Sweating the Small Stuff and Missing the Mark: A Critical Analysis of the Charter School Movement

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The promise of quality education is a cornerstone of American culture. Why, then, is this not the experience of every child in our nation? In the 1990s, the charter school movement began under the auspices of an avenue to address the disillusionment of education policy, the sense of powerlessness felt by parents and teachers, and the disparities of achievement between different races. With many supporters from all levels of government and the community, it is important that we still turn a critical eye to charter schools to accurately and fully assess their impact on individual students as well as the system at large. This paper focuses on two important and interconnected questions related to charter schools: First, how are charter schools claiming to close the achievement gap? Second, what does the charter school movement indicate, represent, and change for American public education system? To truly have long-lasting, transformative change in American education system, the reforms must delve further into the intricacies of the system, acknowledge and account for the interconnectedness between the economic structure of the United States and schools, and expose and change the underlying culture that perpetuates its existence.

Keywords: achievement gap, charter school movement, school reform, economic class structure

Introduction

The promise of quality education is a cornerstone of American culture. From barbershops to Capitol Hill, education is a guaranteed topic of lively and frequent debate. Indeed, congressmen and educators, mayors and businessmen, all claim to want great schools for our nation. Parents want to send their children to schools that will prepare them for a lifetime of success and financial prosperity. Why, then, is this not the experience of every child in our nation? How can America be the richest nation in the world, spend more per pupil on education than most other industrialized nations (McKinsey & Company, Social Sector Office, 2009), and still have alarming dropout rates, test scores, and failing schools? A brief look at school policy, systemic stratification of students, and the antediluvian structure provide sources for the answers to these questions and explain the current culture and focus of school reform policy.

The parlance of school reform consistently appears strong on paper but performs weak in practice. Often, the policy is laden with big promises, but no true plan of action. "Policy talk about the schools has moved in cycles of gloomy assessment of education and overconfident solutions, producing incoherent guidance in actual reform practice" (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 134). The policies, while seemingly relevant and needed, are

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typically devoid of changes necessary to truly improve the current state of education in America.

The "soft bigotry of low expectations" in education policies (Whitman, 2008, p. 4) has treated the most under-resourced population of students, low-income minority students, more as an ailment that must be tolerated than a population of students deserving of an equitable education. Often, expectations have been lowered to compensate for their perceived deficits in skills and ability, thus, exacerbating the disgraceful and glaring achievement gap and failure of the public school system for these students.

While schools are not primarily responsible for creating this achievement gap, "the K-12 system… fails to do much to shrink the gulf in achievement" (Whitman, 2008, pp. 13−14). Indeed, the system is not the great equalizer, so many claim it to be. And so the cycle starts again, a new policy, with new catch phrases is developed and delegated in hopes that it will be the long awaited Phoenix (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). This pattern of overpromising and under-delivering has led to "disillusionment and blaming the schools for not solving problems beyond their reach" (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 3).

In the 1990s, the charter school movement began under the auspices of an avenue to address the disillusion of education policy, the sense of powerlessness felt by parents and teachers, and the disparities of achievement between different races. Since the first charter school in 1991, the movement has steadily gained momentum, support, and success. "As of 2009, more than 4,700 charter schools enroll over 1.4 million children in 40 states and the District of Columbia. The ranks of charters grow by hundreds each year. Even so, more than 365,000 names linger on charter school wait lists" (CREDO (Center for Research on Education Outcomes), 2009, p. 47). Quickly, the term "charter school" became synonymous with success, not so much based on facts and results, but more so because the schools symbolized hope, change, and something new in a dismal public school system.

At first glance, charter schools seem to be the answer to so many frustrating and lingering issues in public education. They seem to be the avenue for change for people who are truly ready to stop complaining and actually make something happen in public education. All charter schools are found in densely populated, urban school districts. Essentially, they appear to be new and improve public schools without all the bureaucratic strings attached.

With many supporters from all levels of government and the community, it is important that we still turn a critical eye to charter schools to accurately and fully assess their impact on individual students as well as the system at large. This paper focuses on two important and interconnected questions related to charter schools: First, how are charter schools claiming to close the achievement gap? Second, what does the charter school movement indicate, represent, and change for America's public education system?

What Is the Achievement Gap?

