

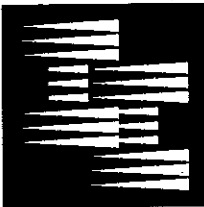
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Charter Schools: Colorado's Mandate For Change

A Primer on the Educational Idea that Almost Everyone Favors

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April 21, 1993

CHARTER SCHOOLS: COLORADO'S MANDATE FOR CHANGE

A Primer on the Educational Idea that Almost Everyone Favors

Why Parents Demand Charter Schools^{*} By MARILYN BLACKMON

As a mother, one principle inspires and guides my efforts to support charter school legislation and create more magnet programs:

Parents have the right and the responsibility to choose the education that is in the best interests of each of their children. However, parents can only choose from among available schools, and therein lies the crux of the problem.

I will argue here that charter schools are an effective tool for solving that problem, because they empower parents and teachers to create public school programs capable of serving the best interests of children.

Based on the accumulating evaluation evidence on magnet programs, the opportunities for effective school reform are especially promising where parents and teachers use that charter-school power (usually only as an implied threat) to create magnet school-within-school programs.

Defense of Parental Choice

Parents' right to choose their child's education can be defended by citing several U.S. Supreme Court decisions since 1925.

This right can also be grounded in the larger democratic traditions of western civilization expressed in the U.N. Human Rights Charter: "Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children" (Bloom 1992: 9).

Parents' responsibility to choose their child's education is similarly grounded in

Continued on Page 2

Why They Will be Good for Public Education By DAVID S. D'EVELYN

What once drew brickbats now seems to be building a bandwagon. From Sen. Bill Owens to the State Board of Education to the Colorado Children's Campaign -- from CACI to Gov. Roy Romer to President Bill Clinton -- all are endorsing charter schools.

Commissioner Bill Randall calls the idea a way to revitalize public education by "opening up the system." Indeed, charter schools is the lead education proposal in *Mandate for Change*, considered a blueprint for the Clinton administration.

Continued on Page 10

In Brief

■ *Blackmon, a mother from Boulder, says charter schools would serve 13 interests including neighborhoods, diversity, equity, measuring performance, school pride, reducing dropouts, better teaching, parental involvement, raising standards, facilitating choice, maintaining student interaction, preserving extracurricular options, and strengthening school leadership. (Pages 2-9)*

■ *D'Evelyn, an educator from Evergreen, says charter schools would be... a lever for change, a relief valve, an R&D lab, an incentive for entrepreneurship, a boon for teachers, an empowerment for parents, a partner for businesses, an antidote for sameness, and a fresh start for public education. (Pages 10-12)*

■ *Myth-busting, he adds that charter schools would not be... biased, private, costly, unregulated, amateurish, fly-by-night, or anti-public. (Pages 13-14)*

WHY PARENTS DEMAND CHARTER SCHOOLS Blackmon - Continued from Page 1

the 1973 United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child: "The best interests of the child shall be the guiding principle of those responsible for his (or her) education and guidance, and that responsibility lies in the first place with his (or her) parents" (Bloom 1992: 9).

Market Constraints on Parental Choice: Bad News About Schools is True Even in Well-Educated, Affluent Boulder

Students in Boulder Valley Schools perform way above average, giving the illusion of an academically excellent district; but my published analysis (Boulder's *Sunday Camera*, Dec. 15, 1991, 1Bff.) of district California Achievement Test data showed that Boulder Valley is not a value-added district and that it has been declining in recent years.

Boulder also has a serious problem with student alienation, evidenced by a dropout rate approaching 25 percent overall and 50 percent for our Hispanic students, our largest ethnic minority group. With the change to middle schools, our comprehensive high schools have grown much larger and become crowded; this is liable to exacerbate our problems, because increased school size is a strong determinant of higher drop-out rate, lowered student achievement, and student alienation/apathy (Toch 1991: 263-271).

