



Teacher voice and a focus on diversity will put charter schools back on the road to being the laboratories of innovation in public education.

by Richard D. Kahlenberg and Halley Potter

A Smarter Direction for Charter Schools

Charters have long drawn the ire of teachers unions, and more recently of civil rights groups such as the NAACP and Black Lives Matter, which have called for a moratorium on their expansion. This dissension has made it easy to forget that these groups once embraced the vision of charter schools—one in which teachers would innovate in educational laboratories where students of different

backgrounds would learn from each other. Charters have not lived up to this promise, but we believe they can.

To do so, they have to return to their roots. The charter school movement was jumpstarted in 1988, when education reformer and teacher union leader Albert Shanker proposed a new kind of public school that would allow teachers to experiment with innovative

approaches to educating students. Publicly funded but independently managed, these schools would be given a charter to try fresh approaches for a set period and would be renewed only if they succeeded.

Freed of bureaucratic constraints, teachers would be empowered to draw on their expertise to create educational laboratories from which the traditional public schools would learn. And liberated from traditional school boundaries, Shanker and other early charter advocates suggested, charters could do a better job than the regular public schools of helping children of different racial, ethnic, economic, and religious backgrounds come together to learn from one another.

Somewhere along the way, charter schools went in a different direction from the one Shanker envisioned. Many charter school founders empowered management, not teachers, and adopted antiunion sentiments. Today, just 7 percent of charter schools are unionized, and teacher retention rates—one possible measure of professional satisfaction—are lower than in traditional public schools.¹ Moreover, most charter schools largely discarded the goal of student integration. Today, charters are actually less economically and racially diverse than traditional public schools.²

The purpose of charter schools also evolved. Originally conceived as laboratories with which traditional public schools would collaborate, charters became a force for competition, with some of their proponents suggesting they replace district schools.

All in all, the change was quite dramatic. Proposed to empower teachers, desegregate students, and allow innovation from which the traditional public schools could learn, many charter schools instead prized management control, reduced teacher voice, further segregated students, and became competitors rather than allies of regular public schools. We think the evidence suggests that the original vision had more power—that teacher voice is good for education, as is the racial and economic integration of students. A small number of charter schools are embracing this early vision, and state boards of education could be critical players in supporting them and broadening this approach to charters.

The Importance of Teacher Voice

Teachers' engagement in school decisions and their collaboration with administrators and each other lead to many positive outcomes. School climate improves, which promotes a better learning environment for students. These conditions in turn raise student achievement and improve the working environment for teachers, which reduces teacher turnover. We briefly review the research that bears out these connections.

Stronger School Climate. Richard Ingersoll, an expert on teacher workplace issues, describes teachers as people “in the middle,” “caught between the contradictory demands and needs of their superordinates—principals—and their subordinates—students.”³ When teachers have the right amount of control, Ingersoll argues, they are able to do their job successfully, earning respect from principals, coworkers, and students.

Looking at data from the National Center for Education Statistics' Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), Ingersoll found that the amount of conflict between students and staff, among teachers, and between teachers and the principal all decrease as teacher control in “social decisions” such as student discipline and teacher professional development policies increases. As he summarized in a later article, “Schools in which teachers have more control over key schoolwide and classroom decisions have fewer problems with student misbehavior, show more collegiality and cooperation among teachers and administrators, have a more committed and engaged teaching staff, and do a better job of retaining their teachers.”⁴

Increased Student Achievement. A strong teacher culture also improves student performance, research shows. Valerie Lee and Julia Smith measured the effects of teachers' work conditions and school climate on student achievement using longitudinal data tracking individual student learning gains from 8th to 10th grade.⁵ They found that, after controlling for student and school characteristics, student achievement is higher across all subjects when teachers take collective responsibility for student learning and when the staff is more cooperative. The study also showed that schools with high levels of collective responsibility and staff cooperation had more equitable distributions of

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student gains across socioeconomic status (SES): That is, lower SES students in these schools tended to have gains on par with the gains of higher SES students. Promoting collective responsibility and cooperation among teachers may thus improve student outcomes and reduce achievement gaps.

