

Overview

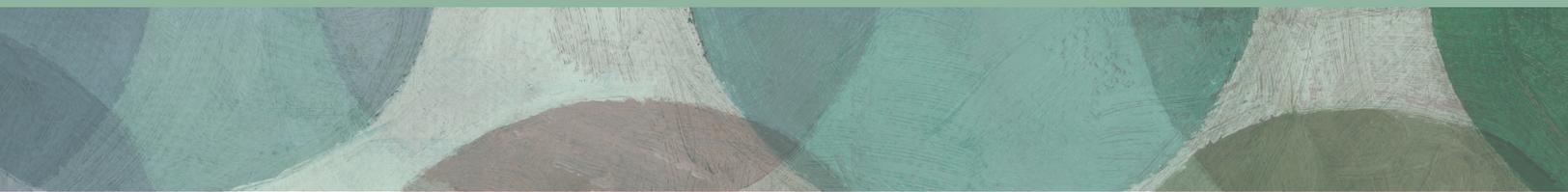
Will the Charter Movement Rest on Its Laurels or Innovate and Expand?

Robin J. Lake



Hopes, Fears, & Reality

A BALANCED LOOK AT AMERICAN CHARTER SCHOOLS IN 2012



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More than 20 years after the charter sector was born, charter schools have become a mature presence in U.S. public education. Charter schools educate a significant number of students in most major U.S. cities. From a ragged start marked by diverse—and sometimes vague—goals, the sector has evolved into one where the quality of outcomes is generally understood to be the central concern. Since the first charter law was enacted in 1991, the movement has grown steadily, with 300 to 400 new charter schools added each year, and with the best schools being replicated through charter management organizations (CMOs). As our last issue of *Hopes, Fears, & Reality* highlighted, charter schools are now partnering with major urban school districts, developing agreements and infrastructure to support shared enrollment systems, special education, facilities, and instructional best practices. Even my home state of Washington passed charter school legislation in 2012 (on the fourth attempt in 13 years). Today, only eight states still do not allow charter schools. It is hard to envision the future of U.S. public education without an ongoing role for the charter sector.

So where does the movement go from here? In a way, it has fulfilled one of its core missions—equity for students—by establishing itself as a primarily urban phenomenon with significant chains of schools that are closing achievement gaps. But innovation is another core mission of the charter founders, so it would be a shame if charter leaders took their successes for granted and became a strong but largely static element of public education.

Will the sector place itself at the leading edge of innovation? Some signs point to no. For instance, I recently conducted a quick survey of school providers and association leaders in the charter sector to see whether they were prepared to implement the Common Core State Standards. To a large extent, they were not prepared to do so. The Common Core State Standards are the next big thing for



U.S. students, so the sluggishness of charters in this area is surprising for a movement that has often positioned itself as the research and development sector for public education. There are other areas of concern as well:

- We have seen tensions as more charter schools fight to get a foothold in suburban areas. Today, are charter schools more likely to open in more advantaged communities? If so, is this a cause for concern? Or is it a reflection of their growing mainstream appeal?
- In the past few years, cities have started bidding wars over a few high-performing CMOs that cannot come close to meeting the demand for them. How can cities and those who fund growth develop new ways to create more good schools?
- In the face of budget forecasts that predict very tight state education spending well into the future, will charter schools struggling to cover basic costs use their budget autonomy to use funds more productively?
- Although there are a handful of striking examples of creative new uses of technology in charter schools, why are they relatively small in number and isolated, given the market share of charters and their flexibility to innovate?

We asked leading thinkers in these areas to assess the landscape and provide guidance to the field. In the following chapters, these experts explore ideas that could be useful to charter leaders, funders, and policymakers as they consider what role charter schools should play given the demand for better schools, the Common Core State Standards, and highly constrained fiscal realities.

