

EDUCATION WEEK

COMMENTARY

Piecing Together the Charter Puzzle

Simply removing barriers will not ensure quality—and may create problems.

By Greg Richmond

At age 15, charter schools are in their adolescence—kind of awkward and wondering who they will become, standing at a crossroads but not quite sure where either road leads. Like an uncomfortable teenage basketball player, the size is impressive: 4,000 schools in 15 years, with 40 states and the District of Columbia passing charter laws, and with huge demand for the schools, particularly from urban families.

The question, however, is whether this maturing movement has an ability to learn, adapt, and make its mark. Some of the success that networks of charters have shown in motivating minority and low-income learners is astounding and reflects entrepreneurial education at its finest. But there has been enough failure and excess in some charter settings that a degree of humility is

called for as well. Are we maturing enough to face ourselves and admit our mistakes? Is it time to tone down the in-your-face challenges to the status quo? Might we study the results and civilly and honestly explain what we have learned? If we do, might districts begin to use chartering strategically to move entire public school systems forward?

When charter schools were first established during the 1990s, advocates believed that the key to success was the removal of barriers. State regulations, union contracts, and district bureaucracies were identified as the barriers to school quality. Charter schools, it was thought, would excel within a free market of competition if only those barriers were removed.

As the American economy boomed, the free market was viewed as so powerful that the most significant barrier of all was the barrier to entry into the marketplace. States that had

low barriers to entry—those where it was easy to obtain approval to open a school, and where there were no caps on the number of schools—were described by some charter advocates as having “strong” charter school laws.

The prevailing 1990s philosophy was that the best role for government was to eliminate barriers and get out of the way. As an adolescent sometimes learns the most important lessons the hard way, so we’ve learned that this philosophy was wrong. States like Texas and Ohio followed this philosophy, hastily creating hundreds of charter schools, many of them of low quality. Those states have been rocked by years of low charter test scores, financial scandals, and bad press, obscuring their stellar schools’ success stories. Both are now paying for their excesses. Late last year, *proponents* of charter schools in the Ohio legislature passed legislation to automatically close any charter

school that fails to meet certain performance targets. A similar bill is now advancing in Texas.

If we are to establish high-quality charter schools at scale, it is not sufficient to simply knock down barriers and get out of the way. We must create new systems of support based on innovation and flexibility. These emerging organizations must be anti-bureaucracies that foster informed choice, protect school autonomy, and provide the public real accountability. They replace the old, traditional central office that attempted to achieve quality through regulation, centralization, standardization, and the direct operation of schools by government.

Nationally, this new system includes organizations such as New Leaders for New Schools to develop and support new principals, Teach For America to recruit and train a new generation of teachers, the Local Initiatives Support Corp. to provide facility-funding solutions, and the NewSchools Venture Fund to provide investment capital to education entrepreneurs. Charter school management organizations, such as the Knowledge Is Power

Program (KIPP), Lighthouse Academies, Uncommon Schools, and High Tech High, provide an array of ongoing support services to the schools that operate under their umbrellas. Within states and cities, there are charter school associations and resource centers, such as the pivotal New Schools for New Orleans, which is helping attract talent and resources to rebuild that devastated city. New Orleans currently has 57 percent of its students in charters.

The New Orleans story is an important example. When all the standard aspects of schooling—the “taken for granted” parts of public education—were washed away by Hurricane Katrina, a remarkable consensus formed in Louisiana that chartering was the right way to both rebuild and rethink the schools. New Orleans now has a greater proportion of students enrolled in charter schools than any other city in the nation. After Katrina, the state’s leaders recognized that the charter school model provided the dexterity to reopen schools quickly, and to ensure that the old, dysfunctional school system of New Orleans was not rebuilt. They moved decisively, taking action to open dozens of charter schools while holding firm on

quality and accountability. My organization has been active in authorizing Louisiana’s charters for the past year.

The future of public education in New Orleans must be considered in light of the philosophical evolution that has occurred within the charter movement nationally over the past decade. Schools need supports—we know that now. In 1995, when Louisiana first passed its charter school law, we simply did not understand all of these needs, nor conceive of the organizations that would meet them. To be clear: It is possible to produce a small number of high-quality charter schools without these supports, but to produce a *large* number of high-quality schools, we need a new system.

In Louisiana, the state’s Recovery School District (which, amazingly, got its name before the storm) is at the center of this new system, which must now assume a proactive role in creating a vision, planning, and establishing predictability and stability. The people who want to create high-quality new schools need to understand the state’s long-term

vision and plan, and how the new system will work.

The supply and demand for public education resources in New Orleans must be managed. What does that mean? In short, it means that the state can't simply knock down barriers and get out of the way. It needs to play an active role in identifying challenges and developing solutions.

This begins with establishing a vision for the number of schools, types of schools, and distribution of schools the city will need over the next five years. By "type," I mean the grade levels of each building, enrollment size, and any desired curricular focus. Do the city and the state want to encourage small, personal high schools, or large departmental high schools, or a mix? Do they want to establish special schools in the performing arts? What about schools focused on rebuilding the urban landscape, or on the environment, or on math and science? How should these schools be distributed throughout the city? This is an exciting opportunity to engage the community and establish a vision for public education in New Orleans. And it is fundamentally different from the 1990s version of charter

schools, in which planners would simply wait and see who happened to apply.

After establishing a vision, there must be sound processes for making that vision take shape. What's needed is a five-year action plan that explains how New Orleans is going to get from where it is today to where it wants to be. How many new schools each year? Where? What types?

Each year, the state needs to ask for schools. Leaders should put out a "request for proposals" that solicits applications for the types of schools in the plan. If they want a small math and science high school in the Uptown section, or a 600-student Montessori elementary school in Gentilly, they should release proposal requests that ask for this. They are thus driving public education to achieve an agreed-upon vision, rather than simply reacting to others and creating a hodgepodge.

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In New Orleans, the hardest part is ensuring that the city will actually get the schools it needs. This is where it is important to work with external groups, like those I have mentioned, to make sure schools can have strong leaders, talented teachers, and dedicated governing boards. It appears that the national groups are responding.

The state must then hold these schools to high standards and stay out of their day-to-day business. There is a never-ending pressure for the people who work in central offices to tell the people who work in schools how to run them. Louisiana must not make this mistake. Here is where getting out of the way is the *right* thing to do.

If the state and city follow this recipe, I am confident that New Orleans will become a beacon for the finest educational talent in the country and, in less than five years, will have the best public schools in America.

Districts across the country are unlikely to hit high quality marks in the decade ahead without doing essentially the same: asking for talent to step forward, pushing authority out of the central office, and creating

a portfolio of schools, some of which are not under the district's direct control, but all of which are providing the options that families desire.

As we make the transition from an adolescent movement into a mature segment of the public education landscape, I believe we're ready to face our missteps. It's time to admit

that in simply getting out of the way, we failed to plan for and support the growth of high-quality charter school communities. Let's learn from that and improve how we support our charter schools, in New Orleans and around the country. If we do, districts can begin to use chartering strategically to move all of public education forward.

And isn't that what we wanted in the first place?

Greg Richmond is the president of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, which has headquarters in Chicago. This essay is adapted from a speech he gave to a meeting of the Louisiana board of elementary and secondary education in February.



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