years, charter schools significantly underperformed traditional public schools in math and reading in grades 4, 7 and 11, but that gap narrowed considerably and in some cases disappeared at the end of the study period (Murphy & Izraeli, 2019).

Three recent studies examined the exemplar KIPP charter school network, which today includes 255 schools in 30 regions across the country, and found that KIPP and the “no excuses” charter schools like them outperformed traditional public school counterparts on reading, math and other student performance measures. Researchers studying “no excuses” charter schools, which

emphasizes expectations that all students can meet high standards, found large meaningful gains in student math and literacy achievement in the “no excuses” schools over each year of attendance (Cheng et al., 2017; Krowka et al., 2017). “This review found multiple studies providing tentative support for the no excuses charter school model as an effective intervention for improving students’ math and literacy achievement, with limitations,” write Krowka et al. (2017). A study of a KIPP school in rural Arkansas found that its students gained significantly more each year on standardized assessments than did their matched traditional public school peers (Rose et al., 2017).

In California, researchers found that Los Angeles charter schools were better at preparing students for college than the traditional public schools studied (Adzima, 2017), and in a meta-analysis of charter performance of African-American students, “the results revealed that regardless of region, subject, type of assessment, or school focus, charter schools do positively influence African-American students' academic outcomes” (McCloud, 2018).

An examination of national trend data over 12 years (2005-2017) found that charter schools showed a steeper upward trend in student achievement than district schools, especially for black students, poor students and students in the Northeast (Shakeel & Peterson, 2020; Shakeel, 2021).

However, as in earlier reviews of studies on charter school performance, other recent studies also showed traditional public schools outperforming charter schools. Spees & Lauen (2019) examined charter schools in North Carolina and found that while charter school performance improved over time, it continued to remain lower than traditional public school achievement, though it found that charter students who were Black or economically disadvantaged experienced slightly more achievement growth in reading than other students. A study of charter schools performance in Texas over four years found that students in traditional public schools performed better than those in charter schools, which had high dropout rates, low attendance and low graduation rates (Keller, 2015). In addition, traditional public schools have more students ready for college than charter schools, the study found.

A more recent study from CREDO (2013), the research organization referenced above for the comprehensive 2009 report that found disappointing results for charter schools nationally, showed improvement for charter schools compared to their traditional public school peers. The 2013 CREDO study found,

In the aggregate, charter schools gained an additional 8 days of learning each year in reading beyond their local peers in traditional public schools. The 2009 study found a loss of 7 days each year in the 16 states. In math, charter school students in 2009 posted 22 fewer days of learning than their traditional public school counterparts; today there exists no significant difference in days of learning (CREDO, 2013, news release, p. 1).

The improvement was credited in part to the closure of 8 percent of underperforming charters in study states and the declining performance of traditional public schools over the same period.

Yet, overall in the 2013 study, only 25 percent of charters schools have significantly stronger learning gains in reading compared to traditional school peers, while 56 percent showed no

significant gains in reading and 19 percent having significantly weaker gains. In mathematics, 29 percent of charters showed student learning gains that were significantly stronger, while 40 percent were no different and 31 percent were weaker (CREDO, 2013).

Thus, the best evidence of charter success shows that only 25 percent beat traditional public schools in reading, leaving 75 percent of the charters performing as well or worse than traditional public schools in reading, and only 29 percent beat traditional public schools in math, with 71 percent of charters performing as well or worse than their traditional public school peers. “In an era of evidence and accountability, it seems ironic that these data have not slowed the growth of charter expansion,” remarked Fabricant & Fine, following the 2009 CREDO report (Fabricant & Fine, 2011).

Paradox of Charter Schools: Strong Support, Lack of Evidence

The lackluster performance of charter schools despite nearly 30 years of performance, as outlined above, is well documented. While examples of exemplar charter schools exist, the overwhelming evidence is that the charter school “experiment” has yielded mixed results despite decades of philanthropic and public support (e.g., CREDO, 2009, Fabricant & Fine, 2011; Ladd, 2019; Stern, 2019). The support and advocacy for charter schools often seems disconnected to the reality of the lack of consistent success on the ground (Fabricant & Fine, 2011; Ladd, 2019; Stern, 2019).

