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ABSTRACT

A charter school is a public educational entity that operates under a charter or contract negotiated between the organizers, who design and run the school, and an organization that holds the school accountable based on charter provisions. Most charter schools are elementary schools with smaller than average populations; many serve disadvantaged and at-risk students. The concept of charter schools surfaced during the late 1980s, with the first charter school being opened in Minnesota in 1992. An overview of the historical development of the charter school concept is presented, including a description of characteristics of charter schools, differences between charter schools and voucher programs, examples of charter school achievements, and difficulties faced by charter schools. Accomplishments of charter schools in St. Paul (Minnesota), Lowell (Massachusetts), Castle Rock (Colorado), Henderson (Minnesota), and San Diego (California) are briefly described. Initial startup problems of charter schools include lack of funding and lack of legal and business expertise. Other concerns include charter specifications, financial mismanagement, social inequities, profit motivation, use of uncertified teachers, inability to serve special education students, and lack of accountability. The literature suggests that charter schools offer a viable alternative educational experience, but more study and research is needed to determine their effectiveness. A study to explore concerns related to charter schools in Arkansas showed that only one attempt had been made to charter a school, and that the 12 superintendents surveyed had little factual knowledge about the charter school concept. Their major concerns were loss of funding, competition for students, segregation, circumventing standards, and accountability. Contains 35 references and 10 other charter school resources, including Web sites. (SAS)

CHARTER SCHOOLS: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

AND

AN ASSESSMENT OF PERCEPTION

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Abstract

CHARTER SCHOOLS: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND AN ASSESSMENT OF PERCEPTION

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The concept of charter schools has been offered as a viable alternative to traditional public schools. Since the first charter school legislation in 1991, the number of charter schools has grown to over 480. Although the number of charter schools has grown, the concept is not without its opponents in the educational arena.

A comprehensive review of the literature on charter schools was conducted by the authors as part of a doctoral seminar project. An overview of the historical development, description of the characteristics and the elements of charter schools is provided. The differences between charter schools and voucher programs are explained. Initial start-up problems are explored. Examples of charter school achievements are provided, along with difficulties faced by charter schools and additional resources for information about charter schools is provided.

The perception held by superintendents in Northeast Arkansas in regards to the charter school concept and the perceived need for charter schools was assessed as part of the seminar project through the use of an informal phone survey. The results indicated that overall the superintendents (n=12) had little factual knowledge about the charter school concept with only one superintendent indicating he had read any information. Several expressed concerns about the concept and the implications for their schools. However, caution must be exercised in generalizing these results because of the smallness of the sample population.

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Charter Schools: A Review of the Literature

The concept of charter schools has been hailed as the solution to improving education. The notion of charter schools surfaced during the late 1980's (Molnar, 1996; Vergari & Mintrom, 1996) with the first charter school being opened in Minnesota in 1992 (Nathan, 1996b,c). Since that time over 480 charter schools have begun. Currently, charter schools are receiving attention in the political arena as educational issues are raised (Barlas, 1996). However, a debate in regard to the appropriateness of the concept of charter schools has ensued (Center for Education Reform, 1997; Pioneer Institute for Public Policy Research, 1997; McKinney, 1996; Vergari & Minstrom, 1996).

Charter School Concept

In essence a charter school is a public educational entity that operates under a charter, or contract, that has been negotiated between the organizers, who design and run the schools and an organization who holds the school accountable based on the provisions of the charter (Bierlein, 1995). The charter school can operate with fewer restrictions from the governing agency but must meet the goals it has established for student achievement (O'Neil, 1996).

The discussion of the charter school concept begins with an overview of the historical development. A description of the characteristics and elements of charter schools is provided and the differences between charter schools and voucher programs are explained. Initial start-up problems are explored. Examples of charter school achievements are provided, along with difficulties faced by charter schools. The concerns about charter school programs and recommendations for consideration are also examined. The concept of charter schools is considered for Arkansas and a discussion of the results of informal interviews assessing the

perceptions held by some Northeast Arkansas superintendents in regard to the charter school concept is presented.

