

Fall 2007

Advantages and Objections to Charter Schools: Are these Schools of Value As Schools of Choice

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ADVANTAGES AND OBJECTIONS TO CHARTER SCHOOLS: ARE THESE
SCHOOLS OF VALUE AS SCHOOLS OF CHOICE

by

Kenneth E. Williams

A Research Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Education

REGIS UNIVERSITY

May, 2007

ABSTRACT

Advantages and Objections to Charter Schools:

Are These Schools of Value as Schools of Choice

This researcher examined the value of charter schools as viable alternatives to public schools and as schools of choice. A PowerPoint presentation was created in which the researcher analyzes the debate on schools of choice and the issuing authority for charter schools. Highlights of the research include discussions on the advantages of charter schools in relation to: a) students with learning disabilities, b) teachers in charter schools, and c) parental satisfaction. The researcher responds to the most frequently voiced arguments against charter schools and urges support for charter school legislation in states where charter schools are not operating.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Until the passage of the first charter school legislation (Collins, 1998), disgruntled parents, educators, and other interested parties had few options for schools of choice. Vouchers have been debated for years. The expense of private schools was out of reach for most families in the United States, and the ability to provide home schooling was attractive to few. During the years since that initial charter school legislation, a great deal of research has been done on the effectiveness and viability of charter school education, and research continues. Highly motivated parents and innovative educators have embraced the school of choice movement with the creation of charter schools as one answer to meet the needs of students.

Statement of the Problem

The first charter school laws passed in Minnesota in 1991; since that time, 39 other states and the District of Columbia have followed this example with charter school legislation in an effort to provide schools of choice to meet the demands of parents (Hess, Maranto, & Milliman, 2001). Parents had become concerned with the academic failure of many schools across the nation. As a result, parents and other interested parties sought a greater voice in neighborhood schools in regard to curricula, as well as in the operation of local schools. Charter schools became an option as a school of choice. However, researchers and educators have questioned the viability and wisdom of charter schools from the beginning of the charter school movement.

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this project was to determine the effectiveness of charter schools as schools of choice. In Chapter 4, this researcher creates a PowerPoint presentation to be made available to state legislators who are interested in pursuing charter law. This researcher's opinion is that public education in the U.S. is unresponsive to the needs of students and the desire of parents for the adequate education of their students. Parents have a reasonable expectation that school staff will provide adequate education for their children. When the parent feels the local school has failed to meet the responsibility established by law to teach children, the parent has the right to take action. The formation of charter schools allows parents the opportunity to invest in schools of choice, with curricula of choice, and teachers of choice.

Chapter Summary

It is this researcher's opinion that charter schools can provide alternative choices for parents and educators who find public school education lacking. When state legislators provide the leadership to enact legislation, parents and other interested parties have demonstrated their ability to maximize the opportunity to create effective charter schools. The recent history of charter schools in Minnesota, Colorado, Arizona, and other states indicates charter schools are, with proper management, effective and a viable logical response to parental interest to schools of choice (Collins, 1998; Hess, Maranto, & Milliman, 2001; Windler, 1996). In Chapter 2, the Review of Literature, this researcher presents the background information to support the advocacy of charter

school legislation. In Chapter 3, Method, the procedures for the development of this project are detailed.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this project was to develop a PowerPoint presentation designed to advocate for the enactment of charter law with Montana state legislators. The debate for school choice has been a highly contested topic for more than a decade. On the national and state level, great debates have been held, which culminated in the passage in 1991 in Minnesota of the first charter school law in the nation (Collins, 1998). Colorado followed suit in 1993 (Windler, 1996), and 38 other states and the District of Columbia (Palmer, 2006) passed charter school laws in an answer to the demands of parents and other interested parties to improve the caliber of public education within the United States. The debate continues, and there is still a question about the viability of charter schools as a school of choice.

School Choice Debate

Charters were a point of debate in the Presidential Debates in 2000 (Kennedy, 2000). Both candidates, Al Gore, the Democrat, and George W. Bush, the Republican, supported an increase in the number of charter schools in the U.S. Gore proposed an increase to more than 5,000 charters by 2005. Bush wanted to establish a Charter School Homestead Fund to support \$3 billion in loan guarantees to create or improve 2,000 charter schools (Kennedy).

Public interest in charter schools was based on several factors. Parents, teachers, and community leaders perceived local school boards and local public schools

as unresponsive to their needs and requests (Hess, Maranto, & Milliman, 2001). Parents sought input to school curricula and felt, in some cases, that school administrators were arrogant in their refusal to listen and act on the parents' requests. Concerned for their children's individual opportunity to excel and for their learning of basic core curricula, parents participated in the movement for charter schools. The prominent issues were that the number of students in school classrooms was too large for students to receive individual attention, and school curricula did not address parents' desires.

Charter schools are being viewed by the members of local school boards in Colorado as another tool to meet academic standards and respond to the concerns of parents and interested parties (Windler, 1996). In general, parents, who seek charter schools for their students, are more involved with their child's academic growth. Windler reported that parents want a safe and nurturing environment where basics are taught in smaller classrooms, and specific curricular objectives are met. In Fort Collins, Colorado, 76% of the parents with children who attended the public neighborhood schools reported that the schools were not the best place for all students and parents (Bomotti, 1998). Thus, an alternative choice seemed appropriate for these students.

