



*Oregon's experience shows how to mix healthy skepticism, an active watchdog role, and passionate support for the best charters.*

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**by Samuel D. Henry**

## Charter Schools: A Critical Appraisal

The record is clearly mixed. Charter schools have been racialized, radicalized into business-generation schemes, scorned by teachers unions, and, according to some of my sources in my hometown of Washington, DC, rammed down the throats of poorer communities.<sup>1</sup> But charter schools sometimes have spotlighted best practice in urban education.<sup>2</sup> As a critical reader of research, education faculty member, and former policymaker, I share an observer's experience of the "good, bad, and ugly" of charter schools nationally, along with suggestions for creating the best charters.

Forty-eight years ago and five days after release from Army active duty, I entered a recently desegregated Washington, DC, high school as an English teacher. Since then, I have served as teacher, community school administrator, school desegregation researcher, and regional federal assistance center leader, and in faculty and administrative roles in higher education and in school reform, concluding my service with three policymaking entities advising the governor and two terms on the Oregon State Board of Education. In that time, I have visited several dozen charter schools—in my state and elsewhere—and visited more than a hundred regular public and private schools in 15 countries. I have

learned there are no panaceas in education—save great teaching, which, when accompanied by the focused, actualized commitment of educators, community members, and policymakers, produces solid educational results for kids.

Charter schools, with their mixed record of successes and failures, can address "soft spots" in public education practice, but they have not made the case that semi-independent entities can better address the many issues and inequities that public education face. These schools must be endorsed and authorized by those who are competent and insightful enough to insist on high quality and powerful enough to terminate charters where necessary. In my experience, this responsibility has encompassed detailed school oversight and decisive action, including dissolving a charter board and closing schools.

As chair of the state board, I insisted that board members participate in annual charter schools review so that policy met practice. Kids' lives are at stake with every policy decision, and I made it my leadership role to include a critical consciousness in the complete charter approval process.

As a parent, I appreciate school choice. High-quality science instruction was

not a local option for my daughter, whose grandmother was one of the first black female chemists at the National Institutes of Health in the 1950s, and her mother, educated at the prestigious Simon Bolivar Institute in Venezuela, was a Latina organic chemist. We monitored our local school closely, finding the graduation rates and other indices to be completely unacceptable. We first tried to be active in school change, and then we voted with our feet and changed our daughter's high school enrollment to get the kind of instruction we wanted for her. Thus from my personal and professional perspectives, I support choice for students, parents, and communities.

One of my favorite places for K-12 education is a bilingual/dual-language charter school in Oregon. I visit whenever I can because the learning and teaching atmosphere is electric, the leadership is inspiring, and community members regularly meet there, with some serving as literacy volunteers. Four Rivers Charter School is an intellectual and emotional delight—a wonderful educational space that honors the languages and cultures of the local community, employs sound curriculum approaches, and celebrates great teaching, skillful administration, and home visitation. Four Rivers is the sort of place every educator hopes for on entering the profession.

Over the objections of three local school boards, the state board authorized the school. Scores of community members embrace the school and its dual-language mission, many sending their kids there to support the unique educational and social-capital role it has served for over a dozen years. It is a charter school success, with a record of student achievement and producing college-bound graduates.

Located in a rural town of 30,000, surrounded by sheep and cattle ranches, and in a different time zone from the state capital, the school faces real challenges. Its very remoteness can be daunting: It is hard to hire and maintain good teachers, the nearest teacher preparation program is over a hundred miles away, and it persists despite a decade of struggle with local districts.

As a matter of policy, the Oregon state board has presumed that a part of its job is maintaining direct contact and an active role with the charter schools that the board directly authorized. Charter schools in our state may be authorized

by the local district, or in exceptional cases, by the state board of education. As vice chair and then board chair from 2012 to 2015, I urged each board member to take on this active role. By working with the Oregon Department of Education's staff director for charter schools and through site visits, we could help assure the state legislature and the governor that the board was responding faithfully to its legislative charge.

## Charter School Controversies

The controversies that beset charter schools have real roots. Many proponents for charters emerged in early years, including parents seeking to avoid sending their kids to schools with black children and those frustrated by the bureaucracies of large, mostly urban, school districts. Decades later, these roots still show, sometimes blatantly.

In "The Racist History of Charter Schools," Christopher Bonastia puts fears about charters in the context of past segregation: "The now popular idea of offering public education dollars to private entrepreneurs has historical roots in white resistance to school desegregation after *Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954.... [T]he desired outcome was few, or better yet, no, black students in white schools. In Prince Edward County, Virginia, one of the five cases decided by *Brown*, segregationist whites sought to outwit integration by directing taxpayer funds to segregated private schools." This past necessitates stiff scrutiny for the charters of the present, he adds. "[I]n some cases charter schools deliver what they promise.... [I]n others, ... this sparkling veneer masks less attractive realities that are too often dismissed, or ignored, as the complaints of reactionaries with a vested interest in propping up our failed system of public education."<sup>3</sup>

Parents and state boards of education need to determine whether all schools are addressing equity issues, but with charter schools in particular. Charter schools should be supported when 1) all students are benefiting from quality educational experiences, including teaching, as shown in graduation rates and postsecondary success; 2) charter structures and personnel are accountable to local communities and to state and local school boards; and 3) charter schools support the educational aspirations of the community and society as a whole.