Research on effective school organization also finds that collaboration—one manifestation of teacher voice—is an important component of school quality. One prominent recent example is the impressive 15-year longitudinal study of hundreds of elementary schools in Chicago by the Consortium on Chicago School Research. This study found that one of the organizational features that distinguished schools showing academic improvement from struggling schools was intense staff collaboration coupled with strong professional development. Furthermore, researchers found that building strong relational trust among teachers and administrators was crucial to school improvement.⁶

Greg Anrig synthesized research on collaboration and school organization in his book *Beyond the Education Wars*. He found that “one of the most important ingredients in successful schools is the inverse of conflict: intensive collaboration among administrators and teachers, built on a shared sense of mission and focused on improved student learning.”⁷

One important way to promote teacher voice is to allow teachers to form unions and bargain collectively as a group. With the support of a union, teachers may feel less intimidated about speaking out and can advocate more effectively for changes in the classroom. Unionization has also been linked to higher levels of academic achievement for students. In a 2002 review of 17 studies, sociologist Robert Carini found that 12 of 17 identified studies found increased student achievement in unionized schools, controlling for a number of factors. These studies were also more methodologically rigorous than the five studies that found negative effects.⁸

The Importance of Socioeconomic and Racial Integration

There is also considerable research to suggest that socioeconomic and racial integration are important ingredients to producing good

citizens in a democracy and skilled workers in a free market economy.

Integration and Democratic Citizenship. Separate schools for rich and poor and white and minority students undercut the primary lesson of democracy—that we are all social equals. American public schools—whether district schools or charter schools—are not only about raising academic achievement and promoting social mobility; they are also in the business of promoting an American identity, social cohesion, and democratic citizenship. In an increasingly diverse nation, public schools are the glue that reminds students what they have in common as Americans.

Segregation by race and class undercuts that goal by increasing the risk of students having discriminatory attitudes and prejudices. For instance, children are at risk of developing stereotypes about racial groups if they live in and are educated in racially isolated settings. Diverse schools, by contrast, can help prevent bias and counter stereotypes.⁹ When school settings include students from multiple racial groups, students become more comfortable with people of other races, which dramatically decreases discriminatory attitudes and prejudices.¹⁰ Numerous studies have found that racial integration in public schools is important to producing tolerant adults and good citizens.¹¹ As Justice Thurgood Marshall noted, “Unless our children begin to learn together, then there is little hope that our people will ever learn to live together.”¹² Research confirms that students who attend racially diverse high schools are more likely to live in diverse neighborhoods five years after graduation.¹³

Integration and School Quality. In addition to offering important civic advantages, integrated schools—particularly those that bring together students of different socioeconomic backgrounds—produce stronger academic outcomes for students of all backgrounds. Fifty years ago, the congressionally authorized Coleman Report found that the single most important predictor of academic achievement is the socioeconomic status of the family a child comes from, and the second most important predictor is the socioeconomic makeup of the school attended. Students generally perform significantly better in schools with strong middle-class populations than they do in high-poverty schools.

Virtually all the things that educators talk about as desirable in a school—high standards and expectations, good teachers, active parents, a safe and orderly environment, a stable student and teacher population—are more likely to be found in economically mixed schools than in high-poverty schools.

While it is possible to make schools with high concentrations of poverty work, it is extremely uncommon. Douglas Harris found that middle-class schools are 22 times as likely to be consistently high performing as majority low-income schools.¹⁴

Students in middle-class schools perform better in part because middle-class students on average receive more support at home (including better nutrition and health care) and come to school better prepared. But the vastly different educational environments typically found in middle-class as contrasted with high-poverty schools also appear to have a profound effect on achievement. On the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) given to fourth graders in math, for example, low-income students attending more affluent schools scored substantially higher than low-income students in high-poverty schools. The gap in their average scores is roughly the equivalent of almost two years of learning.¹⁵ Moreover, low-income students given a chance to attend more affluent schools performed more than half a year better, on average, than middle-income students who attend high-poverty schools.

