Charter Schools


Small size is one of the important characteristics of charter schools. A school is a social institution, and smallness can help create a community of learners that includes students, teachers, school administrators, parents, and community members. The people in this community of learners can know each other and be responsible to each other. They can draw on personal and community resources as an integral component of the learning experience.

Some Design Elements

Charter schools vary widely in design and focus. For example, there are dozens of different school-reform movements, any of which might be the basis for the design of the curriculum, instruction, and assessment in a charter school. The people starting and initially staffing such a school have a heartfelt zeal for their particular school-reform movement. Parents may play a significant role in the design of the school.

Many charter schools place significance on initial and ongoing professional development—for example, preparing teachers to work well in the curriculum, instruction, and assessment environment that is the hallmark of the school. Moreover, many charter schools make use of differentiated staffing arrangements, using volunteers, paraprofessionals, regular teachers, and master teachers. Pay schedules may be quite different than in traditional public schools. For example, a charter school might have a performance-based pay mechanism.

IT use tends to be one of the distinguishing features of charter schools. Not all charter schools are high tech, but, on average, charter schools depend more on IT than do traditional public schools.

Roles of Information Technology

All schools have common characteristics. They have budgets and must deal with fiscal affairs. They have students and must deal with record keeping. They need to provide students with access to information. They have curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

IT can play a significant role in all of these areas. The steadily increasing power and cost effectiveness of microcomputers, local area networks, the Internet, and the World Wide Web make significant contributions to charter schools. In many ways, the economies of scale that used to give certain advantages to large schools are being obviated by IT.

To a large extent, IT is scalable. Microcomputer hardware and software can be purchased in small increments, but at unit prices comparable to what buyers obtain when making large purchases. This has been achieved through statewide consortia or other purchasing arrangements. Schools can be small and cost-effective in providing their students with the benefits of IT.

One of the most obvious areas of IT use is the school research library. The Web is an emerging global library. Gradually, the contents of this global library will surpass even the best university research libraries.
Another obvious area of IT use is in access to curricula of great breadth and depth. Distance learning and computer-assisted learning already offer a wide range of learning opportunities and time-scheduling options for the learner. Eventually it will be commonplace for students to make significant use of distance learning and computer-assisted instruction in their schooling.

Many charter schools provide environments in which students can learn from each other. As compared to traditional public schools, charter schools tend to span a wider range of grades and to do more mingling of students from different grade levels. For example, a charter school might combine students in kindergarten through sixth grade into a single classroom. This type of multi-age grouping helps older students learn to help younger students. In terms of IT, it also provides an environment in which a younger student may end up helping older students.

Final Remarks

The people starting a charter school have the opportunity to create a school from scratch. They can build on the best ideas in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. They can decide the nature and extent of IT use. In essence, each charter school is an educational experiment. Most will initially succeed at least to a reasonable extent, because of the huge amounts of energy and enthusiasm of their founders.

Over the longer run, some of the charter schools will fail and be closed. Others will show performance results comparable to traditional public schools. However, some will be consistently more successful than the traditional public schools in their communities. They will serve as role models and may help facilitate improvements in the overall school systems in their districts.

References

Resource

*Phi Delta Kappan* [Theme issue]. (1998, March). 79(7). This theme issue contains three articles on charter schools. These articles provide research information about current charter schools as well as information about some of the successes and failures of these schools.

Retrospective Comments 5/22/2005

The Charter School movement continues. An interesting piece of the Charter School movement is the development of schools based on Distance Learning. Thus, for example, a Charter School might be serving students from throughout a state, and not have a "campus" like a traditional school.

There are, of course, some public schools that have entered the Distance Learning arena, as well as some statewide public and private Distance Learning schools. Some draw students from throughout the country, or throughout the world.

Charter Schools, all by themselves, represent a paradigm shift to a niche between a traditional public school and a traditional private school. When coupled with Distance Learning, we have a more narrowly defined paradigm shift. Such a Charter School nicely fits some of the
needs of parents who are home schooling their children. The home-schooled children receive
direct benefits of the public money available for supporting public schools.

Gerald Bracey is a well-known researcher and author in education. In 2005, he published an
extensive report on Charter Schools.


Quoting from the Executive Summary of this report:

This report argues that evidence exists for the case that the charter school movement is largely a
failed reform. The report puts the charter school movement in the context of dissatisfaction with
public schools and the public sector in general. It then describes the claims for charters made by
the early charter school advocates, emphasizing the advocates’ promise of increased achievement.
From there, the report reviews evaluations of charter schools in Arizona, California, Michigan,
Ohio, Illinois, North Carolina, and Texas, as well as several national evaluations.

The review shows that charters have not lived up to their promise of increased achievement. This
failure is surprising given that charter schools are small (most have fewer than 200 students) with
small classes, two factors known to increase achievement. This failure becomes even harder to
understand given the advantages that charters enjoy in their freedom from the rules, regulations,
and contracts that are said to bureaucratically burden the public schools.

Retrospective Comments 9/2/2008

Quoting from the Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charter_school) article on Charter
Schools:

The charter school idea in the United States was originated by Ray Budde, a professor at the
University of Massachusetts Amherst and embraced by Albert Shanker, President of the American
Federation of Teachers, in 1988 when he called for the reform of the public schools by
establishing "charter schools" or "schools of choice". At the time, a few schools (which were not
called charter schools but embodied some of their principles) already existed, such as H-B
Woodlawn. As originally conceived, the ideal model of a charter school was as a legally and
financially autonomous public school (without tuition, religious affiliation, or selective student
admissions) that would operate much like a private business — free from many state laws and
district regulations, and accountable more for student outcomes rather than for processes or inputs
(such as Carnegie Units and teacher certification requirements).

Minnesota was the first state to pass a charter school law, in 1991. California was second, in 1992.
As of 2008, 40 states and the District of Columbia have charter school laws.

The US Federal Government has provided substantial encouragement and financial aid to the
Charter Schools movement. It seems to view this movement as providing competition for the
public schools, and seems to believe that such competition will improve our overall educational
system. Thus, people leading the Charter Schools movement are not happy (or, very accepting)

Bracey tends to use such evidence as indicating the quality of public schools. I tend to take
such evidence as indicating the stability and resistance to change of our educational system. In
essence, our educational system has been “fine tuned” through many years of effort to achieve its
current levels of performance. People attempting to reinvent schools face a very long learning
curve before they achieve the potentials of their new design. Many Charter Schools are finding it
difficult to continually make the small and larger ongoing changes that are required to achieve a
new, stable, sustainable school.