Historical Overview

In 1988, Ray Budde wrote a new book in which he suggested school districts should give teachers a "charter" to try new approaches. Budde sent the book to many including Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers (Nathan, 1996a). Shortly thereafter, Shanker gave a speech to the National Press Club where he called for empowering teachers by creating "charter" schools (Molnar, 1996). These were to focus on professional development and have a clear commitment to improving student achievement. Minnesota State Senator Ember Reichgott Junge and several local activists heard Shanker's speech and revised the idea to fit Minnesota where there was already a strong base for public school choice; St. Paul had operated magnet schools since the 1970's. The Governor of Minnesota in 1985, Rudy Perpich, proposed expanding choice of public schools for all Minnesota children. His primary goal was to expand opportunities and achievements for low- and middle-income students (Nathan, 1996a). He knew there would be problems without government support. At this time, only affluent families had choices. Thus, programs would have to be carefully designed for all students and racial integration would have to be addressed. However, the timing was not right. In 1985, 60 percent of Minnesota people opposed public school choice while only 33 percent favored it (Nathan, 1996a).

Minnesota Leads Out

By 1989, most people in Minnesota had some form of school choice but without much variety. Many were ready to increase options and to review the benefits of school vouchers.

Senator Junge wrote an article favoring charter schools over the voucher system which was published in the state's largest newspaper (Nathan, 1996a). Two years later, Minnesota became the first state to pass a law allowing charter schools (O'Neil, 1996; Molnar, 1996). This law allowed school districts the opportunity to "charter" schools organized by teachers. The schools were not required to abide by most state and local regulations and operated as "nonprofit cooperatives that were legally autonomous (Molnar, 1996; p. 10)." Existing private schools that were nonsectarian were also allowed to apply for a charter.

The first charter school opened in 1992 at the City Academy in St. Paul, Minnesota (Nathan, 1996a). The first private school to convert to a charter school was Bluffview Montessori School in 1993 in Winona, Minnesota (Center for Education Reform). The program was a success in Minnesota for several reasons: students who had dropped out returned to school, advanced course selection in high schools more than doubled allowing a wide choice to students, choices brought the family back into public education and choice allowed educators to create new schools (Nathan, 1996a).

Trends

Buechler (1996) cited six trends in the 90's that laid the foundation for the charter school movement: accountability, deregulation, decentralization, restructuring, public school choice, and private school vouchers. He contended most of these were attempts to create a responsiveness to the public such as that in a free market, but maintaining a public educational system. This was a compromise between attempts to force the educational system to be accountable but remain free and open to all.

Other states quickly passed legislation to allow charter schools: California in 1992, Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Mexico, and Wisconsin in 1993 (Buechler, 1996). By late summer 1996, the District of Columbia and 25 states had passed laws allowing the existence of charter schools (O'Neil, 1996; Molnar, 1996). There were 480 charter schools operating during the fall 1996 with an enrollment of over 100,000 students (Center for Education Reform).

Characteristics/Elements

Smaller Student Populations

Most charter schools are elementary schools with smaller populations than traditional public schools (Buechler, 1996). According to the Medler and Nathan survey (1995), the average size of a charter school was 287 students. Most serve the average or underprivileged student than the regular public school and many serve the disadvantaged student. This is because much of the legislation in some states requires or encourages the charter school to serve students at-risk. Also, local school boards are more likely to sponsor a charter school designed to serve students deemed not appropriate for the public school.

Charter schools pursue a variety of educational approaches including individualized education plans, performance based assessment, thematic instruction, expanded use of technology, multi-age grouping, parental involvement, real world focus and others (Buechler, 1996). There is no one method for any charter school or student. Orland and Tan (1995) gave one reason for a charter school as a method of increasing the marketability of education by improving the educational quality and allowing students a choice of schools to attend and allowing the funding to follow the student.

Charter Schools Verses Vouchers

There are key differences between charter schools and the concept of vouchers (Nathan, 1996a). The central principles that underlie the charter idea are:

1. Other publicly accountable groups such as colleges and universities, a state board of education, a new state agency or city council could organize and operate a charter school. The organizers could be teachers, parents or other community members and sponsors could be other public bodies than just the local school district (Buechler, 1996; Nathan, 1996a). This is a feature of a strong charter law that creates a more positive response from local school districts. The charter school concept creates a competition and encourages school districts to better serve students (Nathan, 1996a).

To be considered for a charter school, an applicant must outline the educational procedure to be followed. The application must describe the educational program, the expected student performance levels, the methods by which that performance will be measured, and the governance structure of the school. Also, the application may be for a brand new school or an existing school choosing to change to a charter school (Buechler, 1996).