Early in 1992 a group of Boulder parents decided to take a proactive response to the bad news about Boulder schools, founding a community group called Parents and Schools to expand all children's opportunities for academic excellence in the Boulder Valley Public Schools. We share the many-faceted concerns expressed by the excellence movement (Toch 1991: chap. 2), and we are particularly haunted by massive quantity of evidence showing U.S. public schools falling far short by international standards.

Probably the most powerful and scientifically valid international comparison available (Stevenson and Stigler 1992; Stevenson 1992; Stevenson et al. in *Science*, Jan. 1, 1993) delivers sobering findings: American students at all levels of ability lag seriously behind their Asian counterparts in math.

- There was only one American fifth grader in the hundred top-scoring students, a shocking level of under-representation, since each of the three nations in the study were expected to contribute about 33 students to the top hundred scorers (compare Singal 1991 for further evidence of disturbingly poor performance of high-ability American students).
- Average students in Japanese, Taiwanese, and Minneapolis schools were the same at kindergarten, but by 5th grade, average Japanese and Taiwanese students scored way above the mean for the total sample, while average American fifth graders scored way below the mean for the total sample.

Charter Schools Defined

The details can vary. But here is the core concept as it has moved from initial tryouts in Thatcher's Britain to enactment in Minnesota and California to the current SB 183 proposal in Colorado:

A CHARTER SCHOOL IS A SEMI-AUTONOMOUS PUBLIC SCHOOL.

It is established by way of a charter (contractual operating agreement) granted by either a local school board or (if the latter is uncooperative) the State Board of Education.

The degree of autonomy concerning issues such as personnel, curriculum, governance, and facilities, is worked out in negotiations between the school and the chartering body.

Portraying the evidence differently, only one American school outscored even the lowest-scoring of the Asian schools. Among 11th graders, only 14.5 percent of the Taiwanese and 8 percent of the Japanese scored as low as the average American student in mathematics.

- Americans were way over-represented among the lowest-scoring students in the total sample.

Stevenson and his colleagues conclude that it is ridiculous to think America can become first in math and science by the year 2000 without a radical change in American schools and attitudes toward education.

Most Americans repress the implications of such comparisons, insulating themselves with mistaken stereotypes about schools in our competitor nations of Asia and western Europe. In fact, the Asian students in the above study exhibited markedly fewer symptoms of stress, were given much more complex and challenging problems to solve, used more math manipulatives and hands-on learning, had more recess time, were much more likely to enjoy attending school, and displayed the high value Asian culture places on education (69 percent of the Asian elementary school children wished for such educational goals as going to college, compared to only 10 percent of the American children, who instead wished for money, toys, or pets).

In contrast, Parents and Schools members approach the bad news about schools with a sense of urgency. The decline of America's economy was already the primary issue in the 1992 presidential election, and the economy will only grow worse if we fail to raise student achievement and motivation.

Economic forecasts show rapid growth in high-performance jobs requiring high levels of academic skills, while unskilled and low-skilled jobs are fast disappearing (*Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 9, 1990; SCANS 1992). Students with poor academic skills face a dismal future of high unemployment and minimum wages. In the poignant words of a Russian saying: During a famine a fat man gets thinner, but a thin man dies.

Our children also need an excellent education in the humanities to help them understand the meaning of life, enlarge the horizons of their experience, and anchor them in a time of rapid social change and extreme individualism (Collins and Tamarkin 1982; Bellah, Madsen, et al. 1985; Ravitch and Finn 1987; Gagnon and The Bradley Commission 1989; Toch 1991: 55-71). We want them to acquire the character and integrity for leadership centered in the principles of truth, honesty, justice, fairness, courtesy, freedom, equality, fidelity, self-discipline, diligence, tolerance, and love (Covey 1989, 1990).

Severe time constraints underline the urgency of prioritizing academics. A ninth grader spends, at best, only 25 percent of his/her waking hours per year doing academics. This includes both the time spent in the classroom and the time spent doing classroom-assigned homework (it is less than 25 percent if he/she spends less than two hours per school-night doing homework). That 25 percent of the student's time is small and precious, yet it is very often wasted because students are so frequently off-task in today's classrooms, and because we have not set the right priorities for our public schools.

