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Blog: Will charter schools survive the confusing charter movement?

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There has been a flood of news about charter schools recently, and in the following post, Jeff Bryant, a marketing and communications consultant for nonprofits, tries to make sense of it. Bryant is a marketing and creative strategist with nearly 30 years of experience – the past 20 on his own – as a freelance writer, consultant, and search engine marketing provider. He has also written extensively about public education policy. This post appeared on the [Education Opportunity Network](#), a new online publication edited by Bryant.

By Jeff Bryant

America's education policies are brimming with contradiction. Schools, we're told, need more standardization, but parents need more choices, which standardization precludes. Teachers need to be held to more accountability, but entry into the teaching force needs to be easier with fewer qualifications.

This kind of contradiction applies to one of the more contentious ideas often equated to school "reform" as well – charter schools.

Just as states across the country are ramping up efforts to increase the number of charters, loosen government regulations of these schools and transfer accountability responsibilities from local boards and education administrative bodies to charter enthusiasts, proponents of charter schools are calling for tougher oversight of these schools that would result in many more of them being closed down.

If all that seems at cross-purposes to you – and potentially, a colossal waste of time and money, not to mention a risky experiment on our children – then you simply do not understand the guiding principles of what has become known as the "charter school movement."

The existence of charter schools is, of course, nothing new. But the creation and expansion of charter schools is now being referred to as not just an idea for creating better schools in a community but as a “movement” with a messianic goal to expand the power and influence of education “reformers.”

While the intent of some charter backers may have at one time been for educators and parents in a community to create a different learning space for students who weren’t being well served, that’s all changed now. Charters have instead ventured into a brave new world of a movement contradictory to the ends it purports to serve.

The Face Of Charter Movement-Building

If you’re not clear that the charter school movement is now mostly about creating charter schools for charter school’s sake, look at what’s happening in North Carolina.

This past week, a [new bill was introduced in the state Senate](#) that would significantly weaken the oversight of the state’s charter schools and expand their numbers. [An analysis by Rob Shofield](#) of the left-leaning NC Policy Watch group, stated that “the proposed legislation makes charter schools even less accountable than they already are” by “replacing review bodies with cheerleaders,” diluting the qualifications of teachers allowed to work in the school, and keeping funds appropriated for failing charters in the hands of private interests instead of returning money to the state.

These concerns caused the editorial staff of [The Charlotte Observer](#) to notice that the bill would remove “a lot of charter school accountability.”

Nevertheless, according to the progressive NC policy Watch group, the bill had the “[full support](#)” of charter school activists and the conservative belief-tank community in the state. This charter school proposal in North Carolina is not an isolated case. Other, similar bills have been trumpeted by conservative lawmakers in [Arkansas](#), [Ohio](#), [Tennessee](#), and [Texas](#). According to Valerie Strauss at [The Washington Post’s The Answer Sheet](#) blog, “more than half of the states with charter-school laws” now provide loopholes to circumvent charter regulation.

In some states, charter enthusiasts are now even pushing for these schools to be exempted from new [Common Core standards](#) and assessments that are being demanded of traditional public schools across the nation.

The wave of charter school loophole proliferation is decidedly counter to what leading charter proponents have been proposing.

What About Charter “Quality?”

Shortly after this current school year began, the principal trade group for charters, The National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA), proposed the need for “tougher laws” governing charters and “said it’s time to rein in growth and focus on quality” according to USA Today’s [Greg Toppo](#).

NACSA reported their concern arose from the finding that “as many as 1,300 charter schools are in the lowest 15 percent of schools.” Nevertheless, states allowed the vast majority of charters to continue operation, blocking “fewer than one in seven schools” from renewal of their contracts. Stories of low-quality charter schools, in fact, have now become routine in local and national news.

This past week, school officials in [Ohio](#) reported that a new rating system developed by Gov. John Kasich’s administration would grade over 70 percent of the states’ charters schools “F.” The president of the Ohio Alliance for Public Charter Schools said the grades “skewed charter schools’ results” because some of the student populations the charters serve are more challenging. But certainly traditional public schools serve many of these same challenging student populations as well.

Meanwhile, another [recent report](#) from Ohio, revealed the state’s “charter schools cost the state twice as much per student as traditional schools” to operate.