2. These would be nonsectarian schools free to all and with no admission criteria. Charter schools would only have to follow health and safety regulations (Nathan, 1996a).

3. Each school would be responsible for improving student achievement. A contract of three to five years outlining specific areas of improvement would be negotiated by each school. The contract would have to state which areas a student was to learn more and how

that learning would be measured. Schools who failed to achieve the planned results would be terminated (Nathan, 1996a).

4. The state would waive almost all rules and regulations governing public schools in exchange for accountability for improved results. Health and safety regulations would not be waived (Buechler, 1996; Nathan, 1996a).

5. Each charter school would allow choices by the educators and students. Educators would not be forced to work in, nor would students be forced to attend a charter school. Parents would have a choice of sending students to a particular school (Buechler, 1996; Nathan, 1996a).

6. The founders could choose any organization available under state law making the school a legal entity with its own elected board. Teachers could organize and bargain collectively but separately from any district bargaining unit (Nathan, 1996a).

7. Full per-student funding would follow the student. This amount would be equal to the average state per-pupil allocation or the average allocation per district from which the student comes. If the state provides additional funds due to a disability or income level, these funds would follow the student (Nathan, 1996a).

8. All teachers would be protected and allowed new opportunities. The state would permit teachers to take a leave from their public school systems without any loss of seniority. Teachers could remain in the retirement systems. Teachers could choose to be employees, to organize a cooperative, or to choose another method of organization (Nathan, 1996a).

Other states have adopted many of these previously mentioned characteristics with similar educational approaches. Many offer interdisciplinary instruction, expanded use of

technology, with multi-age grouping. Assessment may be performance based with the use of traditional tests, exhibitions and portfolios that are more individualized for the student (Buechler, 1996).

Initial Start-up Problems

Lack of Funding

The two most crucial barriers to beginning a charter school are the lack of funds and the lack of legal and business expertise. There are a number of other barriers including problems with special education regulations, unclear legislation and conflict with the sponsoring school district (Buechler, 1996).

Medler (1996) cited results from a 1995 survey he co-conducted with Nathan to identify problems in charter school movements. The three barriers listed most often in establishing and operating a charter school were a lack of start-up funds, finances and facilities. Charter schools usually do not have separate funding sources such as bonds to pay capital expenses (Buechler, 1996; Finn, Manno & Bierlein, 1996). These must be paid from general revenue sources and are usually inadequate when securing facilities. Even if buildings are provided, they must usually be renovated for handicap accessibility and code regulations.

Other start-up costs include legal fees, consulting fees, textbooks, furniture, and equipment (Buechler, 1996; Finn et al., 1996). All of this must be paid from the charter school general revenue fund. Only four states have provided start-up funds and this amount was usually small compared to the expenses needed. There is limited grant money available. One example is a provision in the 1994 Re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary

Education Act that established a $15 million grant program for charter schools (Buechler, 1996).

Some new charter schools have unique ways of handling affordable facilities. In Minnesota, one school met in a suite of offices in an office building, one in a recreation center and one in an apartment complex. Each of these facilities presented different obstacles in their use for educational purposes (Buechler, 1996).

Lack of Legal/Business Expertise

The lack of legal and business expertise can be overwhelming in beginning a new venture. Many charter school initiators do not realize that a school is also a business and certain things must run like a business. Someone has to be responsible for managing the funding formula, teacher salaries, health insurance, the school budget, financial audits, and security. Other problems exist such as food services, payroll administration and transportation

Some schools have contracted with the resident school district to provide these services. But this may lead to a loss of autonomy. Others have relied upon help from state agencies, parents or other volunteers. Some charter schools have hired consultants (Buechler, 1996).

Special education and students with disabilities have been cited as a major problem when beginning a new charter school. Charter schools must meet federal guidelines to provide services appropriate to students' needs; although it may be very expensive. Each school district receives additional money due to students with disabilities, but often it is not enough to pay for additional services. Some schools have to use money from the general operating revenue to pay for special education. Since charter schools are usually autonomous,

they are unable to share costs with others in a district; nor can they share teachers or others with expertise (Buechler, 1996).