Projected Impact of Charter School Legislation: Rapid Growth in Number and Quality of Schools Worth Choosing

I will outline below the advantages of magnet schools-within-schools, arguing that the rapid growth of magnet programs in the U.S. provides the best hope for improving American public schools. Magnet schools-within-schools have a high probability of simultaneously meeting all essential criteria recommended by

educational reformers from the 1960s to the 1990s: excellence, equity, parent involvement, community support for learning, and humanization of the teaching-learning process.

Establishing a magnet program is a manageable-sized educational reform task, a way parents and teachers can make a difference in one small community at a time. However, without the implied threat of the charter school option, school boards may jealously guard their power and be unresponsive to parent-teacher requests for magnet programs. Therefore, I support the charter schools concept, especially because of what it will do to permit the creation of schools-within-schools.

At a moment in history when the future of our public schools is seriously in doubt, charter schools legislation is the right kind of new-paradigm, pluralistic policy, the kind of policy capable of producing genuine classroom improvement (Pauly 1991, Kearns and Doyle 1989, Toch 1991, Chubb and Moe 1990).

Advantage 1: Neighborhood-based Choice. The recently released Carnegie study on choice (*Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 26, 1992, A7A) found that parents typically choose schools located near their home or workplace. Multiple school-within-school programs at neighborhood schools would expand parental choice but still retain the convenience of neighborhood schools, minimizing transportation and facilitating continuation of students' neighborhood friendships. In addition to serving a substantial fraction of the students in the school's attendance area, such programs could also function as magnet programs to attract students from all over the district if they offered a distinctive program.

Advantage 2: Win-win Respect for Diversity. Within each neighborhood in Boulder there are clusters of consensus on educational goals and academic excellence, but it is rare to find an overwhelming majority favoring a single program. Even with a clear majority of parents and teachers supporting one program, converting a particular school to one program would always be a win-lose solution, but offering two or more school-within-school programs would offer a win-win solution and respect diversity.

Advantage 3: Access and Equity. It is a burden for low-income parents to provide transportation for their child to attend a magnet school across town, so choice of magnet schools is likely to be less common among low-income groups than among middle- and high-income groups.

School-within-school magnet programs would make choice much more accessible, providing greater equity. Magnet programs in East Harlem (Kirp 1992, *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 29, 1992, A15, Toch 1991: 256-59, 265-666) and Polly Williams' efforts in Milwaukee (*Wall Street Journal*, June 6, 1990, A16) demonstrate that low-income parents want choice, and that their children benefit from it.

Advantage 4: Performance Goals and Data Made Explicit. As excellence advocates have argued, a tougher academic curriculum is an essential ingredient in educational reform (Toch 1991: 271). The book *The Learning Gap* (Stevenson and Stigler 1992) includes a perceptive section analyzing why Americans have such low standards for their children's schools. They attribute low standards to (1) lack of national performance goals defining what children should learn in each grade, and (2) lack of clear external standards. These deficiencies can be corrected in a situation where parents must make choices among programs within the school.

It should be obligatory for school districts to provide objective data so that parents can compare the goals, standards, and actual performance of each school program against national and international standards. If choices included programs with clear performance goals and clear, world-class external standards, such as the International Baccalaureate program, parents would realize how hard children should

work in school to equal the performance of students in other countries.

The more schools that offered programs with world-class standards, the more parents there would be who would have to confront international-comparison evidence in order to choose or reject the program for their children.

Advantage 5: School Pride Builds Commitment to Learning. When students and teachers choose a distinctive magnet program, they both tend to develop a strong pride and sense of ownership tied to the school they have chosen, a better fit of the program to individual learning styles and interests, and a resulting increase in commitment to learning.

There is strong research evidence that permitting students to select from among distinctive programs draws kids into the learning process, resulting in substantial increases in academic achievement, increased attendance, and lowered dropout rates; and these effects are strong even in inner-city schools with large minority enrollments and non-selective admissions policies (Toch 1991: 258-260).