As reported in *Sweating the Small Stuff* (Whitman, 2008), of the more than 20,000 public high schools in the United States, almost half of the nation's dropouts attend just 10% (2,000) of the schools. More troubling, nearly half of all black and Hispanic students in our country attend these failing schools. Deemed "dropout factories", these failing schools are the epicenter of the school reform crisis.

Broadening the lens to include students who have not dropped out but fallen into the category of low performing, the discrepancy of ability between races is alarming. "The average black twelfth grader has the reading and writing skills of a typical white eighth grader and the math skills of a typical white seventh grader" (Whitman, 2008, p. x). In high schools with a predominantly Caucasian population, more students identify

themselves as college bound and have the option of taking several college preparatory classes. However, in schools where the majority of students are African American or Latino, a significantly smaller number classify themselves as college bound and have much less opportunity, if any is offered at all, to take college preparatory classes. Even within schools that have a better balance of racial groups, the student body seems to self-segregate. "Most of the students in high-track classes (are) white while most of the students in lower-level classes (are) African American or Latino" (Holme, Wells, & Revilla, 2008, p. 354). The self-segregation is not solely the result of students choosing which level of difficulty in their coursework they would like to pursue. There are a myriad of factors contributing to this so-called self-segregation: discrimination, quality of education received prior to high school, socio-economic level, stability of home life, healthcare, lack of intervention to remediate low performance to maintain academic achievement on part with their white classmates. How is it possible that in a country of such acclaimed opportunity, the college prospects of most kindergarteners can be forecasted with nearly impeccable accuracy (Gracey, 1975)? How is it that achievement levels in as early as fourth grade can be linked to life outcomes (McKinsey & Company, Social Sector Office, 2009)? How can non-poor whites in the highest performing states be five years ahead of poor blacks in DC by the fourth grade (McKinsey & Company, Social Sector Office, 2009)?

Repercussions of the illusion of merit-based success are another component to the widening achievement gap low-income minority students are up against. The undertone to most current school reform is that students are lazy, unmotivated, and stupid. In the book *One Nation, Underprivileged: Why American Poverty Affects Us All*, the sources of the merit-based illusion are highlighted. "Americans tend to rank individual reasons (such as laziness, lack of effort, and low ability) as the most important factors related to poverty, while structural reasons such as unemployment and discrimination are typically viewed as less important" (Rank, 2004, p. 50). Thus, teachers, who mostly come from the middle class, have echoed this mantra in their classrooms.

The assumptions are based on the illusion of merit: Students just have to try harder to do better, which allows for policy makers, administrators, and teachers to have a clear conscience and sleep well at night, because the responsibility is now solely burdening the shoulders of students. "If they want to succeed, it's up to them. The opportunity is there", is the mentality shared by many in the positions to actually change the structure and culture of the system that perpetuates poverty and the achievement gap.

What Are Charter Schools?

The charter school movement is the most recent policy amalgamation and manifestation of several reform ideas that have been a part of public education for decades including magnet schools, public school choice, alternative schools, site-based management, privatization, and community-parental empowerment. The term "charter" is believed to have been first used by New England educator Ray Budde in the 1970s, when he recommended that small groups of teachers be given contracts or charters, by local school boards to explore new approaches. Albert Shanker, the former president of the American Federation of Teachers, then publicized the idea, suggesting that local boards could charter an entire school with union and teacher approval. Several schools-within-schools, called charters, were developed in Philadelphia in the late 1980s.

Legislation soon followed. Minnesota was the first state to enact legislation to allow charter schools in 1991. By 1995, nineteen states had signed laws permitting the formation of charter schools, and by 2003, that number increased to forty states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. Charter schools are one of the fastest growing innovations in education policy, enjoying broad bipartisan support from governors, state

legislators, and past and present secretaries of education (*US Charter Schools*, 2009).

Essentially, charter schools are public schools, when it comes to funding and student population served. Usually, the schools are run by non-profit organizations, trail-blazing individuals, public school districts, and even for-profit companies. There are academies that one can attend if interested in opening a charter school.

The Pros and Cons of Charter Schools

While much of the NCLB (No Child Left Behind) legislation enacted in 2002 perpetuated the paper-based appeasement of the broken system, namely by mandating changes but providing minimal funding, one burgeoning source of change gained even more momentum. Since NCLB, out-of-the-box charter schools have continually called the bluff of the rosy-worded agenda of current school reforms and shown what far-reaching, life-impacting, poverty cycle-stopping change actually looks like. These charter schools are showing that one way to change an under-resourced child's life "is to get him into and through a high-quality high school and into and through college" (Whitman, 2008, p. xvi).