Difficulties with Local Districts

A few charter schools have experienced problems with the local school district (Buechler, 1996; Medler, 1996; Finn et al., 1996). Often a charter school must receive approval of the local district as the sponsor. This may lead to the district having control of the funds which can lead to additional problems. Charter schools maintain that districts are not providing services required; while districts are confused as to what services they are to provide. In addition, some school districts in California are withholding funds to cover expenses, such as administrating employee payroll or leasing school facilities (Yamashiro & Carlos, 1996). Medler (1996) chided local school districts for their threatening attitude toward charter schools. He said local school districts could make the experiment more successful by sharing ideas and opening lines of communication and cooperation rather than competition.

Results of surveys in a study conducted by Dianda and Corwin (1994) cited in Buechler (1996) showed the more autonomy the charter school sought, the less it was supported by the district. Also, the more control a charter school sought over staffing, the less it was supported by the union. Other complaints by charter school personnel were that the districts added conditions before approving charters and districts still tried to enforce additional rules.

One example cited was a conflict in Colorado (Buechler, 1996). Charter schools in Colorado are, by law, part of the local district. However, they are allowed only 80 percent of

the per-pupil funding that the district receives and must negotiate for the remainder. This has often caused conflict over how the money is distributed.

Lack of Clear Legislation

One of the major problems between schools has been the lack of clear legislation (Buechler, 1996). This has especially been a problem in California where there is dissension over accountability and liability. The California law does not provide for autonomy for a charter school nor is its legal status defined. A charter school could become a non-profit corporation which would ensure its independence from the district. But this could jeopardize the teachers' role in state teacher retirement system with the funding formula.

In addition, the law in California is unclear as to what categories of money charter schools are entitled (Buechler, 1996). The California system is very complex with various categories and a basic tuition support system. There are advocates who say charter schools should receive money to meet needs such as federal, state and local building and safety codes (Yamashiro & Carlos). However, most of these funds are distributed on a district basis rather than to individual schools.

Questionable Accountability Standards

Another concern with charter schools has been the concept of accountability (Ditmar, 1995). Since a charter school is independent, some educators have worried that this will allow the schools to disregard the standards followed by traditional schools. Some charter schools do not evaluate by traditional methods, but use portfolios or social evaluations, such as involvement in community affairs. Many fear since there are no clear methods of evaluation and accountability and that there are no clear standards for ensuring students

receive a quality education. With this fear comes the idea, since charter schools may be operated by a private company, the bottom line will be finances, rather than educational standards.

Accomplishments

Innovative

Charter schools approach education in innovative ways. A part of the innovation in creating broadened learning environments is through the parental and community partnerships formed (Bierlein, 1995; Riley, 1996; Vergari & Mintrom, 1996). The needs of the students, parents and community are considered in the formulation of charters. The result is a heightened commitment to an innovative educational process. While critics would argue that nothing happens in a charter school that could not happen in a regular school, the philosophical foundation and novel educational implementations in charter schools defy their critics (Finn et al., 1996). For example, approximately half of the charter schools were created to serve at-risk students. Approaches used to educate at-risk students vary as can be seen in the discussion of specific examples of charter schools that follows (Finn et al., 1996, Bierlein, 1995; Riley, 1996).

City Academy

City Academy serves a low income area of St. Paul Minnesota. The school provides before and after-school programs and serves ages 15-21, many of whom had dropped out of other schools. Students are given hands-on application of learning principles, such as how one uses math in construction work. It is a small school with approximately 60 students, but it is growing. Students, parents, community, and business leaders work collaboratively to

provide for the broad needs of students (Bierlein, 1995; Cutter interview, 1997; Finn et al., 1996; Nathan, 1996 b,c).

Lowell Middlesex Academy

The Lowell Massachusetts Middlesex Community College served as a sponsor for the Lowell Middlesex Academy. The academy is small with never more than 100 students. Most of the faculty are part-time, working at other colleges or community colleges in the area. This charter school serves a student population who dropped out of high school. The accomplishment of a graduation rate of 80 percent of students getting their GED stands in stark contrast to the previously rate for these students which was 0 percent. The school uses the same schedule as the community college. School is held year round with three terms (Finn et al., 1996, Clinchy, 1994). It is a nontraditional schedule for regular high schools. Similarly, Fenway Middle College High School is located at Bunker Hill Community College. The largest percentage of students are minority students. The curriculum uses real world internships to show the relationship between education and work. The use of this nontraditional approach has resulted in increased graduation rates (Clinchy, 1994).