Advantage 6: Smallness Reduces Dropouts and Alienation. Large schools, notably the comprehensive high school, can be divided into smaller magnet programs, each of which has the pulling power of a distinctive program. In these magnet schools-within-schools teachers know their students well and often work with the same students over several years, creating continuity and a supportive environment in which both teachers and students flourish. Teachers and students share similar interests, stimulating lively discussions.

The effects of small size are very strong, creating strong advantages for students in schools-within-schools compared to students in large, comprehensive high schools. The benefits are particularly dramatic for disadvantaged students, who have so often been alienated and apathetic in comprehensive high schools, helping to correct the "savage inequalities" pointed out by Kozol (1993).

Advantage 7: Teaching Improves. Teachers are pulled towards a given magnet because of an interest in the subject matter emphasized and/or the school's educational philosophy, and teachers who select the program work closely together to develop and implement the distinctive curricula and instructional strategies. This produces greater collegiality and greater accountability (Toch 1991: 261-62).

Closer ties develop between students and teachers in magnet schools-within-schools and small magnet schools, and this produces a genuine caring and mutual obligation rarely found in large, comprehensive high schools. In many of the magnet programs, teacher-student relationships are maintained over several years, increasing the opportunities for genuine mentoring and coaching relationships to develop (Toch 1991: 266-67).

Advantage 8: Parent-Community Support for Learning. Parent involvement in the child's education is well-known to be a powerful determinant of a child's success in school, and Toch (1991: 268) shows that parent involvement increases in magnet programs. Increasing parent-community support is part of a larger cultural issue: as Lamar Alexander has said, America needs to create a tradition of valuing academic excellence. We must honor those who are well-educated, so kids will be motivated to do the hard work of learning.

Since American students spend, at best, 25 percent of their waking hours per year doing academics, it is important to wisely use the remaining 75 percent of their waking hours per year, the hours when the students are being educated by the community outside the school. Through expanding parental involvement and community partnerships, magnet schools have the capacity to effectively educate kids during the 75

percent of their waking time that kids spend outside the influence of schools.

Advantage 9: Raises Standards and Achievement for All. Because the charter school legislation will make possible charter school-within-school programs, our Boulder organization, Parents and Schools--and similar organizations in other districts--could use this legislation as a tool to raise academic standards for all students in all schools, just as the Colorado Board of Education and national leaders are challenging us to do. Even if a minority of parents in any particular school wanted a program with high academic standards, we could still justify a school-within-school program. These programs would then become wedges for raising standards for other students in the school.

Magnet programs have resulted in substantial increases in academic achievement, higher attendance rates, and lower dropout and suspension rates, according to several studies (Toch 1991: 258-260). Some small urban magnet programs have gotten extraordinary results with disadvantaged, inner-city students (Toch 1991: 270). Other magnet programs, such as the International Baccalaureate, challenge college-bound students to reach for high levels of achievement, addressing what Singal (1991) has called the "other crisis in American education," the crisis of poorer performance by top-quartile students now compared to a generation ago.

Obviously, some magnet schools are poor choices that must be weeded out as failures; but, in general, magnet programs provide a promising opportunity to simultaneously raise academic standards, as advocated by leaders of the educational excellence movement, and to humanize schools by increasing student/parent/teacher choice and by dividing large schools into smaller schools-within-schools, thus addressing the demands of the 1960s reformers without producing the excesses associated with their efforts and the decline in academic standards that their ideas produced in the 1970s and 1980s.

Advantage 10: Insisting on Choice. Parents should accept the responsibility, not just the right, to choose the educational program that is best for each of their children. In order to enroll a child in a school with multiple school-within-school programs, parents would have to make a choice between the programs offered. Ideally, wherever different school-within-school programs were offered, the school would provide parents with the information needed to make a well-informed choice in the best interests of their child.

In contrast, parents are rarely confronted with a choice about magnet schools. Magnet schools may be available in a district without parents ever learning about their merits, or even their existence. Open enrollment by itself rarely produces improvement in individual schools, and if it does, there is a tendency for only higher economic groups to gain access to information about which schools are best, creating inequities (Kozol 1993; Toch 1991).