Of the six schools profiled in *Sweating the Small Stuff* (Whitman, 2008), five are charter schools and all are located amid large, urban school districts. Typically in the high-poverty areas of these school districts, 20%–40% of students graduate from high school in four years. At the three high schools, more than 85% of students go on to a four-year college or university. How is it that these schools, often juxtaposed to failing secondary schools, produce such drastically different results? How can these schools ratchet up student achievement by several grade levels within one to two years and essentially eliminate the achievement gap when it comes to graduation and college admission rates? Whitman (2008) identified a top 20 list of successful reform practices for urban, high-poverty schools. They are:

(1) Tell students exactly how to behave and tolerate no disorder;
(2) Require a rigorous, college-prep curriculum;
(3) Align curriculum with state standards and specify performance outcomes;
(4) Assess students regularly and use the results to target struggling students;
(5) Keep students busy in class with a clear plan and a variety of assignments;
(6) Build a collective culture of achievement and college-going;
(7) Reject the culture of the streets;
(8) Be vigilant about maintaining school culture;
(9) Extend the school day and/or year;
(10) Monitor and enforce attendance;
(11) Welcome accountability for adults and embrace constant reassessment;
(12) Give principals and teachers more autonomy—think "charter school";
(13) Eliminate (or at least disempower) local teacher unions;
(14) Use unconventional channels to recruit committed teachers;
(15) Do not demand much from parents;
(16) Escape the constraints hobbling traditional district schools;
(17) Do not waste resources on fancy facilities or technology;
(18) Keep the school small;
(19) Track and support students after they graduate;
(20) Help create additional schools following your model. (Whitman, 2008, p. 259)

For the purpose of this paper, five of the recommendations will be briefly examined. First, No. 1 tells students exactly how to behave and tolerate no disorder, and No. 7 rejects the code of the streets, which will be examined in tandem. Instinctively, it is easy to begin to criticize these recommendations. These

recommendations can very easily be seen as wrong, egotistic, and overbearing, not to mention disrespectful of cultural differences. However, when comparing cutting students slack for undesirable behavior, because of their supposed differences verses expecting a strict code of conduct, the impact of the "soft bigotry" (Whitman, 2008, p. 4) is highlighted. Expectations for behavior must be high, they must be middle-class, and they must be demanded. Of all the qualities of the school students mentioned were desirable, feeling safe ranked number one (Whitman, 2008). This approach to behavior forces students to be successful rather than just be judged by the middle class values that not only create most school cultures, but also are what they are critiqued on for any and all achievement in life. As Chester E. Finn Jr. noted, a decade ago, "Although nearly all parents would run screaming from schools that 'call' themselves paternalistic, in practice, paternalism seems to be what many want: institutions with explicit standards for skills, knowledge, and behavior, and with the gumption to hold both teachers and pupils accountable for achieving those norms" (Whitman, 2008, p. 22). Just having all students walk through a metal detector does not guarantee that they are leaving the code of the streets at the door. Without imploring the other components proven to change the educational and life outcome of minority and low-socioeconomic students, schools simply remain being large-scale babysitters until students are expelled or reach the legal dropout age. One of the beliefs of this new breed of successful schools is that:

> … Parents want to do the right thing but often do not have the time or resources to keep their children from being dragged down by an unhealthy street culture… (T)he school helps to reinforce middle-class mores by nurturing a work ethic and culture of achievement. (Whitman, 2008, p. 28)

The next three recommendations, No. 2 requires a rigorous college prep curriculum, No. 3 aligns curriculum with state standards and specify performance outcomes, and No. 4 assesses students regularly and uses the results to target struggling students who are transformatively interconnected. "Giving disadvantaged adolescents a full and fair shot at success in life may require a period of close supervision and explicit instruction in how to learn and how to live" (Whitman, 2008, p. xvii). This intense supervision sounds like most teenagers' worst nightmare, but how else can the hidden rules of the social culture and the academic culture be explicitly taught, practiced, and ultimately transferred for students to utilize for their advantage?