Academy Charter

Charter schools serve a varied student population in addition to at-risk students. For example, the Academy Charter School in Castle Rock, Colorado has both gifted students and students with disabilities. This school focuses on innovative teaching with conservative curriculum ideas. Scores in math language and reading have increased (Nathan, 1996 b,c).

Minnesota New Country

The Minnesota New Country school in Henderson, Minnesota was begun by three teachers who had a concern for the use of technology in education. This year round school includes parental involvement, teacher and student accountability. Technology is viewed as an essential tool. The school serves approximately 90 students in grades 6-12. It is rural in nature and meets in former store fronts. Students are involved in nontraditional classrooms. Students work individually or in small groups to plan and develop projects (Nathan, 1996 b,c).

O'Farrell Community School

The O'Farrell Community School in San Diego is a school where educators combine educational diversity and innovations. It opened in 1988 and serves 1400 inner city students in grades 6-8. The school is governed through participation by teachers, students, parents, and community leaders. The school focuses on offering an enriched curriculum (Nathan, 1996b,c).

Finn et al. (1996) noted in their study of charter schools that the accomplishments included high and clear academic expectations. The notion that the purpose of coming to school is to learn is communicated distinctly. For many at-risk students offering a safe environment was a key to facilitating learning. Violence and verbal abuse were not acceptable. Punishment for offenses included legal action and inclusion of the family in discussion of the situation. Learning is geared to the individual student. The staff is committed to seeking out students and offering academic or personal assistance. The approach incorporates all stakeholders: teachers, students, parents, and the community.

Concerns

Although charter schools have shown a variety of accomplishments they are not without their legal, financial and employment problems. The first major concern in a charter school involves the specifications of its charter. The manner in which the charter is written could determine who controls the school. There can be conflicts among charter school constituents concerning governing issues if not clarified in the charter (Page & Levine, 1996; Randall, 1992; Schneider & Dianda, 1995; Sempe, 1995; Wohlstetter & Anderson, 1994). For example, Michigan's first charter school violated the state constitution because it overturned the state board's authority to supervise public education (Bierlein, 1995; Broderick, 1995).

Financial

Additionally, financial problems have plagued charter schools. As discussed previously the lack of initial start-up money can be problematic (Finn et al., 1996; Nathan, 1996b,c). Mis-management has been a problem. The Los Angeles based Edutrain's charter was revoked because of financial mismanagement (Bierlein, 1995; Finn et al., 1996).

Promote Social Inequities

Experts noted that creating new patterns of choice increased the old concerns of promoting social inequities. The people who benefit from charter schools are those who are the most assertive, the most resourceful and the most committed which results in the neighborhood school being abandoned by the best students. Charter schools reduce the opportunities that students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds have to learn from and about one another. However, other experts disagree and believe that factors influencing

choice can be planned for to keep racial isolation from becoming a by-product. Fear of re-segregation is also a concern (Bierlein, 1995; Finn et al., 1996; O'Neil, 1996, Page & Levine, 1996)

Profit Motive

Concern has been expressed that the charter school movement grows out of the belief that private is better than public, or that individuals want to make money controlling the schools, or people who want to increase educational options with the hope that these options will improve student learning (Molnar, 1996; Saks, 1995; Schneider & Diana, 1995). Despite the positive ideals of the charter school proponents, the money and political influence for charter schools is driven by profiteers (Molnar, 1996).

One way that finances are used to influence the charter school movement is that some charter school proponents push to lessen credentialing and the employment of uncertified teachers. The use of uncertified teachers is a fear for many charter school critics. The weakening of teacher unions and lower wages for teachers is one way of lessening cost of educational reform according to charter school critics (Finn et al., 1996; Kearney & Arnold, 1994; Molnar, 1996; Odden, 1994). Finn et al. noted unions' responses were to keep charter schools as small and weak as possible but in cases where teachers in charter schools had the opportunity to form a union, none thus far has chosen that option.

Special Education Students Not Served

A major concern of charter school critics is that charter schools may be leaving out children with disabilities and that there are problems with special education in charter schools (Schnaiberg, 1997 a; Schnaiberg, 1997b). McKinney (1996) noted that in Arizona that of the

7000 students in charter schools only 262 (4 percent) were being served as special education students. Few charter schools are designed to serve the learning disabled (McKinney, 1996). Charter schools are subject to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the American with Disabilities Act. Section 504 prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability by any agency that receives federal financial assistance. All states are recipients, therefore, public school districts, including charter schools, are bound. In some charter schools there is no accommodation for IEPs. McKinney reported few Arizona charter schools serving children with disabilities were in accordance with IEPs. Charter school personnel lack knowledge of federal and state special education laws and procedures (McKinney, 1996).

