

# **CHARTERING IS BOTH AN INNOVATION AND A FRAMEWORK FOR INNOVATION**

**Ted Kolderie, Education/Evolving**

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Chartering was a radical change in the arrangements for public education; an institutional innovation, not a program or pedagogical innovation.

When the idea appeared the issue was the institutional change. The barriers were disbelief – Albert Hirschman nicely said that nobody believes in creative discoveries until they have happened . . . which may fairly describe the Ford Foundation’s decision to recognize Minnesota’s 1991 charter law in 2000 . . . and, of course, the opposition everywhere of all the major elements in the traditional institution.

That opposition was overcome by the support the innovation received from legislators and governors. All conventional wisdom political said no idea so disruptive could be enacted against the opposition of those groups. It was enacted because governors and legislators saw how powerfully chartering would serve the state interest. Research, so far as I could see, played no role in

what emerged. It was, as a friend said, “intuitively obvious” for experienced political people.

Governors and legislatures had long been enormously frustrated by the unwillingness of the institution to change, by its inability to control its costs and by its inability to get young people to learn. But they were told they had no choice: If they wanted to remain within public education they had to work within its institutional ‘givens’.

Suddenly they saw that was not so. If the districts did not respond they could “get somebody else who will”. They were not limited to trying to change old schools: They could create new schools . . . and within the principles of public education. This was liberating. If you were around the country in those years you came to know the big smile that spread over the face when suddenly they saw it.

- o Chartering withdrew the ‘exclusive’ of the district. Boards could charter. But somebody other than the superintendent could start and run a public school. And where an ‘alternate’ sponsor was provided somebody else could offer public education in the community.

- o Chartering created a radically different structure of incentives. it introduced new reasons to change combined with new opportunities to change. It was a contract arrangement, with control based on performance rather than on

process. For the first time there was a real prospect that schools that did not work could be closed. To the idea of choice were added the choic/es needed to make innovation feasible politically.

So it is not surprising that state policy leadership has maintained and continued to enlarge this innovative sector of public education. Its inner dynamics have caused the sector to evolve almost continuously; unfolding new and unexpected variations in the laws and in the schools; in the governance of the schools and in the learning programs they use. Chartering as an institutional innovation has proved to be a framework, a superior medium, for program and pedagogical innovation.

Chartering includes contracting, so the sector has become an opportunity for EMOs and for the testing of the contract model. Teacher-ownership, for example, is an innovative form of leadership. It is now clear that teachers in professional partnerships can contract to run a department, school or program, with the administrators working for them. This creates more new incentives, with yet-untapped potential. It is fascinating to think how the questions of teacher retention, teacher recruitment, teacher quality, teacher compensation, teacher professional development and the improvement of teacher practice might change if we pulled out the assumption of teacher-employment and rethought the questions on the assumption that teachers could work with partners in professional groups they collectively own.

There are also innovative models of learning emerging. Some new secondary schools are breaking away from what Whitehead called “the fatal unconnectedness of academic disciplines”, and are using electronics to individualize student work in ways that are both important to teachers and powerfully motivating for students. This matters.

Chartering helps solve other problems as well . . . as, how to get choic/es to educationally-disadvantaged students *where they live*. But what was decisive for this innovation was the leverage it provided for state policy leadership to turn K-12 at last into a self-improving institution.

This is still its power. it will be very hard for this country to get the schools it needs by changing the schools it has . . . and risky for governors and legislators to keep all the chips bet on re-forming existing schools. Prudently, the states should move also with a comparable effort to create the different and better schools new. Because it can produce different schools more quickly the charter sector will be important also as a superior medium for the replication of proven models.

We do have to experiment with new learning models. The revolution represented by the web makes this imperative. Online, young people have vastly greater opportunities for research and learning than ever before. The uses they make of this opportunity and the skills they display are impressive. This challenges our institutions to adapt. Libraries are now adapting . . .

becoming “information-access-centers”. We have no real idea yet how school will adapt. That will need a lot of thinking; a lot of experimentation.

In this process as in any essentially R&D process there will be failures. The process does not fail when things-tried fail. Charter/ing does not fail when schools fail. 3M and IBM would surely not apply to their R&D programs the no-defects standard they apply to their production processes. So charter/ing and the schools-chartered must be evaluated by different standards: the schools in terms of whether students learn; charter/ing in terms of its capacity both to replicate proven models of schools and to generate kinds of schools that are innovative in their governance, management, patterns of resource-use and in their approaches to teaching and learning.

That is one word of advice I would offer to the OII, as it thinks about chartering as an approach to innovation and improvement. It does seem to be itself an innovating sector. It is continuously evolving. Let the process run.

The other is to help in every possible way to strengthen the institutional foundations of the charter sector. There is a considerable effort in the country just now to ‘scale up’ this sector . . . to speed up the process of new-school-creation. But that effort focuses on schools and their operators; on generating more proposals and political and financial support for the schools created.

This is important. But there must also be serious work done to improve (a) the arrangements for sponsoring, authorizing, approving the new schools, (b) the state-level mechanisms for overseeing both sponsors and schools, and (c) the public-interest rationale for a major program of new-school-creation.

- o Sponsors have, everywhere, been passive. Someone else makes a proposal for a school; the sponsor/authorizer says 'yes' or 'no'. Some sponsors should also be pro-active; developing ideas of their own both about the educational needs of the community and about what are quality models of learning. It would also be helpful to have more sponsors like the D.C. Public Charter Schools Board, whose only job is to generate quality public schools new.

- o The state agencies overseeing this new sector were not built for innovation. They are heavily oriented to regulation; to traditional ways of operating; strongly tied to the district sector which dislikes the new, disruptive innovation. State policy leadership needs to create new and separate entities to over see the new, innovative sector it is developing.

- o Finally, there needs to be a stronger rationale. it needs to be clearer that this innovative new sector is necessary in the public interest . . . that it is a central strategy for the states in making the K-12 institution a self-improving institution, both by creating different and better schools new and by giving districts and their boards the incentives they need to improve the schools they have.