Charter schools are created and operated by contract with the issuing authority, generally, the state board of education (Palmer, 2006). A contract is made between the individual or group who requests the charter and the sponsor, which may be the state board of education, or local board of education. Specified in this charter are the "educational plan, outcomes, measurement, management, and compliance with other requirements" (McLaughlin & Henderson, 1998, p. 99). State officials relax the laws

that confine public schools, which allows more opportunity for experimentation in the charter school. At the same time, the charter operator is held accountable for teaching the students. If the teacher fails to teach, if the student fails to learn, and this is shown by measurement, then the charter of the school stands to be revoked. Above all, a charter school is a public school run by community leaders, parents, and/or teachers who provide an avenue of choice within the school district (Windler, 1996).

By design, since parents can exercise their choice, they will find greater satisfaction in the charter school their children attend (Buckley & Schneider, 2006). Also, empowerment and involvement are ways that parents can express ownership and commitment to the charter school (Windler, 1996). Thus, charter schools are market and consumer driven. If the consumer is not satisfied with the product offered, the school loses students and ceases to exist.

Charter School Issuing Authority

One of the great challenges to the establishment of charter schools has been the question of charter school authorizers, that is, who runs the school (Buckley & Schneider, 2006). From what authority does the charter draw its existence, and who has the authority to close a charter school when deemed necessary? By virtue of charter school law, local school board members have served as the authorizers or sponsors of charter schools to varying degrees in all of the 40 states and the District of Columbia where charter schools exist. Some members of local boards have welcomed the establishment of charter schools as a continuation of their effort to meet the needs of students and parents. Also, charter schools have been used to place students identified as problem students, at some locations.

However, a large number of the members of local school boards desire no affiliation with charter schools at all (Buckley & Schneider, 2006). Frequently, local board members who view charter schools in this manner, consider these schools to be a drain on resources and resent the need to provide assistance to charter schools. This has resulted in the state board of education becoming involved in appeals that, at times, force local boards to grant charters.

The members of local teachers' unions have pressured local school boards, which has resulted in political pressure to limit or refuse the creation of charter schools (Raywid, 1995). Often, this pressure is countered by pressure from concerned parents and other interested parties, which leads politicians at the state and local level to support the creation of charter schools.

The greatest success by authorizers comes when the authorizer: (a) has sought the responsibility to sponsor a charter school, (b) has been insulated from the pressures of political interests, and (c) has had the ability to develop adequate infrastructure to meet the needs to run a school (Palmer, 2006). The presence of political pressure (on behalf of charter schools) from elected state officials on local school boards can result in animosity and is not recommended. Frequently, the members of state boards of education do not want to accept the additional duties required by sponsorship of charter schools. Willing sponsorship, that is immune to the pressure of politicians and union representatives, and has the ability to sustain the financial requirements of charter schools, has proven to be the most successful for authorizers for charter schools. This provides leadership that has the ability to make difficult decisions such as closing a

school, or opening a new school over the objections of established and well funded teachers' unions.

In order to be successful, the authorizer of a charter school must be able to function within a political arena, yet be sufficiently distant from the local politics to not be adversely influenced by the politics (Buckley & Schneider, 2006). Charter schools cannot operate without reliable business principles. A school must be financially sound in order to produce high quality education, and quality is not produced in a vacuum.

Advantages of Charter Schools

Charter schools tend to have smaller enrollments than the local public schools (Clark, 2000). Most enrollments range from 25-200 students, and some public charter schools have 500 or more students (Lacireno-Paquet, 2006). As a result, class size is smaller than in public schools. With a smaller teacher to student ratio, the teacher has more time and opportunity to work with individual students.

Charter schools are public schools that operate outside the establishment, as an experiment for the public schools, in an effort to help the public school staff be aware of ways to self-improve (Andrews & Rothman, 2002). This was demonstrated in Arizona when a charter school opened in Mormon Springs and immediately drew 30% of the local elementary population (Hess et al., 2001). This action, precipitated by parents of local school age children, immediately identified to the local school board that a large portion of local parents were not satisfied with local school administrators, teachers, and school curriculum. Parents in the area sought out the charter operator in an effort to gain "more phonics based instruction and more traditional teaching methods" (p. 1108). The school board members took immediate action and replaced the current school

superintendent with an out of state candidate who believed in a basic core education. This action led to: (a) the replacement of the principal and several other administrators, (b) an improvement of the student/teacher ratio in classrooms, (c) the establishment of a Title I funded preschool, (d) an increase in teacher salaries, (e) the purchase of new textbooks, and (f) the initiation of a gifted student program. Eventually, the public school was able to recoup the loss of some students.

As charter schools are market and consumer driven entities, charter school teachers and administrators are compelled to emphasize performance and standards (Windler, 1996). When the charter school administrators fail to meet these requirements, either the charter is revoked, or the school is closed prior to revocation. This situation occurred in the State of New Mexico (Casey, Anderson, Yelverton, & Wedeen, 2002). Accountability is synonymous with charter law. Therefore, charter school operators must take responsibility for the results of their students and teachers, instead of undue attention to bureaucratic red tape. Charter school operators function in a market driven environment. This market demands immediate accountability of the operator and teachers to the parents and sponsors of the charter. Failure to produce desired results leads to fewer students, which can lead to loss of the charter.

In the six states where there are live charter laws (i.e., Colorado, Arizona, Minnesota, Michigan, California, and Massachusetts), educators are able to be creative and innovative without fear of retribution from overbearing bureaucracy (Raywid, 1995). Live charter laws are, as stated by Raywid, “genuine and bearing potential – because 1) it permits a substantial number of charter schools, 2) a charter school can be either a brand new school or a previously existing one, 3) the school is constituted as an

independent organization whose teachers belong to it, and 4) such schools can be authorized by an agency other than the local school board” (p. 558). Because charter school operators are allowed the freedom to hire noncertified teachers and utilize innovative teaching techniques with curricula approved by the charter school parents, charter school legislation in these states has supported a continuation of growth in the charter school movement.