McKinney (1996) noted that one high ranking official for the Arizona State Department of Education, in the Exceptional Student Services Division, reported that the division was not involved in the charting process of 50 charter schools for 1996-1997 school year. This official commented, "Charter schools are totally out of it when it comes to special ed (McKinney, 1996; p.24)." However, Finn et al. (1996) noted in their report on charter schools that parents of children with disabilities who attended charter schools felt as if their children were getting better service than at previous schools. They suggest that possibly the way special education is practiced and governed in regular schools needs rethinking.

Accountability More a Theory Than Reality

Another concern reported by Finn et al. (1996) is that charter schools may be stronger on theory but weaker in practice when it comes to accountability and evaluation of progress. States face the situation that traditional tests and standard instruments may not adequately access progress. There is a concerted effort for charter schools to focus on accountability of

student achievement. However, the degree to which governing bodies hold charter school organizers to the progress standards in their charters is questionable (Finn et al., 1996; Vergari & Mintrom, 1996).

Charter Schools: Implications and Recommendations from the Literature

Charter schools are viewed as a viable force in education today. This force holds the power to both help and hurt students if not managed appropriately. It is clear that charter schools offer alternatives to those who want something different in educational experiences than can be obtained in traditional schools. The focus on accountability and student achievement is a major needed element in the educational process. For charter schools to work, they must be free from legal and employment restrictions and have a well written charter based on a strong charter law. Funding allocated for students in regular public schools should also be allocated for students in charter schools with the appropriately needed start-up funds (Finn et al., 1996; Nathan, 1996 b, c; Vergari & Mintrom, 1996).

Charter schools are relatively new on the educational scene. While they offer viable alternatives to traditional education, they are in their early stages and it is too soon to draw conclusions. Additional research and study is needed to determine the effectiveness of charter schools (Finn et al., 1996, Nathan, 1996 b, c; Vergari & Mintrom, 1996).

This review of literature done in conjunction with a doctoral seminar project was the first step in considering the issues of charter schools in general. The next step of the seminar project was to explore the nature of charter schools in Arkansas. The specific geographical area of focus was the regional location of the university which was Northeast Arkansas. The

seminar project was then designed to explore the concerns related to charter schools in Northeast Arkansas.

The Charter School Concept in Arkansas

Nathan (1996c) reported that the charter school law in Arkansas is relatively weak because of the number of restrictions. A strong charter law is defined as one where many groups, private and religious, receive automatic exemptions from state and local regulations (Ledbetter, 1997).

To date, there has been only one attempt to charter a school in Arkansas. This was the Fourche Valley School District in Arkansas. This school district was small and located in a rural area, in the Ouchita Mountains (Roth, 1996; State Board Votes; State board rejects). Their application for a charter was rejected. The superintendent, Jack O'Reilly, reported during a phone interview that he felt the application for a charter was rejected because of political reasons and there was a push for smaller school districts to consolidate (Tyler, 1997). Further, O'Reilly stated that the state department of education noted that they rejected the application because in making the school a charter school it would limit pararental choice and one of the purposes of a charter school was to increase parental choice (State board rejects, Tyler, 1997). Also, he noted that the state department of education felt as if the school district was trying to avoid some salary and staffing issues by using non-certified teachers. O'Reilly stated that the school district would re-apply for charter school status (Tyler, 1997).

Purpose and Method of the Survey

The information about the growing number of charter schools in the United States (Nathan, 1996a, b, c), the push for charter schools (Barlas, 1996), the Arkansas Charter

School law (Ledbetter, 1997; Nathan, 1996c)and the Fourche Valley School District charter situation promted the following questions (Ledbetter, 1997; Roth, 1996; State Board Votes; State board rejects; Tyler, 1997): "What is known about the charter school concept in Northeast Arkansas? How is the concept perceived by educational leaders and is there any perceived need for charter schools in Northeast Arkansas? An attempt was made to answer these questions through the use of informal telephone interviews with superintendents in Northeast Arkansas. The purpose of this survey was to determine the perceptions held by superintendents in regard to the charter school concept and the perceived need for charter schools in Northeast Arkansas. An informal questionnaire was developed and utilized as an interview guide during the phone interviews. Data obtained from the participating superintendents (n=12) were analyzed for major themes.

