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How Well Are Charter Schools Serving Urban and Minority Students? ERIC/CUE Digest, Number 119.

Charter schools have become popular because many people believe that they can provide a high quality education to public school students without the regulatory constraints imposed on conventional public schools. Charters are created and managed by an entity comprised of parents and/or teachers, community and/or business leaders, non-profit organizations, or for-profit businesses. The District of Columbia and 25 states now have laws permitting these independent public schools to be chartered by school districts or the state Department of Education, and thus they can receive public monies for their operation. The autonomy granted the schools varies widely, however.

Urban areas are particularly fertile ground for the development of charter schools because there is a great need to find ways to improve education in the face of poor resources and overcrowding in the public schools. However, since most urban students are either disadvantaged or members of minority groups, there are concerns that charter schools may "cream off" the students identified as easiest to teach (frequently white or middle class children), leaving the remainder to founder in arguably inferior conventional public schools.

There are now approximately 350 charter schools in the nation (Finn, Manno, & Bierlein, 1996). The vast majority are quite small, and many have only a few grade levels or a very specialized student body. Most have been in operation just a few years, so it is too soon to evaluate their success. In fact, no single study has yet attempted to review all the charters on any measure at all, although surveys of charter school samples have been undertaken. Some organizations have also put forth blueprints for the future development of effective charter schools. Recommendations from these different studies are sometimes contradictory, possibly because of biased sources.

FUNDING

Determining the comparative level of funding for charter schools requires consideration of many factors. Charter school laws all set the charter school reimbursement rate at a lower level than for existing public schools (personal communication, P. Comeau, Project Director, Charter Schools Working Group, October 1996). In addition, charters usually have start-up and building leasing costs not incurred by other schools, and these expenses are often not funded by the school district or agency that chartered

them. But such costs may be paid directly by the state and by Goals 2000 funding. Some charters do not receive certain Federal monies for special services for at-risk students that are received by other public schools, although their student populations are no more advantaged than those at the other schools. Nevertheless, one study reported that California charter administrators believe they have more money than other schools (Corwin & Flaherty, 1995), a result of the fact that some charters also get funding from private sources.

Both non-profit and for-profit charters can benefit financially from selling copyrighted instructional materials they produce. Businesses that establish charters negotiate a fee from the agency contracting for their services. While the goal of the businesses is to make a profit, they must absorb incurred losses. Charters cannot charge tuition, but some impose fees, aggressively solicit contributions from families, and pressure parents to raise funds. While such practices increase a school's budget, they may make the school inaccessible to some families (American Federation of Teachers [AFT], 1996).

STUDENT COMPOSITION

The Federal government mandates that all schools receiving funds from its charter school initiative must adhere to civil rights statutes, and that all students must be given an equal opportunity to attend the charter. States may add more stringent equity standards in their charter legislation; for example, Colorado requires that the diversity of each school reflect the composition of the district in which it resides (Dittmar, Torres, & Weiser, 1995).

Data on the composition of the student bodies of charter schools differ considerably from survey to survey. A national survey of about 100 charters operating in 1995, undertaken to provide a comparison for a detailed analysis of California charters, found that 38 percent of the students in the nation's charters were minority group members; minority students ranged from a high of 70 percent in New Mexico to a low of 20 percent in Colorado. One-third were eligible for a subsidized lunch program, indicating low family socioeconomic status, with New Mexico and Colorado students again at the extremes of poverty and non-poverty status, respectively. Fourteen percent of the student population were classified as Limited English Proficient (LEP). Sixteen percent qualified for special education placement (Corwin & Flaherty, 1995).

The researchers' review of student demographics in 54 California charters indicated that the state largely conformed to these national averages. Within the state, however, there were differences on several student population measures between charters that were new schools and the nearly equal number that were converted from existing conventional public schools. This reflects the fact that converted charters were concentrated in urban areas while new charters were established in more affluent suburbs. Regardless of a charter's origin, there was a general over representation of students from more privileged families working in professional or managerial positions, and an under representation of students with disabilities (Corwin & Flaherty, 1995).

Another study, this one undertaken in 1996 and including 225 charter schools in seven states, found that minority group members comprised a much larger proportion of the student body: 63 percent (Finn et al., 1996).

