

BY TED KOLDERIE



# Is Chartering, as a Strategy, *Succeeding?*



I want to explain how chartering can be succeeding even if not all the schools chartered are succeeding.

Many people think the success of the idea must be measured simply by the success of the schools created and they want to measure the success of these schools by conventional standards: scores on tests. The schools and the strategy are different things, however, and each needs to be measured and evaluated separately.

Chartering is the strategy, adopted by most states in the 1990s, of opening a sector of public education in which schools may be created new by a district, or in some cases by another entity designated by law. A country trying to do an educational job it has never done before will need different schools; will need to move away from the notion that there is any one best, right, kind of school for all kids. And it is easier to be different when starting new.

So when we ask, “is chartering working?” we want to know whether schools do get created, what kind of schools they are, how they differ from existing schools, and what is innovative in their approach to learning, in their governance and in the culture they establish. To call them ‘charter schools’ tells us nothing: A chartered school is not a kind of school. A charter is simply permission to start a school. Kids don’t learn from charters: Kids learn from the kind of school people create when they receive a charter. Somebody needs to describe the schools created; tell us clearly what they are and how they work.

If we knew this we could evaluate the schools’ performance; could look to see how a school’s size, its learning model, its organization, its governance and its culture affect its students’ learning and then draw conclusions about the kinds of schools that prove more successful. Note, though, there is more to ‘success’ than test scores. Families have multiple goals for their children. They want better learning, to be sure, but also – and quite reasonably – they want social, physical and civic development and of course safe custody. There is also, as we will see, more to the success of chartering than the success of its schools.

## WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT CHARTERING

At the moment, unhappily, we do not have the information we need to evaluate the success of chartering. We know how many schools are created, and where they are and how large they are. But we don’t know what the schools are as schools. We lack good information about their approaches to learning, their governance and their culture and about their broader effects on young people and on the larger system.

Most research has accepted the mushy notion of ‘charter schools’ then tried to compare the schools created under these

laws with district schools. As John Witte of the University of Wisconsin has noted, research moves quickly to ‘most’ and ‘on the whole’ and ‘overall.’ So researchers’ have simply asked how ‘charter schools’ are doing, how ‘their’ students are scoring. This is lazy and too often ideological, on both sides, essentially a part of the political debate about the states’ decision to withdraw the districts’ traditional exclusive. Only a few researchers seem interested in describing and classifying the schools in terms of their approach to learning, their governance and their culture; then relating learning to these things that actually affect learning.

So what can we say now about chartering and about its success? Well, we can talk about four things that are intuitively obvious about this new sector. We can then fit things we see and hear about chartered schools into these categories. And we can urge researchers to use these categories in a serious effort now to learn how chartering is working.

### IS CHARTERING INNOVATING, ‘CUSTOMIZING’ LEARNING?

It is probably easier to produce truly different approaches to learning by creating schools new than by trying to turn existing schools into something dramatically different. So chartering is likely to prove the preferred strategy, for the kids historically left behind.

The country has said it seriously intends to educate the quarter or more of students who have never learned well in conventional schools. Almost certainly this will require schools that are different in fundamental ways from conventional school. Surely the burden of proof is on those who suggest that young people who have never learned well in traditional schools suddenly will learn well, simply because the law now tells their districts that they must.

Not all the schools chartered are innovative but some are. The schools differ widely, as everyone acknowledges. Some use a known model of learning. Some try a new model. Some have teachers talking to kids in groups. Some have kids working independently. Some use courses some are project-based. Some are low-tech some are high-tech. In some, kids wear uniforms and in others they dress as they please. Some have principals and employ teachers while others have no leader, but are professional learning communities in which teachers make decisions collegially. Some

are nonprofit. Some are commercial. Some are autonomous unit operations and some belong to a centrally-managed group.

We urgently need to know what and where the breakthrough innovations are. To see the innovations, the exceptional cases, researchers will have to look for particular schools. This is apparent if you think about the efforts to fly heavier-than-air craft. For years all manner of contraptions crashed. Generalizing about these efforts you could validly have said that even in December 1903, after those two brothers from Dayton reported their success at Kitty Hawk, most heavier-than-air craft could not fly. But what difference did that ‘most’ make after Wilbur and Orville had gotten it right?



Probably the most important innovation to watch is the way some schools are now customizing learning for the individual student.

The Internet, the web, the data bases, the search engines and the courses on disk now make it increasingly possible for students to be in touch with the world of knowledge directly. This makes it increasingly possible to depart from the course-and-class model of the teacher ‘instructing’ a group of students moving together through the material all at the same speed. Students can increasingly work individually, moving more slowly if they need to and more rapidly if they are able to. This in turn has the potential to let teachers be planners and managers of learning rather than (horrible phrase) “deliverers of education.”

Customization can have huge implications for making education more motivat-

ing for students, which can in turn make school both more successful academically and more productive economically.

Most areas of life now offer the diversity of goods and services that lets people customize. Think about housing, home furnishing, clothing, communications, entertainment, food, investment and transportation. For years education was largely standardized. Now chartering gives public education the capacity to get out of the old one-best-way mentality, to diversify its offerings, with families choosing among these offerings.