The Need for a New Direction

The decision of leaders in the charter school movement to largely abandon early ideas about the importance of student integration and teacher voice may help explain why the charter school movement has not produced more powerful results. While there are excellent charter schools and there are also terrible ones, on average, charter students perform about the same as those in traditional public schools.¹⁶ In our view, the charter school movement, once brimming with tremendous promise, has lost its way.

The good news is that within the varied charter school world, a small but growing number of leaders and institutions are resurrecting the original idea behind charters. In our

book, *A Smarter Charter: Finding What Works for Charter Schools and Public Education*, we profile 15 exciting charter schools that promote teacher voice or economic and racial diversity, or—in a few cases—do both. To us, these charter schools offer the right approach because, based on extensive research, students have a better chance of building deep knowledge and honing critical thinking skills in schools where teachers have voice and student bodies are integrated.

Moreover, these schools offer a sensible way out of the charter school wars—rejecting competing visions in which charter schools are either to be utterly vanquished or completely victorious. On the one hand, we disagree with charter school opponents who would abandon the experiment entirely. Because of their freedom and flexibility, charters can provide excellent learning environments for students, and many do. Moreover, as a practical matter, even fierce critics such as Diane Ravitch note that charter schools are “here to stay.”¹⁷ Public support for charters has continued to grow, from less than 40 percent in 2002 to 68 percent in 2013, according to annual Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup polls.¹⁸

On the other hand, we disagree with some enthusiasts who believe charters should completely replace traditional public schools. Despite their enormous growth, charters still educate only about 5 percent of public school students. The abiding purpose of charters must be not only to educate the students under their own roofs but also to bring lessons to the traditional public schools, which will educate the vast majority of American students for the foreseeable future.

How State Boards of Education Can Support Smarter Charters

State boards of education could be critical supporters of a new, better direction for charter schools. Boards could work with state legislatures to embrace important policies on teacher voice and integration that would support what we call “smarter charters.”

Policies to Support Teacher Voice. When we use the term “teacher voice,” we are referring to formal mechanisms in a school for teachers to participate in decisions about instruction, organizational issues, and workplace conditions.

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Unionization is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for having teacher voice in a school, but it can be a helpful tool for channeling teacher participation. Charter schools, however, have a mixed record of openness to teacher unions, which in part explains why 93 percent of charter schools are nonunion.¹⁹ Furthermore, forming a union at a charter school can be a complicated process, and laws differ from state to state. Below are some ideas for reform:

- **State charter school laws should give teachers at charter schools the option to bargain collectively, including joining the district teacher union.** Five states (Illinois, Maine, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, and Washington State) currently bar teachers at charter schools from joining the district collective bargaining unit.²⁰ Forming a separate collective bargaining unit may afford teachers more flexibility, but it also requires more work to form a union from scratch. Teachers at charter schools should have the option to join with other teachers in their district to bargain collectively if they want.
- **State charter school laws should give charter teachers the option of forming their own union.** Because charter schools thrive on flexibility, automatic involvement in the district's collective bargaining agreement may not always be appropriate. At the same time, because charter schools are usually small and therefore cumbersome to organize, charter school laws should provide teachers an opportunity to create a union during the charter school's first year of operation. Instead of making a nonunion environment the charter school default option, as is usually true today, teachers would be given an affirmative choice to decide whether or not to form a union and could also vote again on the matter at any time.
- **Charter schools could appoint teacher representatives to their governing boards.** Unions are not the only way to facilitate teacher voice. When Minnesota's charter school law was first passed, it required a majority of each charter school's board to be composed of teachers employed at the school. (The law has since been relaxed to require at least one teacher on the board.) Currently, six states (Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii,

Minnesota, Nevada, and Virginia) require charter school boards to include a teacher representative, while two states (Louisiana and Missouri) forbid charter teachers from sitting on governing boards.²¹ Where unions do not represent charter teachers, we favor the model of reserving seats for teachers on charter school boards.

Policies to Encourage Student Diversity.