Charter schools run into trouble when stakeholders discern that they do provide quality education experiences, are not accountable, and do not serve their communities' aspirations for their children. Recurring controversies arise over charters' enrollment of fewer special education children and over whether cost-cutting and curriculum streamlining narrow the curriculum.

In a number of districts, local citizens have accused charter schools of draining resources from the school resource pot. In a 2014 report about the Pennsylvania charter sector, Representative James Roebuck of the Pennsylvania House Education Committee listed many of these concerns: "1) [M]ost are not helping kids, 2) some charters are actually hurting kids, 3) too many charter schools are 'cash cows', 4) the charter school provider 'industry' has a lot of fraud and corruption, 5) charter schools have a lack of transparency and accountability, 6) some charters practice skimming and weeding out [of good students] strategies, 7) charters can contribute to re-segregation in US education, 8) charters drain resources from struggling school districts, 9) charter school openings sometimes come at the expense of opening and continuing traditional public schools, 10) it is hard to get rid of bad charter schools, 11) there is a lack of innovation at many charter schools, and 12) choice as a solution is very 'neo-liberal'... free market ideology has turned parents into consumers, rather than public citizens participating in a common good."<sup>4</sup>

## Keeping Charter Schools on Target

Charters have been used as a tool to aid urban white flight, to resegregate, and to differentially resource schools. This history notwithstanding, Oregon's experience demonstrates that there nonetheless can be a positive, substantial role for charter schools. This experience suggests that these conditions need be present: 1) monitoring to ensure that all students are benefiting from quality educational experiences, including teaching, as shown in graduation rates and postsecondary success; 2) design and enforcement strategies such that charter structures and charter personnel are accountable to local communities and to state and local school boards; and 3) an insistence that charter schools

support the educational aspirations of the community and society as a whole.

There must be consequences for failing to meet these conditions. The Oregon board terminated a charter school for moving from its assigned district and failing to take corrective action, a charter school board when members threatened violence by bringing and displaying firearms at a board meeting, and an online charter for enrollment difficulties. Board members found support for these actions when they checked in with both pro-charter and not-so-pro-charter legislators and citizens.

## Conclusions

Oregon's experience suggests that state boards of education in particular can and should support the exemplar charter school and insist on nothing less for charter school sponsorship. Good charter schools authorized at the state level are characterized by sound policy and effective leadership, continually evolving best practice and assessment, a stated equity framework that includes the ongoing participation of diverse communities, and clear authority to terminate schools. Citizens must watchdog state policymaking authorities to ensure that charters reach this high bar. Policymakers must be courageous and transparent in their decision making, with the sure knowledge that kids' futures are at stake with every decision. ■

<sup>1</sup>Christopher Bonastia, "The Racist History of the Charter School Movement," *Alternet* (January 6, 2015), <http://www.alternet.org/education/racist-history-charter-school-movement>; Thomas Gentzel, "Waste, Fraud, Abuse, and Charter Schools...Shocked? No." *Huffington Post* (November 20, 2016), [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/waste-fraud-and-abuse-and-charter-schools-hocked\\_us\\_58325f32e4b0d28e552151b4](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/waste-fraud-and-abuse-and-charter-schools-hocked_us_58325f32e4b0d28e552151b4); Addison Wiggin, "Charter School Gravy Train Runs Express to Fat City," *Forbes* (September 10, 2013); Jeff Bryant, "Education's Newsmaker of The Year: Charter School Scandals," *Common Dreams* (December 19, 2014), [www.common-dreams.org/views/2014/12/19/educations-newsmaker-year-charter-school-scandals](http://www.common-dreams.org/views/2014/12/19/educations-newsmaker-year-charter-school-scandals); Randi Weingarten, quoted in Margaret Raymond, "A Rebuttal of Weingarten on the Facts," *Huffington Post* (April 15 25, 2016), [www.huffingtonpost.com/margaret-raymond/a-rebuttal-of-weingarten\\_b\\_9701622.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/margaret-raymond/a-rebuttal-of-weingarten_b_9701622.html).

<sup>2</sup>Edward Cremata et al., "National Charter School Study 2013," (Stanford, CA: Center for Research on Educational Outcomes, 2013), <http://credo.stanford.edu/documents/NCSS%202013%20Final%20Draft.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup>Bonastia, "Racist History."

<sup>4</sup>Valerie Strauss, "A Dozen Problems with Charter Schools," *Washington Post* (May 20, 2014).

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