

Definition: **Charter Schools** from *The SAGE Glossary of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*

Alternative, public, nonsectarian schools that are operated independently of local school boards. They have open admission policies and are not required to adhere to certain state educational regulations. These tuition-free schools are held accountable by the state to demonstrate that student achievement does not fall below the state average.

Summary Article: **CHARTER SCHOOLS**

From *Encyclopedia of Educational Leadership and Administration*

The term *charter school* refers generally to a school choice reform movement emerging in the 1990s in the United States based on the idea that autonomy, choice, and competition can encourage schools to innovate, diversify programmatic options, and improve outcomes for students. The charter represents a contract between a public entity and a group operating a school, usually specifying a fixed number of years. Depending on the state law, a school could be chartered by a public entity such as a state board, a public university, a local government, or another educational authority, for instance. The central aspect of the model is that the day-to-day operations of the school are managed largely independent of the chartering authority. Chartering agencies exercise an oversight function with their schools to ensure that basic criteria specified in the charter are met and to review the schools' outcomes in deciding whether a charter should be renewed or revoked.

However, as a state-level reform, there is a considerable degree of variation as to what constitutes a charter school in different jurisdictions across the country. In some states, charter schools enjoy high levels of legal, fiscal, and operational autonomy, with many state regulations waived so that the schools can explore new routes to improved results. Other states put severe restrictions on the autonomy of the schools (as well as on chartering authorities), leading to few schools and/or nominal differences between charter schools and district-administered schools. The movement has grown rapidly since the first law was passed in Minnesota in 1991. As of 2004, 41 states and the District of Columbia had passed legislation authorizing charter schools; almost 3,000 schools were in operation, serving well over a half-million students.

THE POLITICS OF CHARTER SCHOOL REFORMS

The charter idea is consistent with reforms that call for deregulation and decentralization of authority in education and other sectors. In looking for more efficient and effective ways of educating diverse students, some reformers sought alternative forms of educational provision free of traditional bureaucratic constraints. The idea of "contracting out" was extended beyond peripheral school services such as busing or food preparation to the delivery of schooling itself. Ray Budde first used the term *charter* in the late 1980s in outlining an alternative model, where teachers could form small schools based on common professional interests. The notion was further popularized in the early 1990s by journalist Ted Kolderie in seeking innovations in schooling. As the movement has spread, privately run educational management organizations such as Edison Schools and National Heritage Academies have pursued chartering as a way of increasing their participation in the publicly funded sector.

The movement represents a diverse coalition of various interests. Many traditionalists appreciate the

opportunity to fashion privatelike schools that emphasize character, moral values, or basic skills in parentdirected school choices. Neoliberals such as the Democratic Leadership Council and the more conservative Center for Education Reform embrace the concept to bring market style competition into public education. Some teachers see this model as a means of experimenting with alternative approaches or focusing on a specific philosophy. Prominent members of the civil rights movement have endorsed the concept, seeing it as a way to empower minority communities or to level the playing field for disadvantaged children who have been denied the choices available to more affluent families. Republican and Democratic federal administrations have been active in promoting and financially supporting the charter movement, and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 specifies charter status as a possible alternative for failing schools.

Critics tend to challenge the movement on a number of different fronts. School boards and other professional groups are concerned about the loss of authority over local funding of schools, claiming that charters bypass local democratic structures and effectively remove public oversight of public spending on education. In many jurisdictions where charter operators are not required to hire credentialed or unionized teachers, unions treat charters as an effort to undermine teachers' rights to collective bargaining. Other observers see charters as part of a process of supplanting the old common school ideal and integration efforts with a model of education that fragments children by social characteristics, leading to greater segregation.

THEORY AND RESEARCH

The theory behind charter schools is premised on the notion that bureaucratic forms of accountability lead to unresponsive public monopolies and standardization of services. Instead of top-down directives specifying processes or practices, alternative forms of consumeroriented accountability, with minimal direct interference with daily school operations from the chartering authority, create competitive incentives that encourage individual schools to find new and better ways of meeting consumer demands. Research on the implementation and outcomes of charter reforms suggests mixed results: Competitive incentives are shaping the organizational behavior of charter schools, but not always in ways anticipated by reformers. As independent schools of choice, charters are usually set up as an alternative to other local public schools, thus providing parents with additional options to find a better fit for their children. Surveys of parents indicate relatively high levels of consumer satisfaction.

However, the research on achievement indicates that charters are not necessarily a panacea. Although many charters exhibit exemplary outcomes, on average, charter schools perform about as well as, and often worse than, other local public schools in terms of student outcomes. Evidence regarding resegregation depends on the locality: In some states, charters serve higher proportions of disadvantaged students; in other areas, they appear to attract more affluent populations and serve fewer children with special needs. While charter schools were often advanced as “laboratories” or “research and development centers” for new classroom practices in the public sector, results to date demonstrate that most innovations have been in other areas of organizational behavior outside the classroom—instructional practices tend to look quite familiar and even tend toward the traditional in many instances. Instead, many charters are pioneering practices in other areas such as management, employment, and marketing. However, this has also led to further concerns in some areas that certain charter schools are targeting students already in private schools, thereby undercutting the competitive incentives intended to prod district-run public schools and increasing the possibility that charters could lead to further segregation of students.

See also

accountability; at-risk students; competition, forms of, in schools; cultural politics, wars; Department of Education; economics, theories of; elections, of school boards, bond issues; finance, of public schools; Friedman, Milton; learning environments; management theories; market theory of schooling; privatization; productivity; resource management; schooling effects; voucher plans; workplace trends

Further Readings and References

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