Advantage 11: Mixing Still Possible. Although school-within-school programs would separate students for part of the day, there could be mixing of all students in the school for physical education, art, music, and extracurricular activities.

Advantage 12: Preserving Extracurricular Options. Attendance at a magnet high school or middle school (such as the proposed alternative high school in Boulder) can diminish opportunities for favored high school extracurricular activities. In contrast, secondary students choosing school-within-school programs would not have to give up such opportunities as playing on a high school football team or participating in a marching band.

Advantage 13: Strong School Leadership Values Pluralism. The Brookings Institution study by Chubb and Moe (1990) shows that strong leadership in a school is a

major determinant of school effectiveness and student academic achievement. A charter school with a single magnet program is likely to have strong leadership from a principal and faculty committed to that one program, but such leadership could have a narrower perspective than leadership in a school offering multiple school-within-school programs.

School-within-school programs would require a particular kind of principal, one committed to pluralism and happy to support a variety of quality programs within their school in order to better meet the different needs of individual students. Which is the leadership that we most admire, and which type of leadership would produce the most effective school? I prefer the breadth of pluralism as long as all choices offered are programs for academic excellence. As Covey (1990) argues, effective leaders value pluralism and diversity, encouraging genuine teamwork that builds complementary roles for team members, so that each person's unique contributions are recognized as essential to the total team effort.

Why Boulder Parents Probably Cannot Raise Academic Standards Without the Charter School Legislation

Our Parents and Schools group should have been able to do it if anyone could. We have been blessed with much more newspaper coverage and community support than most parent groups. In December, 1991, my long article on the mediocrity and academic decline of Boulder schools was the feature article in the opinion section of the *Sunday Camera*, and we captured front-page headlines four times in February and March. On March 22 the sub-headline said our "emerging group has the look of a political force," quoting comments on our group's actions from state and national leaders.

Later we collected 3700 signatures on a petition to the school board. We had more registered voters signing our petition than the number of votes cast for the highest vote getter in any of the contested races in the last school board election.

But, never mind, all that was for naught: the school board refused to make even one concession to our petition. Unfortunately, this is not unusual behavior for a school board. A 1989 national survey of 1200 school board presidents found that only 4 percent had been strongly influenced by parent groups.

Our board claims to favor choice, but so far the choice programs they have approved have been congruent with their own goals and philosophy. They encourage site-based management, but in the end they are unwilling to relinquish real power to the parents and teachers. We need the charter school legislation, especially because it includes provisions to support school-within-school programs.

Considerations in Regulating Choice Programs To Promote Academic Excellence and Protect Consumers

It is important to think about what principles will govern the regulation of programs offered within the district, and to consider whether local school boards should be the regulating agencies.

Some key features should be required in all choice programs. Foremost among these is learning about the common values and history of Americans that bind this nation into one people committed to liberty and equality for all (Ravitch 1990; Ravitch and Finn 1987; Gagnon and The Bradley Commission 1989).

It is also important that all programs nurture independent critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving skill, and transfer of cognitive skill (Chi, Bassok, et al. 1989; Nickerson, Perkins, and Smith 1985; Resnick and Klopfer 1989; Singley and

Anderson 1989; Weisberg 1986).

Finally, programs should, collectively at least, encourage and challenge students of all backgrounds and academic ability levels to learn and to succeed to the best of their ability--society cannot afford to continue throwing away a quarter of our youth (Carnegie 1989), and it also must motivate its highest-ability youth to become tomorrow's leaders (Singal 1991).

School board responsibility should no longer be defined as selection of a single, majority-wins philosophy for all children within the district, but to provide consumer protection through a win-win approach that honors pluralism.

First, the school board (or other regulating agency) should require proponents of each applicant program to defend the excellence of the program in a way that meets the standards of academic argumentation, the level of argumentation and substantive evidence established in the best refereed journals of academic professions.