Generally, charter school identity is based upon the principles of the teaching philosophy which is used at the school (Raywid, 1995). These principles may be standards for mathematics, science, the three R’s, Montessori, or any other form that is acceptable to the parents, charter administrators, or community leaders who are responsible for the school. The school operators are able to establish the values to be met within the school and to enforce the same.

Another founding principle of charter school legislation is to offer more options to parents and their children (Raywid, 1995). This gives the parent the choice of curricula, value systems, and after school activities.

Within the confines of the charter law, teachers can identify and use new teaching methods and opportunities (Windler, 1996). This is an opportunity to be creative and think outside the box. An example of this type of creativity is the direct instruction method of teaching witnessed by this author in Colorado.

Charter school operators run their schools under the direction of parents and/or community leaders; therefore, these individuals are directly responsible for the success or failure of the school (Buckley & Schneider, 2006). In Jefferson and Douglas Counties in Colorado, parental support accounted for thousands of hours of volunteer

work in the school (Windler, 1996). In one survey, 99% of the parents reported that the school met their child's needs. Students had a 97% attendance rate, while the scores for the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills were elevated by several percentage points in comparison to local public schools.

The basic design of the charter school is to reach at risk students or dropout students. In Colorado, this appears to be happening (McLaughlin & Henderson, 1998). In other locations, such as Arizona, this was not evident in all charters (Hess et al., 2001).

Charter schools appeal to a wide variety of legislators as another option for school choice as demanded by their constituents (Windler, 1996). The success of charter schools has diminished public interest in vouchers, although, it has not eliminated the voucher movement (Viteritti, 2002).

In an area where the public school is failing, charter school operators can propose an alternative to that public school which, ultimately, may replace it (Collins, 1998). Charter schools have been opened in urban areas where standardized test results are poor in the public schools. Low income families have responded to charters in their areas by enrolling their children in the charters; some have placed their infant children on the charter school waiting list. The success of the Edison schools in Boston is evidence of the charters school operators' effectiveness in an urban, low income area (Chubb, 1998).

As public schools continue to deal with overcrowding, charter school operators and staff offer an avenue to address the next wave of enrollment (Hess et al., 2001). In locations where schools have been closed, charter school operators have provided an

opportunity to utilize an unused facility and offer a school of choice in the neighborhood.

Students with Learning Disabilities

One of the most appealing points to parents of students with learning disabilities (LD) is the small classroom size and the student to teacher ratio in charter schools (McLaughlin & Henderson, 1998). Charter school operators are not immune to the difficulties found in public schools in regard to students with LD. Finding competent teachers and assistants is always a challenge. Training personnel to deal with Individualized Education Programs (IEP) is: (a) time consuming, (b) labor intensive, and (c) a challenge. Also, charter school facilities may not be as attractive to parents of students with LD as those found in the public school. However, ultimately, because the smaller size of the classroom allows more individualized attention per student, charter schools can provide “more opportunities for personalized education” (McLaughlin & Henderson, p. 108).

As reported by Hess et al. (2001), charter school operators and teachers are providing models for public education in the restructure of public school systems. These charter schools have demonstrated improvement with the introduction of desired curricula and the use of instructional models not found in public schools. The personalized education offered in the charter school format tends to convince parents of students with LD that the teachers and administrators truly care for their child and that child’s education. Individual cases have shown that students, formerly identified as mentally retarded and constantly moved from one special education class to another in

the public school, were able to succeed when immersed in the formula of the charter school (McLaughlin & Henderson, 1998).

Charter School Teachers

Finn and Kanstoroom (2002) stated that: “the heart and soul of any school is its teaching staff” (p. 59). The success or failure of any charter school is determined by the relationship between teacher and pupil, and that teacher’s ability to reach the pupil in a learning scenario. One of the great differences between charter school operators and the public school administrators is the willingness of principals and teachers in charter schools to be innovative. Parents want their children to be safe in school and to learn to read, write, and do mathematics. Educational reformers are concerned with pupil achievement and have more freedom to address this concern in a charter school.

The freedom granted principals, by the charter school legislation, has allowed for the creation of schools not possible within the established public school forum. Finn and Kanstoroom (2002) reported that: “studies suggest that charter schools are serving as exciting seedbeds for new approaches to finding, employing, and keeping better teachers” (p. 60). Personnel policies in charter schools differ greatly from those in the public school. Finn and Kanstoroom cited Podgursky and Ballou (2001) and stated that: “the system of teacher hiring in the charter school is better than the system in a comparable district school” (p. 60). One principal was quoted as saying, “What I need is people who are highly intelligent, prestigious college background, articulate, they like kids. They know what it means to work on a team. They are visionaries of a sort . . . Certification is a guarantee of nothing to me” (p. 60). While many principals were

glad to have the freedom to hire noncertified teachers, they preferred to hire state certified teachers.

Charter school principals, with the freedom to hire without having to deal with the bureaucracy found in the public schools, found that they were better able to find teachers who modeled the school mission (Finn & Kanstoroom, 2002). Since the principals did not have to deal with teachers' unions, after school meetings could be held without the violation of union contracts. Principals could seek out teachers who wanted to be involved in the creation of ground floor policies and procedures. The *gung ho* teacher could be encouraged, while the less productive teacher could be released.