This paradox of charter schools – the strong support despite lack of evidence – is best exemplified by the track record of charter school development in Ohio over the past decade. I argue that Ohio is a microcosm of the charter performance across the country. CREDO, a respected non-partisan research and evaluation center, conducted studies of charter schools in Ohio in 2009, 2014 and 2019 that were funded by the pro-charter Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, based in Ohio. As Fabricant & Fine (2011) observe, CREDO studies are considered strong evidence because they are comprehensive and come from a respected organization that is aligned with choice ideology.

In the latest Ohio study, CREDO found that charter schools were doing no better than they did 10 years ago despite a sweeping reform of charter school rules and regulations put into place in 2015 (O’Donnell, 2015). The 2019 CREDO report on Ohio recounted its previous two studies of charter schools in the state when it observed, “there is little to no progress in Ohio charter school performance since the 2009 study. Although they grow similarly in reading relative to comparable traditional public school students, Ohio charter school students still lag in math during the period of this study and the gap has virtually not narrowed over time” (CREDO, 2019, p. 44). CREDO (2019) found that 34 percent of Ohio charter schools outpace their traditional public school peers in reading and 29 percent do so in math. Still, 14 percent of charter schools have results that are significantly worse than their traditional school peers for reading and 32 percent of charters schools are underperforming in math. On average, students in Ohio charter schools experience similar learning gains in reading and weaker growth in math in a year than their traditional public school peers. The disadvantage in math for charter students is as if the students lost 41 days of learning in a school year (or 23% fewer days). Charters operated by non-profit management organizations showed stronger student learning growth, prompting the study

author to urge an expansion of these exemplars to extend quality education in the state (CREDO, 2019).

Over the course of the previous decade, Ohio strongly advanced the neo-liberal ideals of the free market by growing the number of charter school enterprises, from networks to virtual schools to stand-alone schools – and setting up them up to compete with traditional public schools. In 2014, the head of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers called Ohio the “wild, wild west” of charter schools because of its lack of oversight of charter school authorizers, earning the state a national reputation for being in a charter school “free for all” (O’Donnell, 2014). In 2016, Ohio was described as completing “a 15-year-long ‘fiesta of almost unlimited chartering’ that resulted in a lasting hangover” (Jason, 2017).

Yet, during this time frame, Ohio received much public and private advocacy and financial support, specifically two large federal grants to expand charter schools in the state. In 2010 — just one year after the first CREDO report in 2009 showed poor charter school performance — the state won a \$400 million Race to the Top competitive grant that, in part, required greater state support for charter expansion and freedom for charter schools. In 2015 — just one year after the second CREDO report also showed poor charter performance — Ohio won a \$71 million federal grant to expand charter schools in Ohio. The grant was opposed by former Gov. Ted Strickland and elected Democratic leaders, who argued that Ohio’s poor management of charter schools should disqualify it from receiving the grant (O’Donnell, 2015). "Due to the abysmal lack of regulations surrounding charter schools in Ohio as well as the failed, unaccountable leadership of the state superintendent, I do not believe that the Ohio Department of Education should be considered an eligible applicant nor awarded any charter-related funding at this time," State Rep. Teresa Fedor, the ranking Democrat on the Ohio House Education Committee, wrote in a letter to then U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan (O’Donnell, 2015).

This paradox is not just limited to Ohio. For example, seven other states that received federal Race to the Top grants in 2010-2011 had mixed or poor reviews from CREDO one to two years before the states received the federal grant (U.S. Department of Education, 2020; CREDO 2009, 2011, 2019).

Why does this paradox of charter schools — strong support and recognition when the sector is not showing success — exist? I argue that the paradox is a result of effective advocacy by charter school proponents in a landscape of little accountability for actions by those with wealth and a high public profile. In the next section, I will review these arguments.

Unpacking the Underlying Arguments For or Against Charters

Abowitz and Karaba (2010) note that the charter schools' movement has been largely built on concepts championed by the libertarian justice, or the neoliberal political concept, in the politics of charter schooling. They contrast that with the democratic justice conceptions of equality and justice. The researchers write:

Accordingly, in U.S. political life, neoliberals believe in creating the optimal conditions for individual choice, which should yield the best outcomes for all who can pursue their educational visions uncoerced by government 'monopolies.' Neoliberal conceptions of educational justice are not interested in egalitarian outcome (p.543).