PROGRAMS AND PRACTICES

The goal of most charters is to provide exciting and challenging instruction that is personalized for each student. Charters make good use of their autonomy to employ educational innovations, particularly those involving use of technology. They seek to offer a clear cut alternative to other public schools in the community. Interestingly, as trends cycle, many charters take a "back-to-basics" approach, which has become less popular among conventional schools than previously, and is therefore now considered an innovation. In general, Finn et al. (1996) found no charters in their survey that were stepping beyond the reasonable bounds of publicly-supported education.

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

Some charters have a theme that either governs curriculum and instruction or determines the nature of their student body. Examples of curriculum theme charters are a Guadalupe (AZ) elementary secondary education trilingual/tricultural (Spanish/English/Yaqui) school, a St. Paul (MN) school for returned dropouts, a Freeland (MI) mathematics and science academy, and a Perris (CA)-based "cyberspace" educational program whose services are delivered on-line (Bierlein, 1995). An interesting variation on the usual vocational schools is a technical academy in Lowell (MA) that was established by a group representing local manufacturing firms (Finn et al., 1996).

Charters frequently employ instructional methods promoted by reformers, such as multi-age student grouping, cooperative learning, and portfolio assessment (Corwin & Flaherty, 1995; General Accounting Office [GAO], 1995).

SERVICES TO STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES AND

LEARNING DIFFICULTIESFunding for charters may not include support of programs for special needs students. For example, some charters, depending on their legal status, may not be eligible for Federal programs, such as Title I for disadvantaged students (GAO, 1995). Further, if only a few students with a specific special need attend a charter, the per pupil cost of providing an appropriate education may be prohibitively high, resulting in the exclusion of certain students from some charters. On the other hand, some charters, upon receiving parents' permission, mainstream all students. They believe that the individual attention paid to each student meets the needs of special education and LEP students, and those with disabilities, although the schools may contract out for special services, such as speech therapy (Finn et al., 1996). Some

parents of children with the most needs may not believe that a mainstreaming situation is appropriate, however, and would instead enroll their children elsewhere.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT

A great many charters were created by parents who determine their curriculum and instructional practices at the outset. These founders, along with additional parents, then exercise an ongoing leadership role in the school's management. Parents have been successful in raising controversial issues and changing some policies and practices, and they are more likely to advocate for nontraditional approaches than are parents in conventional schools (Corwin & Flaherty, 1995).
In general, charters have higher rates of parent involvement than other schools, a universally supported goal and a factor that contributes to their uniqueness. They are innovative in suggesting parent-children activities, and giving homework assignments that require parent participation (Corwin & Flaherty, 1995).

Prevalent in California charters' parent involvement programs is the use of contracts to require certain parental behaviors, especially their presence at the school. Other clauses include student attendance requirements, and parents' commitment to provide specific educational materials at home and to support all school codes. The advantages of contracts are that they guide parents who are unsure about what is helpful to their children and the school, and they encourage parents who might be reluctant to participate in school activities. The disadvantage is that they may discourage parents from enrolling their children because they feel unable to fulfill the contract's terms. Frequently, these parents are limited English speaking, poor, or culturally conditioned to leave their children's education to the schools. Further, Corwin and Flaherty (1995) cite studies indicating that such contracts favor parents with the time to participate and those predisposed to support the school's program, thereby creating the possibility that the school will reflect the narrow concerns of those already involved. The researchers also raise the question of inequality in typical parent contracts: while contracts make demands of parents, they do not set forth the school's obligations to the students.

Some California charter contracts include a failure-to-comply clause that legally binds parents, although as yet it has not been widely invoked. Corwin and Flaherty's survey (1995) indicates that this clause was included more frequently in the contracts of schools with larger percentages of disadvantaged students than in other charters, raising the concern that the most vulnerable parents could be intimidated, and not enroll their children. Since students are not required to enroll in a charter, families can protect their rights only by not enrolling their children or by leaving the school, not by objecting to a school's contract.

TEACHER QUALIFICATIONS

Charters offer teachers unique opportunities to become directly involved in all phases of their operations, and to become school "owners," instead of simply employees (Mulholland & Bierlein, 1995). Thus, even teachers' organizations that oppose the employment practices of some charters favor the charters' increased professionalization of teaching (DiLorenzo, 1996). In fact, some charters have been started by teachers working with parents.
Still, the ability of charters to attract and retain qualified teachers is one of the most controversial aspects of the movement. Many charter school officials differ substantially from teacher organizations both in their definition of qualifications and in their hiring and labor policies, such as working conditions, pensions, and other benefits. Usually, charters are exempted from complying with the hiring requirements for other schools and with teacher union contracts. However, some legislation governing charters, and some contracts between charters and school districts, restrict the freedom of charters to make staffing decisions by mandating such compliance.