As reported by Finn and Kanstoroom (2002), charter school teachers tended to be less experienced in the classroom than public school teachers and, frequently, were paid less the first year than their public school counterparts. Contracts tended to be 1 year contracts, with renewal based upon success in the classroom, not tenure. However, since the charter school was not limited to the pay scale found in the public school, successful teachers could negotiate higher salaries based upon the results of their individual performance in the classroom. Charter school administrators seemed to have little difficulty in finding teachers to place within their respective schools, although a 30% turnover of teachers was standard (Finn & Kanstoroom,).

Parental Satisfaction

Parents have reported greater satisfaction with the success of the education received by their students from charter school teachers than in the public school forum (Buckley & Schneider, 2006). According to Buckley and Schneider, charter school

advocates propose charter schools as schools of choice in an effort to “reform the system of education in the United States” (p. 58). Also, they stated: “In contrast, if charter school parents are not satisfied with their schools, then a foundation for the movement is missing” (p. 58). Choice has brought competitive pressure on public schools to force public school administrators to improve relations between themselves and parents, students, and other interested parties.

Also, Buckley and Schneider (2006) stated: “We find that charter school parents are more satisfied with the emphasis on values found in the school, size of their child’s school, and their child’s class size” (p. 67). The interview results demonstrated that the percentage of charter school parents who expressed satisfaction was greater compared to parents of students in public schools in the rating of: (a) principals, (b) facilities, and (c) overall school grade. The satisfaction level for discipline showed no difference between public schools and charter schools.

The parents of charter school students and advocates noted that waiting lists for some schools included newborns (Chubb, 1998). In Boston, Massachusetts, where student turnover is a serious concern, the Boston Renaissance Charter School lost less than 6% of its students from the previous year. Lacireno-Paquet (2006) stated that in: “an open or less restricted market, charter schools will serve low-income populations, perhaps in addition to serving other niche markets” (p. 97).

Objections to Charter Schools

Charter administrators have had to deal with perception as well as reality in the establishment of charter schools. In Jefferson County, Colorado, the newly assigned public school district administrator commented that charter schools were “private

schools in disguise” (Raywid, 1995, p. 555). In Arizona, a teacher was branded a traitor and assaulted by another public school teacher when he announced he would teach at a charter school the next year (Hess et al., 2001). Public school principals were considered *snoops* when they were found visiting the newly founded charter school neighborhood. In most cases, a special conciliatory effort on the part of public school administrators or charter school operators was required to overcome the bad feelings found among the participants.

For public school administrators, charter programs were perceived as taking money from their budgets (Collins, 1998). When charter schools received funds for busing students, the public school budget was affected. This has created animosity in several areas, predominantly rural Arizona (Hess et al., 2001).

In Cleveland, Ohio, the per pupil spending was \$7,746 in the public schools compared to \$4,519 in a local charter school (Viteritti, 2002). In most areas, the charter school administrator receives 80% of the funds that a public school receives per pupil. This requires the charter teacher/administrator to do more on less.

Parents make decisions on where to send their children to school based on factors other than academics (Raywid, 1995). These include: (a) school location, (b) the parents’ work schedule, (c) availability of after school care, (d) proximity of the school, and (d) sports or other after school activities. All of these entities play a role in a parent’s decision as to where the child will attend school. This was evident in the results from a survey of parents with school age children in Fort Collins, Colorado. In this example, parents were unable to transport their children to the charter school, and

busing was not available. The parents then resorted to the local public school as a second choice for education.

Opponents of charter schools acknowledge the competition; however, many see this as a result of the economic factors that dominate the purpose of charter administration as opposed to education being the predominant interest (Collins, 1998). In other words, money pushes the charter concept, not teaching and learning, according to these opponents.

Frequently, charter teachers are paid less than their peers in the public schools (Finn & Kanstoroom, 2002). In Colorado charter schools, teachers are not required to be certified by the state as their public school peers must be. As reported by Hess et al. (2001), in one Arizona charter school, the administrator hired “mommies” (p. 1116) the first year of operation. Soon, this administrator found this concept to be a failure and, subsequently, employed degreed but not, necessarily, state certified teachers.

Some opponents feel charter schools are virtually impossible to establish in poor areas due to the cost and lack of availability of suitable facilities (Collins, 1998). As a result, some charter schools have been located in strip malls and vacant office sites. Also, in one case in Arizona, a newly chartered school operator requested space in a public school, only to have the request denied. The Edison schools have been established in several Eastern U.S. cities in low income areas and appear to have been successful (Chubb, 1998).

Other opponents claim that the establishment of charter schools increases the potential use of public funds for home schooling or private school use (Collins, 1998). Although no evidence to support this claim was reported in any source reviewed as a

part of this current project; nevertheless, Collins stated that charter schools: “increase competition for scarce dollars and result in net financial loss to a school district because students attending the new school do not necessarily reduce the sponsoring organization’s cost” (p. 3).

Since the existence of a charter school in a neighborhood affects only a minority of the student population, the question of viability is posed (Windler, 1996). Charter school attendance accounts for approximately 0.05% of the students in this country (Collins, 1998). In only a few instances have the numbers of students drawn from the public school system reached more than the national average. As aforementioned, the charter school in Mormon Springs, Arizona attracted 30% of the public school population during the first year of existence (Hess et al., 2001).

The concept that the establishment of charter schools will increase the privatization of education has been presented by opponents of the charter movement (Collins, 1998). This fear seems unfounded, since no evidence was found in any of the professional literature reviewed by this author to support this conclusion.