Drawing from Abowitz and Karaba, I argue that the strength and pervasiveness of the neoliberal concepts of "freedom," "choice," and "liberty" for charter schools contrasted against "monopolies" "dropout factories," and "government-run schools" for traditional public schools is partly what has sustained charter schools over the decades *even when the evidence of success is not there*. Neoliberals and charter supporters simply make a stronger case for their approach than supporters of democratic justice and charter opponents make when they call for equity and justice for those in need. Fabricant & Fine (2011) write that the powerful campaigns for charter school target public schools:

To enact policies of market solutions to public opinions to public problems requires political campaigns and power. The campaigns must offer policy solutions that provide a straightforward market-based political solution to public-education failure, hold schools, singularly accountable for their difficulties, and conceal the historic underfunding and defunding of neighborhood schools. The campaigns developed by the charter movement have incorporated such messaging and themes into their political practice. The political agenda and broadest intention of the charter movements is to replace public schools with charters (Fabricant & Fine, 2011, p. 79).

The work of Lakoff (2016) underscores the argument that neo-liberal ideologies have advanced. Lakoff, an American cognitive linguist and philosopher, asserts that "words don't have meanings in isolation. Words are defined relative to a conceptual system" (2016, p. 29). He writes that political worldviews of conservatives and liberals diverge, causing confusion and misinterpretation between the camps when these worldviews color the language used to describe ideas. For instance, Lakoff writes that conservatives are puzzled when liberals attempt to rebut the conservative notion of freedom by pointing out that denying a woman access to an abortion limits her freedom to choose. "The liberal has used a word that has a different meaning in the conservative lexicon," Lakoff writes (2016, p. 31). He notes that conservatives have a deeper insight into their worldview than liberals do, and he writes that "conservatives talk constantly about the centrality of morality and family in their politics, while liberals did not talk about these things until conservatives started winning elections by doing so. This lack of conscious awareness of their own political worldview has been devastating to the liberal cause" (Lakoff, 2016, p. 31).

Peterson (2016) provides a fitting example of this observation of conservative

framing of the charter debate. Peterson maintains that with the failure of regulations to improve education outcomes, charters and choice remain the best option to improving education. “As an education reform strategy, federal regulation is dead,” Peterson maintains. “The regulated captured the regulators. If reform is to proceed now, it will happen because more competition is being introduced into the American system.” Peterson continues:

The long-term consequences of greater competition within an industry for consumers and society as a whole can be highly beneficial, as deregulation of the airlines and telecommunications industries has shown. Comparable gains have yet to appear throughout American K-12 education, but to see how it might happen, consider the slow growth of choice and competition – via vouchers and charter schools – that has taken place during the past quarter-century (Peterson, 2016).

Reframing the Issues

The three main purposes of charter schools — choice, competition and innovation — present an opportunity to refocus the role of charter schools in the education sector, thereby eliminating the paradox and the prevalence of underperforming charter schools. A brief discussion of the purposes will illuminate my point.

Choice Reconsidered

The role of charter schools providing a reliable better choice for parents and students has not been fully realized, even after nearly 30 years of charter schools and decades of reforms. Some charter schools provide a school that is an improvement over the traditional public schools, but far too many charter schools are failing to provide a schooling experience better or on par with the traditional public schools students have left (e.g, CREDO, 2019). For instance, the average Ohio charter student, compared with his or her public school peer, attained the equivalent of 14 fewer days in reading and 43 fewer days of math in a 180-day school year (CREDO, 2014).

Yet, parents are not making the choices to leave schools that fail to provide a quality education. Parents were originally conceptualized as providing oversight on charter schools, so that the poorly performing charters would be held accountable as parents and students “vote with their feet” by leaving bad charter schools and finding better ones (Jason, 2017). But Finn et al. (2016) observe that parents more often chose charter schools for convenience, safety and amenities over academic performance and were satisfied even when academic performance was poor (Finn, 2016). Dingerson (2011) noted “school closings aren’t that easy and parents don’t always vote with their feet. It’s more complicated than trying out another shoe store (personal communications, in Fabricant & Fine, 2011, p. 43). Moreover, Margaret Raymond, the head of the Center for Research on Education Outcomes, indicated she no longer had faith that the free market focus can work as planned in education. She said in a speech to the City Club of Cleveland in 2014 that she now believes that the free-market approach in education doesn’t work. She writes:

I think it's not helpful to expect parents to be the agents of quality assurance throughout the state. I think there are other supports that are needed. Frankly parents have not been really well educated in the mechanisms of choice (Strauss, 2014).