### IS CHARTERING IMPROVING SOCIAL EQUITY?

Chartering also has the capacity to reduce the inequity created by the districting of public education, which gives those with private resources the opportunity to select the schools they want but leaves few choices for those without the resources to move or to enroll in private school. Inter-district open enrollment provides choice but requires students to travel. Chartering makes choices available where the students live.

Research does report student demographics, so we know that – although states vary – the charter sector often disproportionately serves low-income students and students of color and they do provide new options to parents who previously had to take whatever the district offered. So chartering has the capacity to improve social equity.

But while this is true of the new sector as a whole, it is not always true of individual schools. Often they have either generally advantaged or generally disadvantaged students. While the new school might be an improvement over the school a disadvantaged student had attended before, we want to realize more than this on the social-equity front.

It would be interesting to know if customization might help. A school that individualizes and customizes learning might find diversity easier to achieve. Inherently, though, chartering has the capacity to provide the choices needed to improve social equity; that reduce the ability of the district, as Albert Shanker put it when president of the American Federation of Teachers, “to take its customers for granted.”

### IS CHARTERING CREATING A HEALTHIER SCHOOL CULTURE?

Chartering has major potential to improve school culture, and seems to be realizing ►

## Powerful forces are DRIVING CHARTERING. The states must find a way to educate students who have never learned well.

that potential. The different culture appearing is one of the most striking, though least researched and least noticed, aspects of the charter sector. (See “Positive School Culture” at [www.educationevolving.org](http://www.educationevolving.org)). These schools are significantly smaller. Size matters. I heard a former superintendent from Iowa ask the lead teacher in the Avalon School in Saint Paul, Minnesota how it handles discipline problems. “We don’t have discipline problems,” she said. Avalon is a small high school that treats its students as adults and involves them seriously in decisions about its policies. I heard a teacher there tell a legislative committee “every adult in our school knows every student in our school.”

Public education should pay attention to school culture, to the way people treat each other. There is some problem about this in conventional schools. For a sense of the culture in a suburban high school read Elinor Burkett’s *Another Planet*. Safety is a problem some places. So is the anonymity, created as adults for their purposes over the years made high schools ever larger. Culture matters, in itself and as a contributor to student success.

### IS CHARTERING CHANGING PUBLIC EDUCATION?

#### Can chartering change public education and, if so, how?

Chartered schools represent a small fraction of the schools and of total enrollment. Seeing this, many people put down the potential of new schools; think the only practical course is to improve the schools where most kids are. Some who support chartering think it will stimulate the districts to change.

#### What can we reasonably say?

First, be cautious about the ‘competitive effect.’ Chartered schools cannot change district schools, only districts can change district schools. And in the district sector change is easier said than done. Some will change some things but the ‘transformation’ strategy is suspect.

Recent work on organizational theory is compelling, especially by Clayton Christensen of the Harvard Business School. In a major presentation to the 2005 National

Forum of the Education Commission of the States (ECS) he showed that organizations in the private sector, despite the incentive of competition and with all the authority of their executives, can depart only marginally from their traditional model. Firms change more than incrementally, Christensen said, only when they set up a new organization to do the new job. In 1960 there were 316 full-line department-store companies in America; today there are 12. Only one – Dayton-Hudson Corporation – made the transition successfully into discounting. It did so by creating a separate organization: Target Stores.



It will be up to state policy leadership, as ‘top management’ for the education enterprise, to create the new-schools sector. The states can do this, where the districts probably cannot. To improve enough, quickly enough, the states should now expand the new-schools sector while continuing to do whatever can be done to cause the districts to change existing schools.

#### We need to evaluate chartering by a different yardstick.

Opponents of change always insist that the new must do everything the old could do, while creating no new problems of its own. That’s roughly the test opponents of chartering are setting today. But major innovation is usually addressed to new needs, so has to be evaluated in different terms. Christensen pointed out to ECS that the Sony Walkman was not a quality radio as radio was judged by the standard of that time. But teenagers did not care

about high-fidelity sound and well-made cabinets. They wanted something different: portability and the ability to take their music to the beach.

New schools will be different schools and will change old concepts of school, of learning and of ‘performance.’ They will need to be evaluated on a different metric. Innovative schools will have to be evaluated over time. Nobody gets everything right on the first try.

Because it challenges old notions, chartering will continue to be controversial and to be resisted. But the resistance is probably a sign of success and not of failure. As those experienced in change have noted, resistance is always proportional to the scale of the change being attempted. The progress of the change can be measured by the intensity of the resistance.

Powerful forces are driving chartering. The states must find ways to educate students who have never learned well. They need a strategy that does not rely exclusively on changing existing schools. States need to capture the potential of new technologies. They need an alternative to the present unsustainable, labor-intensive model of school. It is very important to know that high schools can be educationally and economically viable with fewer than 200 students. The poor want and deserve the choices available to those with money. Students must have a more motivating learning experience. Teachers deserve the opportunity to be professionals at last.

If research looked carefully at the new-schools sector, it would see these things emerging. So chartering, with its superior capacity to develop new schools that are different, is looking increasingly like the preferred strategy for state policy leadership and for the nation.

We need research now to get beyond meaningless generalizations about ‘charter schools’ and to identify, describe and classify the new models appearing so the country can get about the serious job of replicating innovation. ■

*Ted Kolderie is a Senior Associate with Education/Evolving in Minnesota and one of the founders of the charter school movement.*