Outside Ohio, education historian [Diane Ravitch](#) looked at a recent study about the record of charter schools in Milwaukee, which extends over 20 years. She found, “There is no significant difference between the performance of public schools and charter schools. However, public schools in Milwaukee are more successful with the poorest students than are charter schools.” Also recently, a study by a Stanford-affiliated organization looked at the issue of charter school quality and found similar troubling signs that underperformance among charters was a significant and widespread problem. According to [the study](#), “the performance of charter schools varies widely, even after state policy differences are taken into account,” and “high-performing charter schools are in the minority.”

Further, the study found there was great “uncertainty of successful replication” of good quality charter schools. For instance, charter school “chains, called Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) “on average are not dramatically better than non-CMO schools in terms of their contributions to student learning.”

Although the researchers concluded that some CMOs perform vastly better than others, the same can be said for traditional public schools, which casts doubt that there is something magic about charters that would give them vast powers to improve the performance of American K-12 education in general.

Last week, widespread problems with poor quality charter schools prompted *The New York Times* to declare in an editorial:

Despite a growing number of studies showing that charter schools are generally no better – and often are worse – than their traditional counterparts, the state and local agencies and organizations that grant the charters have been increasingly hesitant to shut down schools, even those that continue to perform abysmally for years on end. If the movement is to maintain its credibility, the charter authorizers must shut down failed schools quickly and limit new charters to the most credible applicants, including operators who have a demonstrated record of success. The revelation that charter schools have a quality problem is not lost on charter backers. Back to the USA Today article, Toppo quoted charter school proponent Caprice Young, “onetime head of the California Charter School Association,” who said the move to toughen standards on charters was “long overdue.”

Another charter advocate, Nina Rees of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, chimed in that “authorizers” needed to “to get it right, whatever the numbers may be.”

Forgive My Noting

Certainly if more charter schools are going to be shut down, someone has to do it. There has to be criteria for the closures, a system of notification and appeal, and a plan for determining what to do with students when their schools are closed. A board of charter school chums appointed by the governor hardly seems up to the job. So something that resembles “government regulation” and someone resembling “government regulators” seems to be in order here.

Also, when charters are shut down, it would seem to make sense to create a means of ensuring charters of a similar nature don't replace the closed schools. That also undoubtedly requires something resembling dreaded "government bureaucrats."

Further, when charters do out-perform regular neighborhood schools, someone has to ensure they aren't simply gaming the system. For instance, a recent analysis at the website of [The Atlanta Journal and Constitution](#) looked at student populations of Georgia's charters and saw a "demographic discrepancy between their student body and that of the area they serve," which would likely skewer the charter schools' academic results higher.

These discrepancies went beyond race and income. Author Jay Bokman noted that in rural parts of the state, "charters attract students who would otherwise attend private schools," which would artificially push their numbers up higher. Also, because "charters can require parents to volunteer as a condition of attendance, they draw families in which parental involvement – and the workplace and transportation flexibility needed to be parentally involved – are a given." Bokman concluded, "That dynamic is an important reason to leave the authority to create charters with local officials who know their own communities" – in other words, more bureaucracy.

In short, the whole movement-driven notion that charter school proliferation should be enabled by lifting regulations and bureaucracy is completely contradictory to the imperative for higher quality charter schools.

A Pogo Moment For Charter Schools

An impartial observer of charter schools, Rutgers professor [Bruce Baker](#), once hoped charters would be a possible source of "some creative, energetic leadership . . . that might be associated with a mission-driven start-up school, coupled with an ounce or two of deregulation."

Recently, however, his perception has changed. "This whole movement has gotten way out of control – it has morphed dramatically – especially the punditry and resultant public policy surrounding charter schooling. Sadly, I'm reaching a point where I now believe that the end result is causing more harm than good."

Baker concluded, "Many charter schools, and certainly the political movement of charter schooling, are no longer operating in the public interest."

Really, a quote from the USA Today article cited above said it all. When confronted with the evidence that poor quality charter schools are now more-so the norm than not, NACSA's leader Greg Richmond declared, "We didn't start the charter school movement in order to create more underperforming schools."

What Richmond apparently didn't realize is that when you morph an idea or a strategy into a "movement," you're no longer in charge of where the movement leads.

For any charter school enthusiast concerned about creating good schools, this is your Pogo moment when your search for the "enemy" of your "movement" has led you to a mirror. Look closely. Whether charter schools survive as a legitimate outcome of the collective effort of local citizens to educate children or become a scourge of low quality institutions devouring the common good for the sake of its own proliferation now depends mostly on you.

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