Results of the Survey

The results indicated that, overall, the superintendents (n=12) had little factual knowledge about the charter school concept, with only one superintendent indicating he had read any information. The majority reported having little direct knowledge or information about charter schools to form in-depth opinions (83.3 percent, n=10). Two noted that the concept of charter schools was new and more research was needed.

The major concern mentioned by superintendents was the loss of funding for "their" schools by establishing charter schools (75 percent; n=9). Since funding is based on students attending or participation in the local school, charter schools for the average to above average students were viewed as unfavorable competition. Superintendents viewed charter schools for "good students" as unnecessary (66 percent; n=8). However, the perception of a charter

school for at-risk students was viewed more favorably (50 percent; n=6). However, money for items related to educating at-risk children, such as transportation, and insurance, was raised as an issue. Most superintendents indicated that the ruralness the area did not lend itself to the need of a charter school, even for at-risk students (75 percent; n=9).

Two superintendents (17 percent) noted that smaller schools, more like community schools would be advantageous, much like the magnet school concept. However, they voiced little need for such types of schools in their areas.

Three superintendents (25 percent) voiced concerns about charter schools promoting further segregation based on race and increasing the social inequities that already exists. These superintendents expressed reservations about circumventing standards and forming charter schools that were held less accountable than public school counterparts. For example, one superintendent noted that possibly private religious groups would use the charter school concept to start more private religious schools.

Survey Summary

Those superintendents who participated in the study had limited information and high reservations concerning the need for charter schools in their area. Furthermore, charter schools serving at-risk student populations would likely be viewed more favorably provided funding is not drastically reduced or if verification of success with at-risk students was supported by use of a charter school.

Their perceptions of the charter school concept was overwhelmingly negative which stands in contrast to the promotion by some that charter schools are the answer for improving educational accountability. Some additional questions were prompted: How is the charter

school concept understood by educators in a variety of educational settings? Who is driving the current promotion of the need for charter schools? Does the charter school concept need further defining and disclosing to the general public for better understanding? Are the needs of rural districts considered in the charter school concept? However, extreme caution must be used in drawing conclusions and raising questions based on this small sample size, lack of random selection with restricted generalizability.

Conclusion

The charter school concept offers alternative modes of education to traditional schools. Critics suggest that lessening restrictions may not compensate for the supposed degree of accountability of student achievement. Further, the profit motive, use of uncertified teachers, weakening teacher unions and concerns over treatment of students with disabilities are raised as negative issues for charter schools. Proponents report increase parental and community support, innovative educational methods, increased learning focus by students, and overall improved student achievement as positive reasons for charter schools.

However, while the charter school concept may be a viable option for education, it may still be misunderstood and viewed with suspicion. As a relatively new trend in education, more research is needed to determine not only the value of charter schools but how educators in a variety of geographica areas and settings perceive the concept. Few, if any longitudinal studies have been done to verify results of academic gains brought about by the increased emphasis on accountability.

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Center for Education Reform, 1001 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 204, Washington, DC 20036, (202) 822-9000.

Ted Kolderie, Center for Policy Studies, 59 West Fourth Street, St. Paul, MN 55102, (612) 224-9703.

Alex Medler, Education Commission of the States, 707 17th St., Suite 2700, Denver, CO 80202-3427, (303) 299-3635.

Joe Nathan, Center for School Change, Hubert H. Humphrey Institute for Public Affairs, University of Minnesota, 301 19th Avenue S., Minneapolis, MN 55455, (612) 626-1834.

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Kathleen Sylvester, Progressive Policy Institute, 518 C Street NE, Washington, DC 20002, (202) 547-0001.

Joan Buckley, American Federation of Teachers, 555 New Jersey Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001 (202) 393-8642.

Robert M. McClure, NEA Charter School Project, National Education Association, 1201 16th St. NW, Washington, DC 20036-3290, (202) 877-7200.

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Center for Education Reform: [http://edreform.com].

Central Michigan University: [http://pip.ehhs.cmich.edu/chart/].

Educational Excellence Netword (based in Washington, D.C.):

[http://www.edexcellence.net/]/

U.S. Department of Education: [http://inet.ed.gov./flexibility/charter.html].

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