Collins (1998) claimed that charter existence: “endangers public schools with special interest curricula” (p. 3). In some areas, public school administrators have adjusted curricula or introduced new curricula in an effort to compete with newly established charter schools in their area. In the four school districts reviewed by Hess et al. (2001) in Arizona, all made concessions in curricula to offset the introduction of a charter school in their respective districts.

One complaint of charter school programs, for which there is support in the literature, is that charter programs fail to meet the needs of at risk or special education

students. Hess et al. (2001) identified a rural Arizona charter school where the operator failed to provide any substantial services for special education students during the first year of operation. However, by the third year, the operator was able to meet the needs of special education students. In regard to the Arizona charter school programs, McLaughlin and Henderson (1998) found that special education students were under represented in these programs. However, Casey, Andreson, Yelverton, and Wedeen (2002) indicated that charter programs mirrored the district population. District drop-out rates in areas where a charter school is in operation reflect improvement as charter operators have enrolled these at risk students.

Another fear of opponents is that charter school operators will draw only the easy to educate student. However, this concern was not supported by Windler (1996) who reported that charter student populations mirror the public school population.

Since charter schools have smaller enrollments, generally, these schools do not offer the after school athletic programs that many students and their parents desire (Casey et al., 2002). This concern is most prevalent with the parents of middle and high school age students. Those after school activities were identified as: (a) intramural sports, (b) arts and crafts, (c) community activities, and (d) after school programs.

Collins (1998) posed the question of whether the operation of a charter increased “isolation based on race or ethnicity” (p. 4). This has been one of the more predominant allegations brought against charter programs. Again, the population of charter schools has been in direct proportion to the public school population, and charter schools in urban areas reflect the minorities of the inner city. In South Texas, the Hispanic American population at charter schools was in proportion to the general public (Clark,

2000). Researchers at the National Center for Education Studies (2001, as cited in Viteritti, 2002) reported that the average African American 12th grade student is 4 years behind his Anglo American peers in academic achievement. Fuller, the Chairman of the Board of the Black Alliance for Educational Options (as cited in Viteritti, 2002) has demanded choice in the name of “social justice” (p. 46).

Those who oppose charter schools claim that charter operators have not demonstrated increased effectiveness and achievement in the standardized testing of students (Chubb, 1998). In early research on charter student achievement (Windler, 1996), the author concluded that this finding was inconclusive (Perkins-Gough, 2002). Since Minnesota passed the first charter school law in 1991, several studies have been conducted to measure the effects of charter students’ scores on national tests (Windler, 1996). Of particular interest to this author were the test results for charter school students in Colorado. Students at The Academy Charter School in Castle Rock, Colorado in grades 2-7 increased their Iowa Tests of Basic Skills by: (a) 3% in reading, (b) 4% in language, and (c) 9% in mathematics (Windler). However, 10 years have passed since this study was concluded. Additional research is required to adequately determine the effects of charter academies upon charter students.

Accountability and school choice are inseparable (Windler, 1996). Accountability was the issue that spurred the public cry for choice. Public school district administrators are legitimately concerned about being held accountable for charter schools over which they have no control. Charter operators require the independence of their charter in order to meet the prerequisites of their participants. In order to encourage the two separate parties to cooperate in a spirit of education, and in

order to move past the concept of geographical and financial adversarialism, this issue is being addressed by individual charter operators and public school principals and administrators as noted in the Project for School Innovation (PSI). This program is an initiative of the operators of the Neighborhood House Charter School, Boston, Massachusetts in collaboration with local public schools to network between local charter school operators and local public school staff in exchange of information (Andrews & Rothman, 2002).

Additional Problems of Charter Operators

Only one in seven charter school teachers network with teachers outside of their respective school (Andrews & Rothman, 2002). This adds to the perception of elitism in the charter schools which is held by teachers and administrators in the public schools. Charter teachers need to be more open with their public school teaching peers. At the same time, public school teachers need to be more receptive to charter teachers. The purpose of the schools, charter or public, is to educate the student. Petty jealousy and rivalry need to be overcome. A healthy school pride is appropriate; jealousy is counter productive.

The success of charter school operators in the recruitment of students has had a negative effect in the form of long waiting lists (Windler, 1996). Waiting lists for charter schools are evidence of the effectiveness of the operators and teachers of the respective schools. A charter operator of a school of 190 with a waiting list of 350 indicates a need for change (Raywid, 1995). Members of the public school board should accept this as a comment on either their effectiveness or the need for additional schools in that geographical area.

Application for a charter in the State of Colorado proceeds from the requestor to the local board of education, then to the state board of education (Windler, 1996). Should a local board refuse the charter, the requestor can ask the state board of education to require the local board to reconsider the actions of that local board. The ebb and flow of charter requests appears to work in Colorado where, initially, the General Assembly approved the charters of up to 50 schools. However, in other states, the charter opportunities are extremely limited. In Missouri the establishment of only three charters was authorized (Raywid, 1995).

The logistics of starting a new charter school would overwhelm anyone but the truly committed. Finances, site availability, and teachers are only a few of the considerations. One charter operator in Arizona was so committed to the creation of a local charter school that he and his wife mortgaged their home to fund the school (Hess et al., 2001). In Jefferson County, Colorado, 45 teachers applied for the 7 teaching positions offered at a new charter school (Raywid, 1995). Law firms have offered pro bono legal assistance. Finding adequate physical locations has proven very difficult for charter operators. Frequently, charter operators are limited to 80% of the per pupil funding, a testimony that money alone does not make a successful learning environment is apparent.

