

Remarks on CRPE 2008 Report on Charter Schools

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I want to thank the Center for inviting me to comment on its 2008 report on charter schools. This is a very interesting set of papers and issues. It is very important that the Center publishes an annual collection like this because charter schools aren't going away, at least as long as traditional public school reform continues to move as slowly as it has.

Charter schools hold great promise as a beacon for dramatic improvement of public education and indeed as a new kind of education for a group of students who so often have been denied choices and remained trapped in struggling schools. But as the authors note, the quality of charter schools is quite uneven and there are pressures that compromise their flexibility and ability and freedom to innovate. It is a balancing act and getting the balance right is something I struggle with as a policy wonk and also a member of a charter school Board of Directors.

I am a strong believer in accountability for taxpayer dollars sent to public schools, including charter schools, as measured by achievement gains on tests. But I see how the accountability framework as now designed can frustrate creativity in developing new learning strategies. An important thing that the federal government can do much more of is invest in experimentation and deep evaluation of the experiments. This includes charter schools, new human resource practices, and a variety of support services for schools and districts, but more about that in a moment.

So here are my comments on these five papers—though just three have been discussed today. I will also make a few comments on what the federal government could do to support high-quality charter schools.

Betts and Tang's report on charter school research is horrifying on one level with only 13 of 70 studies being deemed sophisticated. One of the tragic things about education

research is its uneven quality. When you combine that with the media's seeming inability to distinguish good from weak research, you end up with a generally negative picture of charter schools and their benefits for a group of students who have never had choices before. I find this unfortunate. Indeed, last week I was with a group of MA Title I administrators. When I noted that MA is the highest performing state on NAEP, they told me that the local media never praises the state on leading the nation, but is constantly criticizing its performance. Sure the state isn't where it wants to be, but progress should be celebrated.

Betts and Tang found positive results for elementary and middle school students in charter schools. But they also found negative results for charter high schools and this is in a report that provides exciting profiles by Hill on wildly successful college prep high schools. There is a disconnect here. This seems to clearly call for significant changes in some charter high schools that are serving low-income and minority students or the need for their closure.

But Hill's discussion of these successful high schools calls for something more. He notes that these very demanding, strict college prep high schools are similar to the inner-city Catholic schools that served poor and minority students well for many years but have been closing over the past few decades. He concludes that there is an unmet and growing inner-city demand for schools that value intellectual hard work and attainment by their students. Charter schools and school districts themselves have an obligation to respond to this demand.

The federal government can play a role in multiplying high schools with the characteristics of these schools. When the ESEA reauthorization is considered—I don't use NCLB any more—there is very likely to be major new funding program for high schools serving mostly low-income students since barely 10% of high schools are funded under Title I. It is essential that the legislation call for new federal investment in high schools—be they traditional or charter—that use core elements of these successful schools.

Gross and Pochop make some similar points to Hill about how charter schools organize instruction. I'm especially interested in charter school use of expanded learning time. Indeed, we at the Center for American Progress have been aggressively advocating for lengthening the school day, week, and year in high-poverty schools based on the practices of charter schools. I really expect that a federal investment, perhaps a demonstration program, expanding learning time for all students in a school is likely to be recommended by the new Administration. As you may know, MA has initiated a program of support for such schools.

The Lake and Jacobs paper on charter schools serving special-needs students is especially interesting and offers lessons for traditional as well as charter schools who struggle with how to educate students with disabilities. I really urge you to take these findings and your important recommendations to the Department of Education's Office of Special Education and the advocates for students with disabilities. Right now there is constant criticism about how charters fail to serve students with disabilities, but clearly this need not be.

There are other important, uninvestigated areas for research on charter schools. One is the use of a character-focused curriculum or behavioral code of conduct. Many successful charter schools seem to incorporate such an approach.

I also wanted to make a couple of comments on the Hess and Manno paper that has not been discussed here. In a way it is an outlier and about much more than charter schools. It discusses entrepreneurial ventures and the increasingly complex segmentation of demand from education institutions themselves. This segmented demand is met by niche providers, be they TFA, NLNS, and TNTP which provide human resource services—specifically the recruitment of talented adult workers in schools—or curriculum providers for literacy or special education or back office support.

Hess and Manno point out that niche providers are just as important for charter schools and CMOs as for traditional schools and districts. They are a major force in promoting successful education reforms and their scaling up. They are new entities—entrepreneurs if you will—and their systematic expansion and value-added to urban school systems particularly is one of the most exciting and hopeful developments we have. Hess and Manno caution the choice movement that it too must think in terms of segmented or chunked demands for services and not expect a whole school approach to be the key to charter school success. Their essay needs to be unpacked with further research and examples.

In the end we need to remember Lake's comment in the beginning that charter schools are more different than alike. We all need a much better understanding of this. President-Elect Obama has stated his support for charter schools. But hopefully in addition to investment in them his Administration will sponsor much deeper research about the nature of those that succeed as well as deeper understanding of those that fail. We also must hope that he will make substantial investments in the development of state data systems, because without them researchers like those with us today will be limited in what they can explore.