Second, all programs should meet equal-access standards defined by civil rights laws (as interpreted by our judicial system), preferably being designed to appeal to individuals of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Third, the school board must select tests and analyze data on the performance of students in these programs, measuring performance against national and international standards and performance benchmarks for age/grade levels. Programs performing poorly should be culled.

Fourth, the school board should make sure that the program offerings meet market demands in a way that maximizes choices while preserving the advantages of neighborhood schools, minimizing the length of waiting lists of applicants and maximizing the chances that each parent may find the program they desire at a nearby school, as is done in the Netherlands (Glenn 1989).

Fifth, the school board should make the evidence comprehensible and readily available (in public libraries and convenient public meetings), enabling parents, teachers, and students to make well-informed decisions among available programs in the district (if needed to provide equal access to information about the programs, there should be outreach to parents and/or translators provided). Parent/student/teacher choices could be based on clear presentations to parents of all the following types of objective information on all programs offered in their district:

- (1) clear performance goals for students in the program, setting expectations for what students in the program will learn (know and know how to do), and showing the curriculum, sequence, and approximate timetable for reaching these expectations,
- (2) rationale for the program design and characteristics of students who succeed best in that program (there are always multiple paths to the same outcomes, and any particular student might flourish on one path, yet flounder on others), and
- (3) accurate, complete, objective data that compares the effectiveness of all programs available in the district, evaluating programs within the district in relation to national and international standards (Finn 1991).

This information is necessary so parents have the opportunity to make well-informed choices of the school that serves their child's best interests.

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WHY CHARTER SCHOOLS WILL BE GOOD FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION D'Evelyn - Continued from Page 1

So, what formerly appeared an exotic or even dangerous reform is now seen by many as the most effective approach available for the long-range restructuring of public education. Many; but not all. Some remain concerned that charter schools bring too much reform too fast. That what we value about public education would be sacrificed. That charter schools may be just a back door leading to the privatization of public education. That charter schools really can't accomplish anything that couldn't be accomplished now.

Actually, on that last point many on both sides of the controversy agree. There really isn't anything legally preventing districts from "chartering" innovative and largely autonomous schools right now. And some districts already approximate this through alternative or magnet schools (though the magnet concept has its limits, as Marilyn Blackmon's companion article explains).

But it is also true that, for whatever reason, school districts in Colorado have all too often *not* encouraged the kind of innovation and autonomy associated with charter schools. Thus the emerging consensus for charter schools.

What Charter Schools Are -- and Aren't

The range of what is called up in people's minds when charter schools are mentioned is indeed wide. But here is the core concept as it has emerged in Minnesota and California and is proposed in Colorado:

A charter school is a semi-autonomous public school. It is established by way of a charter (contractual operating agreement) granted by either a local school board or (if the latter is uncooperative) the State Board of Education. The degree of autonomy concerning issues such as personnel, curriculum, governance, and facilities, is worked out in negotiations between the school and the chartering body.

But the bill currently before the Colorado legislature, SB 183, cosponsored by Senator Bill Owens (R-Aurora) and Representative Peggy Kerns (D-Aurora), doesn't so much describe a product as outline a process by which charter schools can come into being. It lays down the ground rules for those proposing charter schools and the criteria by which their proposals will be evaluated.

By the way, given the radical riskiness which some opponents attribute to charter schools, it should be noted that four metro-area districts have recently signed on to an arrangement strikingly similar to the one proposed in the legislation.

Douglas County, Cherry Creek, Denver, and Littleton school districts have contracted with the Public Education Coalition and Colorado Outward Bound School to run a school focused on "expeditionary learning" for students and teachers frustrated by traditional schools. It is funded in part by a grant from the New American Schools Development Corporation, but also by the funding each district receives for those students it enrolls in the school.

So what are the arguments for charter schools? Here are nine:

1. Charter schools can be a lever for change

Seymour Sarason in his book *The Predictable Failure of School Reform* talks about how most education reform is haphazard and incremental. He calls for change that gets at the underlying substructure of the education system, "because what you seek

to change is so embedded in a system of interacting parts that if it is changed, then changes elsewhere are likely to occur."