Chapter Summary

Viteritti (2002) stated: “When economist Milton Friedman first proposed vouchers 50 years ago, he condemned public education in the United States as a failure” (p. 45). Friedman was an advocate of vouchers and concluded that the implementation of vouchers would force bad schools to close. He predicted private schools would

replace public schools in the market place, since the public would not accept academic failure (Viteritti).

The supporters of vouchers still rally great support around the country (Lips & Feinberg, 2007); however, the advent of charter schools has offered a working solution to school choice. Since 1991 (Palmer, 2006), when the State of Minnesota passed the first charter school law, 40 states and the District of Columbia have passed charter school legislation. Although legislators in Minnesota are credited with leadership in the charter school movement, the State of Colorado acted shortly thereafter, and the Colorado Board of Education has chartered schools that have been particularly successful.

Other than the case in Mormon Springs, Arizona, charter operators have not drawn a notable number of students, usually only 1% of the student population of a district (Hess et al., 2001). Thus, there has been no great exodus from the public schools.

To this author, charter operators fill a void in public education. Parents want a choice for their students. They desire their child to excel academically. They want a safe environment for their child. Parents desire that particular curricula be available to their child. Where public schools have been perceived to be lacking in these areas, parents have sought alternatives. Home schooling, private schools, and vouchers are avenues of choice for parents. Charter schools are one more option.

Since charter operators are accountable to the market concept, they either succeed or close their doors (Windler, 1996). Research indicates that the activities of

charter operators do have a cause and effect relationship with the public school. This is part of the evolution of education in the U.S.

Ultimately, the primary concern at the center of this debate must be the education of the student. If charter operators are to continue their efforts, then the charter school must provide an improvement over the public school in that geographical area. Test results and comparisons over the next few years will determine whether this experiment in charter schools has been successful. In Chapter 3, this researcher describes the method, target audience, goals and procedures, and peer assessment for the development of this project.

Chapter 3

METHOD

The purpose of this project was to provide the impetus to open discussion for charter school legislation in Montana and other states that, at this time, have not passed such legislation. The effectiveness of charter school operators was made evident to this researcher when he taught at a charter school in Colorado. During this study, it became evident that charter schools are not a panacea for all the ills of public education. Problems exist in the management of charter programs as with the administration of public schools. However, in the years since the passing of the first charter school legislation, the research indicates that charter school programs can be an effective tool for advocates of innovation and schools of choice.

Target Audience

This project is designed for presentation to legislators and educators who are interested in the improvement of public education. As well, others who believe that parents and other interested parties are entitled to choices in the education of their children with regard to curricula, value systems, and direct accountability may find this project to be of some benefit.

Goals and Procedures

The goal of this project is to provide legislators, educators, parents, and other interested parties with enough basic information to make impartial decisions about the

importance of schools of choice and charter school legislation in particular. The Power Point presentation created from this research addresses advocacy for charter school legislation. This presentation also addresses the objections most frequently presented in opposition to charter schools and charter school legislation.

Peer Assessment

Assessment of this presentation was obtained from two peers, both of whom are working with youth in the local area. One is a sociologist, employed by the State of Montana to work with youth programs; the other is a vice principal of a local public high school. Each was asked to provide informal feedback, recommendations, and suggestions for further research. These individuals provided comments, editing marks, and suggestions on the hard copy. Their feedback is discussed in Chapter 5.

Chapter Summary

The effectiveness and viability of charter schools is the subject of research throughout the U.S. In this project, this researcher uses the knowledge gained to form alliances with educators, legislators, and other interested parties in the furtherance of charter school legislation in the State of Montana and other states where there is interest in the pursuit of competition for the improvement of public education. In Chapter 4, the researcher presents the PowerPoint slide sequence designed for this purpose.

Chapter 4

RESULTS

Introduction

Change comes through movement, and not without cost or investment. The research from this project has led the author to conclude that there is room for improvement in the public school system. The existence of charter schools in many regions of the nation has compelled public school administrators to movement for self-improvement. The establishment of viable charter law has allowed for education reformers to meet demands of parents, community leaders, and other interested parties. Administrators and teachers of charter schools have been allowed to be innovative in the use of curricula, teaching methods, and use of personnel. The establishment of charter schools has not been panacea, or Pandora's Box. Opponents offer valid concerns which must be adequately answered. Charter school personnel must respond to the market conditions of their existence in order to succeed. In the following pages, the author provides a PowerPoint presentation highlighting the debate over schools of choice, charter school legislation, and issuing authority. The author discusses the more common advantages and objections to charter schools, charter school efforts with students with learning disabilities, and an examination of charter school teachers, to include the degree of parental satisfaction expressed by parents and students involved with charter schools. The author concludes the PowerPoint presentation with a discussion of other obstacles faced by charter school operators, and some final comments.

ADVANTAGES AND
OBJECTIONS TO CHARTER
SCHOOLS: ARE THESE
SCHOOLS OF VALUE AS
SCHOOLS OF CHOICE

by

Kenneth E. Williams

Debate for School Choice Highly Contested

- 1991 Minnesota passes first charter school law
- Colorado passes legislation in 1993
- 38 other states and District of Columbia
- Point of debate between presidential candidates
- Parents, teachers, community leaders perceive local school boards and schools as unresponsive to needs and requests

Debate (cont.)