Competition Rethought

The role of competitors to traditional public schools have pitted charter schools against teachers' unions, many Democrats, and the rest of the education sector. While it could be argued that the competition has spurred some improvements by traditional public schools, it could also be argued that regulations, grant programs, and other outside influencers spurred improvement efforts in traditional public schools. Some research has found that competition has not had any role in the academic success of traditional public schools (Bettinger, 2005; Bodilly, 2009, Zimmer & Buddin, 2009), and studies of Michigan public schools found that charter competition had a negative impact on student achievement and school efficiency in traditional public schools (Lee, 2009; Yongmei, 2009). On top of that, the fallout from the competition has been disruptive and contentious, benefitting neither the charter sector nor the traditional education sector as debates occupy the halls of the statehouse and occupy the focus of the two camps (Stern, 2019). One of the casualties of the competition is the third role for charter schools – laboratories for innovation. With the education sectors pitted into two camps, pro-charters and anti-charters, there is very little opportunity for sharing innovations that improve teaching and learning (Fabricant & Fine, 2011). In any case, some researchers have found little innovation taking place in charters (Fox, 2002; Duffy, 2014), but the successful charter schools have undoubtedly put together an innovative plan for success, for example the KIPP academies and New York's Success Academy (Jason, 2017).

Innovation Revisited

The origins of charter schools lie in its role as an innovation lab. Gleason (2019) proposes that charters return to the original vision of Albert Shanker, the United Federation of Teachers president, who saw an opportunity for educators to innovate in schools free from bureaucratic rules and regulations. Gleason writes:

We should ask whether the central motivating feature of Shanker's vision has been fulfilled. Have charter schools tried new or different approaches? Have they experienced success, and have lessons from successful approaches been identified and applied more broadly? In short, are charter schools searching for better ways to educate children, and are we learning from the search? (Gleason, 2019).

Indeed, Charles (2019) notes that current union leaders and progressive educators call for the charter sector to play just that role. "Critics insist they are not trying to demolish the movement, they are just seeking to return it to its roots," he writes, and that the "sector can still play an important role as a laboratory for innovation." He noted that the United Federation of Teachers in New York operates a charter school.

Examples of cooperation between charter schools and traditional public schools seem few and far between. Jason (2017) describes the collaboration between the successful Alma Del Mar

Charter School in New Bedford, MA and public school teachers in New Bedford, Fall River and Dartmouth on professional development workshops. In 2010, the Ohio Alliance for Public Charter Schools, with support from funders in the charter sector and the traditional public school sector, hosted a national conference in Columbus to showcase the 50 best cooperative practices between charter and traditional public schools (Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2010.) Likewise, the Cleveland Municipal School District works closely with the Breakthrough Alliance of high-performing charter schools (O'Donnell, 2015). More opportunities to share and work together on innovations to improve teaching and learning can benefit charter schools, traditional public schools, and students, and that can place charter schools in a more helpful role to benefit all students.

How do we get there? Policy Proposals to Advance the Charter Innovation Role

I argue that the paradox of charter schools, as discussed earlier in this article, is a result of effective advocacy by charter school proponents in an environment of little accountability for actions by stakeholders who fund, advance and advocate for charter schools. The result of that paradox is too many underperforming charter schools offering little more than unfulfilled promises to students. My review of the purposes of charter schools – choice, competition and innovation – suggests that the innovation role holds the most promise for charter schools going forward. Charters have not provided an effective dual system of public schools (e.g., CREDO, 2009, 2019; Charles, 2019; Decker, 2019; Fabricant & Fine, 2011; Jason, 2017). Charters have also not been able to show that their role as competitors to public schools have spurred improvement in traditional public schools (Bettinger, 2005; Bodilly, 2009, Lee, 2009; Yongmei, 200; Zimmer & Buddin, 2009). But the pockets of innovative charter schools and exemplars have indicated a potential for charters to incubate innovative practices and then share them with the traditional public schools, where they can have an impact on the 94% of students who attend traditional public schools across the country.

Critical Policy Analysis: Identify the Problem

How do we get there from here? I borrow from the approach of critical policy analysis, which identifies three phases: Problem definition, policy process and policy implementation (Horsford et al., 2019, p.31). Critical policy analysis envisions subjectivity and complexity associated with all stages of the policy development, with multiple policy streams being developed. The notion of policy as discourse and political spectacle especially resonates with me on the charter issue (Horsford et al., 2019, p. 31). I would argue that the charter debate often devolves to political theater or spectacle when one views the separation of the reality of charter school performance, as defined by hard student-level data, from the envisioned reality of charter schools, as defined by the ideals of providing innovative alternative schools that purportedly bring healthy competition to traditional public schools. The ideals embraced by charter school supporters often seem to border on wishful fantasy.