Mandate for Change talks about the need to "shift the focus of the debate about improving our schools from spending to structure--to the way the enterprise of public education is organized." It also affirms "that it is okay for more than one organization to offer public education in the community."

By making a structural change in the way public schools can organize and establish themselves, charter schools legislation will encourage change agents throughout public education in Colorado to test the viability of their ideas.

2. Charter schools can be a pressure relief valve

Successful systems are self-regulating. They have built-in incentives for change and improvement. This is not now the case with public education. Thus the several alternative schools offered by metro area districts all tend to have long waiting lists, some of them with more than a thousand families on them. Charter schools offer relief from the pressure put on the system by these restive parents and students.

This could mean that there is one less front that beleaguered school boards have to contend with in these difficult times. Clearly, the fact that such waiting lists persist year after year indicates that the system is not responding quickly enough to changing demands. Charter schools will accelerate the rate of change in public education.

3. Charter schools can provide R & D for public education

High tech firms devote 10% of their profits to research and product development. Education, by contrast, has no systematic approach to looking ahead and pioneering new methodologies or forms of schooling. By their very nature charter schools propose, develop, and field test innovative approaches to teaching and school governance. In his State of the State address, Governor Romer called for a network of charter schools which would help in disseminating into the educational mainstream the R&D findings generated by charter schools.

As charter schools spread, we may end up getting definitive answers -- verified by actual practice -- to some of the enduring debates about education. For instance, Does it make a difference if students, parents, and teachers choose their schools? Can a largely autonomous public school deliver quality education more efficiently and effectively?

4. Charter schools will encourage educational entrepreneurship

Five years ago the debate was about choice. But unless we do something about the supply side of the equation -- unless the system permits the development of an array of schools worth choosing -- choice is an empty gesture. Change always implies risk. If we are to succeed in the revitalization of public education, the system needs to reward rather than discourage risk-taking. To encourage this sort of entrepreneurial spirit charter schools come with a super-waiver, exempting them -- once their contract is approved -- from all but health, safety, and civil rights regulation.

One criticism of the current system is that there are no consequences for schools failing their students. Such will not be the case for charter schools. Those that do not meet the terms of their contracts, that do not hold on to their share of students, will go out of business.

5. Charter schools honor the teaching profession

The assumption underlying charter schools is that there exists in our education system right now, sufficient creative energy and commitment to excellence to transform our schools. The role of charter schools is to release and empower that energy

and commitment. To do so is to honor the teaching profession in the most meaningful way possible.

6. Charter schools respect parents

Another assumption underlying charter schools is that we can no longer afford an education system that can "take its customers for granted," as the AFT's Albert Shanker has put it. Charter schools are designed to make the system more responsive to parents and families. It may be that the most crucial form of parent involvement lies in their carefully choosing -- from a diverse array of options -- the right school for their children.

Charter schools may also end up redefining what we mean by "local control." It may be that we need to refocus what we mean by the "community" a school serves. And we may want to rethink whether bigger schools are necessarily better. An opportunistic district might even see chartering particular schools (Montessori, for instance) as a way to retain and attract students--even more important with the passage of Amendment 1.

7. Charter schools are an opportunity for real business partnerships

For all the talk, the partnership between business and education is far too often just that. One promising offshoot of the charter schools idea is to marry it with workplace schools, where businesses provide space and facilities for a school right at the workplace. What this could do for parental involvement alone is intriguing indeed.

It might also be that charter schools could be married with the idea of apprenticeship to provide an effective way to deliver vocational education. Charter schools will then offer choices to what is often called the "forgotten half"-- those young people who do not attend college.

8. Charter schools can help correct the one-size-fits-all fallacy

Charter schools embody what might be called educational pluralism. The standardization of education, the incredible sameness that exists in public schools across the nation, may have run its course. But right now the textbook adoption process of two states, California and Texas, virtually defines the curriculum of public schools throughout the fifty states. Charter schools would have the freedom to choose a much larger variety of books and classroom materials.

It's worth noting, incidentally, that the bandwagon for charter schools is actually international: Some 600 schools in Great Britain have opted out of centralized, bureaucratic control.