In reflecting on the top 20 list of recommendations, one can certainly find them abrasive, insensitive, and unsympathetic. Yet, they seem to be working, and most surprisingly, students attending the charter schools say it is what they want (Whitman, 2008). The students know a more prosperous, stable, career-savvy lifestyle exists, and they can even see it, but it is behind a glass wall. It is not that these schools such as charter schools examined in Whitman's book do not understand the sociological foundations of the problems faced by the minority and low socio-economic students. Quite the contrary seems to be true, actually. These revolutionary schools and programs simply say, "Ok, so now what?" As Whitman (2008) wrote:

> The best way to help the poor overcome social problems and make their way out of socio-cultural cul-de-sacs… is to create policies that set clear expectations and then closely supervise beneficiaries to ensure that they meet those expectations. The key to such policies is not the behavioral requirements themselves but the monitoring and assistance provided to people to help them meet those expectations and, ideally, change their lifestyles for the better. (p. xvii)

In essence, the blame game stops at their front door and students are not made to feel inadequate, because of what they do not know or do not do. Rather, they are taught how to act, how to think, how to speak to be successful. How revolutionary to adequately and authentically educate the members of low-income and

minority populations, so that they can equitably participate in all facets of middle-class society.

However, the term "charter school" cannot be equated with success and high-test scores. As the CREDO from Stanford University recently published a report on the success rate, test scores, and sustainability of charter schools in 16 states, they concluded:

> Despite promising results in a number of states and within certain subgroups, the overall findings of this report indicate a disturbing—and far-reaching—subset of poorly performing charter schools. If charter schools are to flourish and deliver on promises made by proponents, a deliberate and sustained effort to increase the proportion of high quality schools is essential. (2009, p. 47)

Another report, Study Casts Doubt on Charter School Results, published by *Education Week*, found that charter schools perform, on average, worse than public schools with the same demographics (Maxwell, 2009). While on an individual basis, there are tremendous success stories of charter schools. The mixed results indicate the short fallings of this policy reform.

Why Charter Schools Are a Policy Distraction

The understanding that American schools are in need of transformative reform is widely agreed upon by congressmen, parents, the president, mayors, and businessmen, even if their reasons for wanting it are vastly different. The debate, and thus, the stalemate and subsequent blame game, unfolds around "the how and why" of reform.

School reform has historically been carried out in piecemeal, because of the intransigence of stakeholders including unions and school administrators, state boards of education and bureaucrats.

There is something seriously frustrating about incrementalism when applied to inner-city education. If Americans are serious about changing the lives of disadvantaged kids through schooling, we need to embrace super-schools with the power to do that, and not pretend that the schools we have today, with a minor makeover and a few new fillips, will get the job done (Whitman, 2008, p. xvi).

Indeed, the time is now to call the bluff on the piecemeal approach that has plagued and appeased school reform; however, their so-called super-schools, which is their fancy name for charter schools, is an incomplete and simplistic solution for a tremendously complex problem. As Apple (2001) claimed, "… (N)o analysis of education can be fully serious without placing at its very core a sensitivity to the ongoing struggles that constantly shape the terrain on which education operates" (p. 65). The ongoing struggles in healthcare and economics primarily are virtually discounted in the charter school movement.

It should be argued that charter schools by and large are just more of the distraction, rather than a true part of the solution to eradicating the achievement gap between different classes and races of students. As Rothstein (2004) wrote in his introduction:

> The fact that children's skills can so clearly be predicted by their race and family economic status is a direct challenge to our democratic ideals. Policy makers almost universally conclude that these existing and persistent achievement gaps must be the result of wrongly designed school policies—either expectations that are too low, teachers who are insufficiently qualified, curricula that are badly designed, classes that are too large, school climates that are too undisciplined, leadership that is too unfocused, or a combination of these. (pp. 1–2)

The sorting of students into distinct tracts of academic and life success begins in kindergarten and is typically perpetuated in every grade level. The function of kindergarten, as Barr and Dreeben (1991) wrote, "is

to transform an aggregation of children into an arrangement suitable for establishing an instructional program" (p. 76). Indeed, schools seem to more so perpetuate the inequality found in our work force and economy by assigning roles to five year-olds.