- Parents seek input to curricula
- Parents concerned for child's individual opportunity to excel
- Parents concerned class size too large for individual needs
- Parents desire child to learn basic core curricula
- School curricula did not address parental desires
- Charter schools in Colorado viewed by local school boards as another tool

Debate (cont.)

- Response is to demand of parents and interested parties to improve caliber of public education
- Parents interested in charter school legislation are more involved with child's academic growth
- Question remains: Are charter schools viable alternatives as schools of choice

Charter School Legislation and Issuing Authority

- Great challenge to charter schools: Who runs the school?
- From what authority does the charter exist? Who has the authority to close a school?
- Issuing authority, generally, state board of education
- Local board of education is issuing authority in all 40 states and D.C.
- Legislation contract specifies: “educational plan, outcomes, measurement, management, and compliance with other requirements” (McLaughlin & Henderson, 1998, p.99)

Legislation and Issuing Authority (cont.)

- State officials relax laws that confine public schools
- Charter school is a public school run by community leaders, parents, and/or teachers to provide avenue of choice within the school district
- Charter schools are market and consumer driven
- Underlying purpose for charter is placement of students identified as problem students

Legislation and Issuing Authority (cont.)

- Opposition to Issuing Authority
 - Large number of local boards desire no affiliation with charter schools
 - Consider charter schools a drain on resources
 - Resent the need to provide assistance
 - Result: appeals to the state board of education
 - Members of local teacher unions pressure local school boards to limit or refuse charters
 - This pressure is countered by parents pressure on politicians

Legislation and Issuing Authority (cont.)

- Greatest success of authorizers
 - Has previously sought the establishment of charter
 - Insulated from political pressures from public school arena
 - Frequently, state boards of education are not willing to be issuing authority
 - Best scenario: willing sponsor, immune to politics, ability to sustain finances

Legislation and Issuing Authority (cont.)

- Charters cannot operate without sound business principles
- Must be financially sound to produce high quality education
- Quality not produced in a vacuum

Advantages of Charter Schools

- Tend to have smaller enrollments
- Charter schools are public schools operating outside the establishment, as an experiment to help public schools become aware of ways to self improve
- Compelled to emphasize performance
- Failure to meet performance standards results in closure of the school
- Administrators take responsibility for results of teachers and students

Advantages of Charter Schools (cont.)

- Able to function without undue attention to bureaucratic red tape
- Example of introduction of charter school in Mormon Springs, AZ
 - Immediately draws 30% of local elementary students
 - Parents wanted more phonics based instruction
 - More traditional teaching methods
 - Local school board reacts with replacement of superintendent
 - Replaces principal and several school administrators

Advantages (cont.)

- “Live” charter laws in six states: CO, AZ, MN, MI, CA, MA
- School philosophy varies
- School operators establish values within the school and enforce the same
- Offer more options to parents
- Under confines of charter law, teachers can use new teaching methods
- Teachers can be creative and teach out of the box

Advantages (cont.)

- School operators are under the direction of parents and/or community leaders
- Tend to draw more volunteerism from parents
- High capacity for meeting child's needs
- Students have higher attendance rates
- Iowa Tests of Basic Skills elevated by several percentage points

Advantages (cont.)

- Initial basic design to reach at risk and/or drop out students
- Appealing to legislators as an option for schools of choice
- Helps diminish interest in vouchers
- Where public school is failing, offers alternative, even to replacing failing school
- Opened in urban areas where standardized test results were poor

Advantages (cont.)

- Low income families have responded with enrollment
- Avenue to address next wave of enrollment in already crowded schools
- Charter schools receive 80% of per pupil funds

Students with Learning Disabilities

- Small classroom size
- Teacher to student ratio improved
- Challenges: Finding competent teachers and assistants
- Training to deal with Individualized Education Programs
- Charter facilities may not be as attractive as public forum
- Provides a model for public education in restructure of public school system

Students with L.D. (cont.)

- Charter schools have demonstrated improvement with introduction of desired curricula and of use of instructional models not found in public schools
- Personalized education convinces parents that administrators and teachers truly care for the child with L.D.
- Cases where students, formerly identified as mentally retarded, able to succeed in charter school format

Students with L.D. (cont.)

- Charter school L.D. population mirrors district population
- District drop out rates improved when charter enrolls at risk students

Charter School Teachers

- “The heart and soul of any school is it’s teaching staff.”
(Finn & Kanstroom, 2002, p.60)
- Success or failure of a school is determined by the relationship between teacher and student in a learning scenario
- Innovation of teachers and principals
- Education reformers, concerned with pupil achievement, have freedom to pursue this course

Charter School Teachers (cont.)

- Freedom granted principals allows creation of schools not possible within established public school forum
- “charter schools are serving as exciting seedbeds for new approaches to finding, employing, and keeping better teachers” (Finn & Kanstoroom, 2002, p.60)
- Personnel policies differ greatly from public schools

Charter School Teachers (cont.)

- “the system of hiring in the charter school is better than the system in a comparable district school” (Finn & Kanstoroom, 2002, p.60)
- “What I need are highly intelligent, prestigious college background, articulate, they like kids. They know how to work as a team. They are visionaries of a sort...Certification is a guarantee of nothing to me” (Finn & Kanstoroom, 2002, p.60)

Charter School Teachers (cont.)

- Principals glad to have freedom to hire noncertified teachers, but prefer certified teachers
- With freedom to hire without dealing with bureaucracy, better able to find teachers who modeled the school mission
- After school meetings can be held without violation of union contracts
- Seek out teachers interested in the creation of ground floor policies and procedures

Charter School Teachers (cont.)