One aspect of identifying the problem, then, is to reconceptualize the charter school issue to emphasize the reality that more than one third of charter schools perform worse than the comparable traditional public schools they left, and not enough parents have the information and tools to hold them accountable. In other words, more than 1 million students are at risk in bad

schools that falsely operate under the banner of being new, innovative charter schools. This danger to children is a serious problem to be addressed.

A second problem is that the various stakeholders who influence education and expand charter schools operate in an environment with little accountability for their actions. As discussed earlier, their funding and support of expanding charter schools was offered at the same time that credible evidence showed that charter schools were not performing well. This paradox is ultimately dangerous for students and communities that are relying on this education reform. This is the circumstance that gives rise to the notion of reciprocal accountability, which envisions a report card for each level of government and each sector, such as corporate or philanthropic sectors (Horsford et al., 2019, p. 170). The reciprocal accountability would help to define more broadly the landscape that affects education, not only for charter schools, but as Horsford et al. (2019) argue, a recognition of the educational debt owed to disadvantaged children and the systems that attempt to support them. These “report cards” can identify the supportive roles each sector could be fulfilling as good civic partners.

A second element of defining accountability more broadly for charter schools would be to encourage the creation and support of more regional or statewide P-16 or P-20 collaborations. These entities began in the 1990s, and as of 2008, were present in some form in 38 states (Rippner, 2016). The councils have not always been effective, but in the best cases, they have provided a structure to examine data around the education pipeline to determine a collective response from stakeholders at each step of a student’s educational journey (Rippner, 2016). Some effective models have been developed and spread nationally, such as the Strive Partnership in Cincinnati (Edmonson et al., 2014). These entities could both provide the platform to bring together the various stakeholders affecting and supporting education and charter schools. But they could also be the entities that issue and publicize the report cards envisioned under reciprocal accountability.

Critical Policy Analysis: Policy Process and Implementation

The identified problems of the charter school issue areas follows: Bad charters hurting children’s academic performance, education stakeholders operating with no accountability, and no structures to encourage accountability and collaboration among stakeholders. I argue that the introduction of a new role for charters in innovation, reciprocal accountability, and more P-20 collaborations will address those identified problems.

To bring these roles forward, I would also make recommendations to increase support and accountability for innovation at charter schools. This would include a provision on state report cards that grades charters on innovation, a requirement that every charter school have at least one traditional public school partner that wants and receives their innovation — and public schools would be required to have at least one charter school fostering innovation — and provision of state funding for charters offering innovation and for collaborations between charters and traditional public schools. In addition, states should cut public funding for charter school expansion and eventually public funding for charter schools that are not providing innovation to traditional public schools. These charters can continue to operate, if they wish, but they would need to become private schools.

The process to enact these provisions include advocacy from public school supporters, relationship building with legislators and influencers who can help pass legislation and identify funding, written and visual materials that can inform a campaign for these useful changes, and funding to carry out the advocacy and lobbying necessary to put these pieces in place.

Conclusion

This article outlines the roles of charter schools as providing choice, competition, and innovation in education, but points out that charters are not fulfilling those roles after nearly 30 years. I argue that a paradox exists in the charter school debate as the sector receives funding and support for expansion even though it has limited evidence of success. The paradox is caused in part by successful advocacy from neoliberals and charter supporters, wrapping the schools and choice in notions of “freedom”, “liberty”, and “innovation,” while traditional public schools are described as “government schools” and “dropout factories.” Education stakeholders supporting charter schools operate outside of any formal accountability for their actions. In the end, I advocate for a reframing of charter schools as laboratories of innovation and outline steps that can be taken to eliminate their role as a dual public school system competing with traditional public schools and shift them into a role as incubators of new practices and ideas. Finally, I outline how reciprocal accountability and P-20 councils can help to provide broader accountability for education stakeholders.

In this critical commentary, I contribute to our understanding of charter schools by calling out the paradox of charters and an end to their role as alternative schools competing with traditional public schools. But instead of calling for their elimination, I outline a promising role they could play to benefit all students as hubs of innovation.

Charter schools have had a track record of nearly 30 years to make a difference on education reform. It is time for the sector to find its best footing going forward so that it can be positive influence for all public school children.

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