In his essay "Learning the Student Role", Harry Gracey (1975) asserted that "systematic socialization of the young" through schooling allows for society's "organization and operation, values, beliefs, and ways of living" to be maintained and continued (p. 132). Schools are, according to Gracey (1975), a "secondary institution," influenced by such "primary institutions as the economy, political system, and military" (p. 132). It is these primary institutions and bureaucracies that dictate what will be taught, how achievement will be defined, and what skills will be valued. Conflict theorists will assert that our society is designed to reward "a few" through the labors of "many" (Ballantine & Spade, 2008). Gracey (1975) claimed that students throughout their schooling are drilled to compliance, learning how to "go through routines and to follow orders with unquestioning obedience" (p. 133). Therefore, the primary institutions, controlled largely by "the few", make sure schools stay a place where students, the "many", are taught to be good direction followers and task completers.

The educational system is not solely to blame for the disparities in social and cultural capital; however, the system "reproduces and legitimates a preexisting pattern" (Bowles & Gintis, 2008, p. 41) of haves and have-nots. Schools are where "social categories become elaborated and segmented during this developmental period" (Guest & Schneider, 2003, p. 240). In other words, school is where, because of their social and cultural capital, students are labeled and classified into specific groupings and roles that will impact the rest of their formal schooling as well as professional and adult life.

Schools are where students learn where they fit into the social classes and academic roles, based on the skills and values, their social and cultural capital has given them.

Conclusions

What will happen when educators, politicians, parents, and students look back at the charter school movement in 50 years? Will it be deemed successful, transformative, and the magic pill? Will the landscape of public schools be unrecognizably better? Will all students be provided with an equitable education and similar opportunities for financial and professional success? Quite simply, no. To truly have long-lasting, transformative change in American education system, the reforms must delve further into the intricacies of the system, acknowledge and account for the interconnectedness between the economic structure of the United States and schools, and expose and change the underlying culture that perpetuates its existence. Echoing this sentiment are Tyack and Cuban (2005):

> … (T)he utopian tradition of social reform through schooling has often diverted attention from more costly, politically controversial, and difficult societal reforms. It is easier to provide vocational education than to remedy inequities in employment and gross disparities in wealth and income. (pp. 3–4)

While on an individual basis, there are some truly impressive charter schools in existence, as a movement or as a policy, charter schools yet again miss the mark of addressing the underlying systemic causes of disparities in achievement.

In support of this realization, Rothstein (Rothstein, 2004) asserted in his conclusion to "Class and Schools":

If as a society we choose to preserve big social class differences, we must necessarily also accept substantial gaps between the achievement of lower-class and middle-class children. Closing those gaps requires not only better schools, although those are certainly needed, but also reform in the social and economic institutions that presently prepare children to learn in radically different ways. It will not be cheap. Raising the achievement of lower-class children, and narrowing the gap in cognitive achievement and non-cognitive skills between these children and those from the middle class, are more ambitious undertakings than policy makers today acknowledge. … (E)liminating the social class differences in student outcomes requires eliminating the impact of social class on children in American society. It requires abandoning the illusion that school reform alone can save us from having to make the difficult economic and political decisions that the goal of equality inevitably entails. School improvement does have an important role to play, but cannot shoulder the entire burden, or even most of it, on its own. (p. 149)

Long lasting school reform does not begin with requiring all eighth graders to take Algebra or basing graduation on the passing of high stakes, end of instruction testing. These paper attempts at change are devoid of a true understanding of the myriad of sociological factors that impede students' ability and opportunity to succeed in school. Rather than stating that the requirement as all eighth graders must take Algebra, to truly lead to the type of educational and sociological improvements everyone wishes to see, the policy must be reworded to state that by the eighth grade, all students will want to take Algebra and even more advanced math, because their individual, academic, cultural, economic, and sociological needs have been met. Likewise, simply giving students more choices as to which school to attend does not make up for the fact that they are living in poverty and do not receive adequate healthcare, or that their parents cannot work at better paying jobs because public transit does not travel to suburbs, the areas typically where higher-paying jobs are found or that public housing is only available in concentrated urban settings (Anyon, 2005).

The need for policy alignment does not indicate a proper fit between mandates from all levels of government. Rather, as Anyon (2005) wrote, "… Between neighborhood, family, and student needs and the potential of education policies to contribute to their fulfillment" (p. 200). Charter schools, while they have some merits and have produced some promising results, are not the panacea policy makers and supporters tout them to be. In essence, they are more of the smoke and screen and not really an honest assessment of what is really going on in the education system and economic structure of the US. So, while there may be piecemeal improvements with charter schools, they are ultimately doomed to fail because they have completely missed the mark.

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