

FORWARD

Choices and Consequences

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The story of the charter school movement is a testimony to the persistence of error. Science has a hard time establishing the truth claims on policies when those challenge existing social practices. Social sciences contain one essential, unavoidable paradox: To evaluate the effectiveness of any policy, one must implement or at least massively experiment with it. However, when many people get involved in the experiment, it grows a thick crust of emotional attachments, opinions, ideological biases, egos and career investments, not to mention material assets. The truth of the pilot becomes impenetrable for social science research, unless it experiences a catastrophic failure. Charter schools definitely have not failed, they just did not manage to outperform traditional public schools in any significant way, which was exactly the promise of the experiment. Because of the crust, we must now learn to live with charters for the foreseeable future. Unless we see a fundamental shift in all schooling, charters are here to stay.

The origin of the idea is not clear. It probably still originates with libertarian ideas of Milton Friedman (1955), only made more politically palatable for the Democrats to sign on. Others (Kolderie, 2005) attribute the idea to Ray Budde, a University of Massachusetts professor. Regardless of the origin, the idea of choice in education was sufficiently appealing for both American political parties to support in the early 1990s. People were hoping that freeing schools from bureaucratic constraints would make them more innovative, and more responsive to students' needs and parents' expectations. We do not have a reliable way of measuring innovativeness and responsiveness, but we can measure academic achievement. And the pattern did not budge. Even those studies showing modest impact of charter schools on educational achievement sound disappointed that greater results could not be found. The promise was revolutionary; the results are, well, modest, if any. The negative side effects have been fairly visible, and many of them are discussed in this special issue. The negatives also may

not be catastrophic yet, but one has to wonder if they are worth it.

The most troubling point in the story for me is that we do not really know why the original idea has not worked. Is it because schools in general do not play a big role in children's educational achievements? Is it because we do not invest in educational R&D and literally do not have any great innovations to play with? Has schooling reached some natural limits of effectiveness and is no longer improvable?

The 2017 EducationNext poll shows a sharp decline in charter school support among both Democrats and Republicans (West et al, 2018). I find it highly unlikely, however, that the movement will dwindle and wither, for the reasons stated above. A responsible position would be to figure out how to regulate charter schools, to minimize their side effects. The original idea included a promise of swift school closures, if they did not perform. Well, the emotional investment makes this safety feature meaningless. It is just as difficult to close an underperforming charter as it is to close a traditional public school. The cultural practices of schooling imply school stability as an essential identity-building mechanism. Students who must often change schools are considered to be unfortunate, while adults who change job locations often are thought to be enriched by experiences. Now, why is that? No one really knows. What we know is that regulating charter schools is not a simple task, partly because they were envisioned as free from regulations, and partly because they are schools and serve a critical social function.

I applaud the editor's decision to put together this special volume of the journal. We do have many more questions than answers about charter schools and their impact on society. Just because we all got used to them does not mean there is no mystery there. I hope readers will enjoy this collection of thought-provoking papers as much as I did.

REFERENCES

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