- *Gung Ho* is encouraged: less productive are released
- Charter school teachers are less experienced in classroom
- Paid less the first year
- Contracts are for one year
- Successful teachers can negotiate for higher salaries based upon individual performance
- Administrators have little trouble finding teachers
- Suffer 30% turnover

Parental Satisfaction

- Greater satisfaction reported
- Advocates propose to reform the system of education in the US
- Choice has brought competitive pressure
- Waiting lists for charter schools includes infants and newborns
- Boston Renaissance Charter School has less than 6% student loss from previous year

Objections to Charter Schools

- Dealing with perception and reality
- Charter programs perceived as taking money from budgets of public schools
- Funds to bus students in rural areas in Arizona create animosity
- Per pupil spending differential
- What pushes the charter movement?

Objections (cont.)

- Charter teachers are paid less
- Teachers are not required to be state certified
- Impossible to establish in rural areas
- Increases potential for public funds to go to home schooling or private schools
- “increase competition for scarce dollars and result in net financial loss to a school district because students attending the new school do not necessarily reduce the organization’s cost” (Collins, 1998, p.3)

Objections (cont.)

- Are they viable if they affect only a small portion of student population?
- Concern for increase in privatization of education
- Endangers public schools with special interest curricula
- Failure to meet at risk or special education students
- Draws only the easy to educate student

Objections (cont.)

- After school athletics
- Do charter schools increase “isolation based upon race or ethnicity” (Collins, 1998, p.4)
- Opponents claim charter schools have not demonstrated increased effectiveness and achievement on standardized tests

Other Obstacles

- Charter teachers fail to network with public school teachers
- Success of charter schools in recruiting has caused negative effect of long waiting lists
- Submission of application for charter school operation
- Start up logistics overwhelming

Final Comments

- Accountability and choice are inseparable
- Charter schools are accountable in a market concept
- Charter schools either succeed or close
- Do have a cause and effect on public schools
- Fifty years ago, Milton Friedman condemned public education in the US as a failure

Final Comments (cont.)

- Advent of charter schools has offered working solutions to school choice
- Private schools, vouchers, home schooling are options
- Charter schools are one more option

Chapter Summary

The debate over continued improvement in the public education system in the U.S. will not go away. In some areas around the nation, the status of public education is in need of reconstruction. Answers to correct and improve the system are not easy. Parents and legislators are continuously demanding changes. Charter school implementation stands as one of several points of consideration as education reformers determine how to meet the demands of parents, legislators, and other interested parties. This author has concluded that charter legislation is a viable option for improvement in the public school sector. In the following chapter, the author evaluates the contribution of the project, discusses the limitations of the project, and makes recommendation for future research. Peer assessment of the project is discussed, and a summary of the project is provided.

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

Contribution of the Project

A copy of this research will be forwarded to the National Alliance of Charter Schools for use by that authority as an advocate of charter schools and charter school legislation. The author of this research has concluded that charter schools exist as a viable option of school choice. The debate on public education continues, while a new generation of parents demands more from public education. As the debate continues, so does the research continue. In several states with active charter school legislation, charter schools are thriving, having proven successful in meeting the requirements of parents. This research does not solve the question of school choice; however, the establishment of charter school legislation has opened the door to provide another option for school choice.

Limitations to the Project

More recent research is published and available to educational researchers than that reviewed for this project. The majority of research comprising this work comes from the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC). The author, having been exposed to charter schools in Colorado, having taught in the public school system, and having taught in a private program for adjudicated juveniles, brought to this work a bias which became more confirmed as the research proceeded.

Peer Assessment

Assessment and feedback was accomplished with the assistance of two peers. One of these individuals is a sociologist working with youth in our local area for a program sponsored by the State of Montana. She suggested making changes to the PowerPoint presentation which would make it easier to follow. These changes have been added to the original PowerPoint presentation. The other peer assessment came from an administrator serving as vice principal for a local public high school. Not only did this individual make suggestions in the composition of the PowerPoint, he included comments relative to the validity of certain points drawn from the research project. This candid response was used in the rewrite of certain pages in the PowerPoint.

Recommendations for Future Research and Study

Every year, the results of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills are published. From this work, a comprehensive study of tests results from students attending charter schools could be created. Making a comparison over the last several years would identify the success or failure of established charter schools to meet the academic requirements as stated in the original charter law. This would provide a numerical insight to the effectiveness of the charter school movement as an arena for improvement within the public school system. Quantitative research of this nature may establish the effectiveness of the charter school movement, or it may demonstrate the inability of these schools to meet the prerequisites previously established.

Project Summary

Charter school legislation is an emotional subject prompting public school supporters and charter school supporters to take sides quickly and form defensive

boundaries. Where the concept of school choice is strong, charter school legislation has been successful in passing. Where local public school administrators have accepted the establishment of charter schools within their district as a tool in the experiment for school change and reform, charter school operators are proving the experiment successful, as is the case in Colorado. Charter school operators have proven successful in rural and urban settings. The diversity of student population reflects the diversity of the geographic regions in which charter schools have been established. Parental satisfaction with classroom size, curriculum, school administrators, and teaching staff has been well documented in favor of the charter school movement.

Several options are available to education reformers when looking at alternative educational methods for students. They include vouchers, home schooling, private schools, and charter schools. Charter school legislation that would allow for innovative responses to local needs and desires appears to be a viable tool that can be used to help public school administrators meet a growing demand from parents and other interested parties for schools of choice.

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