9. Charter schools could end up saving public education from itself

Mandate for Change, the Clinton-Gore blueprint, puts it this way: "We must save, not abandon, America's public schools. At the same time, however, a reflexive defense of the existing system can only play into the hands of those who want to privatize America's schools. There is another choice: harnessing the power of parental choice, competition and innovation to radically restructure our schools, while retaining their essentially public character."

Shakespeare, as he often does, captures the moment -- the moment now facing public education where that "reflexive defense" may seem like the best way to go:

*There is a tide in the affairs of men
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat,
And we must take the current when it serves or lose our ventures.*

Will public education ride the tide of change -- or omit it?

The Mythology: Seven Things Charter Schools Aren't

Myths abound about charter schools. Here are seven of them -- debunked.

I. Charter schools are not special interest enclaves

The proposed legislation requires that charter schools be nonsectarian, and prohibits them from discriminating on the basis of disability, race, sex, religion, or national origin.

In fact, SB 183 explicitly calls for charter schools to "promote diversity and inclusiveness representative of the community." The spectre of a "skin-head school" cannot materialize.

II. Charter schools are not private schools

Some have termed charter schools a "backdoor voucher" proposal. They are nothing of the kind, as witness the support of such determined voucher opponents as Roy Romer and Bill Clinton. No, these are clearly public schools, evidenced by the fact that...

- a. They are publicly funded.
- b. They are accountable to a popularly elected board of education.
- c. They can charge no tuition.
- d. There can be no conversion of a private school into a charter school.

III. Charter schools are not costly to taxpayers

The only public money flowing to a charter school would be 80-90% of the revenue that the district where the student lives would have received for that student. As far as the state budget for public education is concerned the bill is revenue neutral. In fact, through foundation grants, corporate partnerships, and other entrepreneurial activity charter schools are likely to increase the resources available to public education in Colorado.

IV. Charter schools are not completely unregulated

Charter schools are held to all federal and state regulations regarding health, safety, and civil rights. In addition...

- a. They are governed by the terms of their contract with their chartering body, either a local school board or the State Board.
- b. Their charters are subject to review every five years.
- c. They are required to address the needs of academically low-achieving students.
- d. They are required to measure up to the achievement standards of every other public school.

V. Charter schools are not amateur operations

One television station created the image of hapless parents of charter school students trying to manage a transportation network or food service operation. This is a

red herring. The governing board of each charter school--which may very well include parents--will contract for whatever professional services not included on the school staff. It may very well do so with one or more school districts.

VI. Charter schools are not overnight sensations

Another image of charter schools based more on fear than fact is that there will be a rapid proliferation of fly-by-night operations. Yet the rigorous and detailed application process makes this impossible. It calls for the charter school plan to address the following:

- mission statement
- pupil performance outcomes
- governance structure and parental support
- enrollment policy and plan to promote diversity
- pupil performance evaluation
- pupil discipline policy
- employee qualifications policy
- nature of relationship of school to employees
- teacher salaries
- proposed budget and audit procedures
- facilities for the school
- transportation plan
- insurance coverage
- policy regarding potential school discontinuation

VII. Charter schools are not anti-public education

Some doubters place charter schools on the agenda of those who would "destroy public schools." Quite the contrary. What motivates most members of the unusually diverse coalition advocating charter schools is the need to *rescue* public education from impending obsolescence.

Charter school proponents (of whom Boulder's Marilyn Blackmon, author of the other half of this issue paper, is a good example) see this reform as a way to refute the growing perception that public schools are no longer up to the task.

To the pessimists who claim our state's 176 school districts are no longer willing or able to respond quickly and effectively to changing needs and to what the public wants in its schools, Ms. Blackmon and thousands like her seem to be saying: "Give us a chance to charter, and we'll show the world just how good Colorado public education can become!"

CHARTER SCHOOLS: COLORADO'S MANDATE FOR CHANGE

A Primer on the Educational Idea that Almost Everyone Favors

By Marilyn Blackmon and David S. D'Evelyn

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