In Chapter 1, Jeffrey Henig, an esteemed political scientist from Columbia University, takes on the question of suburban charters. Henig's assessment is that despite recent high-profile newspaper stories about charters opening in affluent areas, the data suggest that in the past six years, charter schools have been remarkably consistent in serving urban and disadvantaged populations. In fact, there is evidence that the proportion of charter schools serving advantaged populations is falling. Insofar as charters are expanding among mostly white advantaged families, he argues, that may be a meaningful political sign, showing that charter schools are making serious inroads with a wider audience. Indeed, Henig points to several intriguing scenarios that could bring a significant increase in demand for charter schools among suburbanites, raising a real opportunity for school developers and authorizing agents to consider whether and how charter schools might move beyond their current "brand" of serving the neediest populations to become leaders in creating integrated schools—a goal that has been elusive in the United States.

In Chapter 2, we move from the demand side to the supply side with Ethan Gray, a leader in building a successful charter school community in Indianapolis and now head of the Cities for Education Entrepreneurship Trust (CEE-Trust). Gray contributes a compelling argument and roadmap for why and how cities should consider taking control of their own destiny by building charter school incubators, rather than waiting for CMOs to decide to expand in a given area. Gray writes that “for most cities, a CMO replication strategy is unlikely to either be successful or meet the demand in their communities for high-quality seats.” Gray describes how school incubators work, the results to date, and lessons the CEE-Trust has learned about how incubators can be most successful. Gray concludes with ideas for the role incubators can play to create more effective models based on blended learning and other new instructional technologies. Finally, he makes the case that by investing in local school incubators, cities can leverage public funds to get long-term results for students.

Chapter 3 builds on the theme of charter school experimentation with new technologies and new classroom structures. Michael Horn is a leading thinker on disruptive technologies in education and director of the Christensen Institute (formerly Innosight Institute). He and coauthor Tricia Maas of the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) argue—based on Horn’s experience and Maas’ surveys of charter school operators—that charter schools, which until recently took a traditional approach to schooling, are now rapidly adopting blended-learning approaches to classroom and school design. California CMOs appear to be leading this trend, but it is clear that charter schools across the United States also are experimenting with technology. Although the potential for cost savings is a factor for many of these schools, the real driver, Horn and Maas say, is a desire to get dramatically better results for students through personalized and data-driven instruction.

In Chapter 4, Suzanne Simburg and Marguerite Roza, fiscal analysts at CRPE and the Edunomics Lab at Georgetown University, propose that school systems should experiment with innovative staffing models and blended-learning technologies to use their resources more effectively. As the authors argue, all of public education is facing a crisis. Labor costs are growing faster than revenues. Other than cutting teacher salaries or increasing class sizes, Simburg and Roza say, the way out is trimming costs by dramatically reorganizing schedules and staff through technological approaches, such as those being used in the schools discussed in Chapter 3.



Together, these essays remind us that the charter school sector is constantly in flux as it responds to the demand for better schools. Formerly viewed as primarily urban schools, charters are now suburban as well and could grow more so in the future. Funders, authorizers, policymakers, and association leaders will have to decide whether to support start-up schools serving a more affluent population in search of better school options or ignore the demand. City leaders need to think through how they will build a supply of strong school providers and whether incubators can play a role. Those running or starting schools must consider how they can use their autonomy to take advantage of new technologies and staffing models.

The charter sector will continue to evolve. The question is only how fast and in what directions. If charter leaders rest on their laurels, the movement may miss out on important opportunities to expand more quickly, use resources more productively, and, most importantly, improve student success. We hope these essays point to proactive steps forward.



Author Biography

Robin Lake is the director of CRPE at the University of Washington and is nationally recognized for her research and analysis of U.S. public school system reforms, including charter schools and CMOs, innovation and scale, portfolio school districts, school turnaround efforts, and performance-based accountability systems. Lake has authored numerous studies and provided expert technical assistance reports on charter schools. She is the editor of *Hopes, Fears, & Reality: A Balanced Look at American Charter Schools*, an annual report on the state of charter schools in the United States. She is also the editor of *Unique Schools Serving Unique Students: Charter Schools and Children With Special Needs* (CRPE, 2010) and coauthor (with Paul Hill) of *Charter Schools and Accountability in Public Education* (Brookings, 2002). She has provided invited testimonies to the Education and Labor Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives as well as various state legislatures; presents regularly at conferences and summits across the United States; and serves as an advisor to the *Journal of School Choice*, the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, and the National Charter School Resource Center.