Some educators in unions and school districts believe that charter teachers must be certificated, and licensed, and must have participated in a teacher education program in order for the schools to provide a high quality education (DiLorenzo, 1996; AFT, 1996). Conversely, the Charter Schools Working Group (1996) in New York (NY) presents a model, based on the hiring practices in New Jersey schools, where some teachers receive alternative certification; they are experts in the content areas they teach through life or other experience, serve under a master teacher, and are closely mentored. The Group advocates that charter teachers not be bound by collective bargaining agreements in effect in other schools so that they are freer to participate in the non-teaching aspects of the school operations. The Group also asserts that teachers' satisfaction from working in a charter may outweigh any loss in compensation, and that charters attract especially dedicated and talented teachers (personal communication, P. Comeau, October 1996). A charter teacher survey in California supports this claim; as reasons for their job satisfaction teachers cited freedom to experiment in the classroom, freedom from rules, and a collegial environment and a common sense of mission (Corwin & Flaherty, 1995). The AFT (1996), on the other hand, asserts that teachers will not work in charters if they offer a compensation package inferior to what other schools provide, and that the charters will therefore have to hire unqualified individuals.

Despite many concerns, unions are not unequivocally opposed to charter schools. The National Education Association (NEA) is involved in partnerships to create a few charters (DiLorenzo, 1996), and the AFT is actively considering such collaborations. The NEA is also working with some states to develop charter legislation and contracts that reflect the organization's position on teacher policies.

AUTONOMY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND ASSESSMENT

The autonomy of charters in choosing the content of their educational program, and their accountability, vary considerably, depending on state legislation and agreements with the agency approving their creation. The most autonomous are exempt from all academic instructional requirements, and students do not have to take standardized tests. Charters that contract with agencies other than the local district are exempt from all the policies of the district (except health and safety). Other charters, however, must request rule-by-rule exemptions (GAO, 1995).
The degree of accountability of charters is debated by their supporters and the more skeptical. Bierlein (1995), for example, states that charters are more accountable than conventional schools because their contracts can be terminated if their performance is deemed unsatisfactory. ASPIRA, an advocacy organization for Hispanics, on the other hand, has expressed concern that the freedom from conventional school regulations also frees charters from the scrutiny necessary to ensure their delivery of an effective education (Dittmar et al., 1995).

The contracts of some charters require testing of some kind, with the type of assessment negotiated between the sponsoring agency and the school. Arguably, however, the use of standardized tests, where required to measure student performance, may discourage the establishment of charters which target low-achieving students because the students' performance on the tests may suggest that the school is ineffective. Because of the newness of the charter movement, the development of assessment methods that would most accurately reflect each school's academic program and measure student achievement is just beginning (GAO, 1995).

The amount of reporting also varies among charters, and it is not clear yet what types of reporting are most useful. The AFT (1996), citing the inadequacy of charter reports supplied to the Minnesota Department of Education, has urged increased reporting on all aspects of a charter's operation and public scrutiny of the documents. Corwin and Flaherty (1995), on the other hand, report that teachers in California charters are already overburdened by paperwork. Occupying the middle ground, Finn et al. (1996) found that most charters are beginning to develop standards and ways to accurately measure and report on student performance.

CONCLUSION

While it is too soon to evaluate the performance of students in charters, it is possible to identify certain trends in their operation. Charters are, in fact, attracting urban students, to some extent solely because of their location, but not the most vulnerable minority and disadvantaged students. It may be unrealistic, however, to expect charters to serve the needs of all students (P. Comeau, personal communication, 1996). Charters are also attracting dedicated and talented teachers, but the compensation they provide is often not competitive with that of conventional schools, and the teachers may not to continue to teach there over the long term. Some private funders are more likely to support the creation of new projects, like charters, than the revitalization of existing and possibly

problematic organizations, like traditional schools, so grants received by charters are not funds that otherwise would have gone to other public schools, as has been argued. The ability of charter schools to provide a more effective public education than other schools remains to be seen. However, their presence as an education choice has awakened the public to the need for overall educational improvement, and has demonstrated to both government and private funding sources that increased support for all types of education is essential.

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