Charter schools need tools and incentives for promoting diverse enrollment, as well as protections against choice-driven segregation, to be effective vehicles for integration. State boards could encourage the adoption of the following types of policies:

- **Allow charter schools to enroll students from across a region.** In states where charter schools are bound by district lines or other smaller zones, new provisions for interdistrict charter schools should be an option. Likewise, when charter schools are required to give preference to applications from the surrounding neighborhood, these preferences could be capped below 100 percent of seats so that charters may balance serving the immediate neighborhood with increasing integrated options across the region.
- **Require that funding be provided for transportation to charter schools, at least for low-income students.** Many state charter school laws fail to provide charter schools with funding for student transportation that is equitable to that of other public schools.²² Charter schools that do not provide transportation may exclude families who are unable or unwilling to provide their own transportation, a group likely to be disproportionately low-income. Providing transportation funding will remove this potential barrier as well as make it easier to use charter schools to integrate students across a region.
- **Require charter schools to participate in the National School Lunch Program to provide free or reduced-price meals to eligible students.** Based on a nationally representative sample, the federal Schools and Staffing Survey found that 17.2 percent of charter schools did not participate in the federal free or reduced-price lunch programs as of 2011–12, compared with just 3 percent of traditional public schools.²³ Low-income families may

be deterred from enrolling at a charter school that fails to provide these meals.

■ **Allow charter schools to use a variety of weighted lotteries to promote integration.** Many states require charters to use a blind lottery, which strips charters of an essential tool for diversifying student bodies. We should not leave diversity literally up to chance. Unfortunately, states have varied and often unclear policies on the legality of weighted lotteries.²⁴

The charter school wars have gone on for too long—virtually since the first charter school law passed 25 years ago. In the next quarter century, states and districts can forge a new path for charters that provides genuine voice to teachers and integrates students. A wide body of research supports this approach. But it will take a critical coalition of civil rights groups, teachers unions, and visionary charter school leaders—allied with and supported by state boards of education and other state leaders—to make it happen. ■

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³R. M. Ingersoll, *Who Controls Teachers' Work?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 211.

⁴R. M. Ingersoll, "Short on Power, Long on Responsibility," *Educational Leadership* 65, no. 1 (2007): 24.

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⁸R.M. Carini, "Teachers Unions and Student Achievement," in A. Molnar, ed., *School Reform Proposals: The Research Evidence* (Greenwich, CT: Information Age, 2002).

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¹⁰H. McGlothlin and M. Killen, "Children's Perceptions of Intergroup and Intragroup Similarity and the Role of Social Experience," *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 26 (2005): 680–98; A. Rutland et al., "Interracial Contact and Racial Constancy: A Multi-Site Study of Racial Intergroup Bias in 3–5 Year Old Anglo-British Children," *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 26 (2005): 699–713.

¹¹For example, A. S. Wells and R. L. Crain, "Perpetuation Theory and the Long-Term Effects of School Desegregation,"

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¹²Milliken v. Bradley, 414 U.S. 717, 783 (1974) (Justice Marshall, dissenting).

¹³K.J.R. Phillips et al., "Integrated Schools, Integrated Futures? A Case Study of School Desegregation in Jefferson County, Kentucky," in C. E. Smrekar and E. B. Goldring, eds., *From the Courtroom to the Classroom: The Shifting Landscape of School Desegregation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2009).

¹⁴Douglas Harris, "High-Flying Schools, Student Disadvantage, and the Logic of NCLB," *American Journal of Education* 113, no. 3 (2007): 367–94. Harris defines middle-class schools as those with less than 50 percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and low-income schools as those with 50 percent or more of students eligible for subsidized lunch.

¹⁵C. Lubienski, and S. T. Lubienski, *Charter, Private, Public Schools and Academic Achievement: New Evidence from NAEP Mathematics Data* (New York: National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2006).

¹⁶See, e.g., E. Cremata et al., *National Charter School Study 2013* (Stanford, CA: Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University, 2013); P. Gleason et al., *The Evaluation of Charter School Impacts: Final Report* (Washington, DC: US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, June 2010).

¹⁷Diane Ravitch, *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools* (New York: Knopf, 2013), 252.

¹⁸W.J. Bushaw and S.J. Lopez, "Which Way to Go? The 45th Annual PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 95, no. 1 (2013): 9–25; L.C. Rose and A.M. Gallup, "Urban Dwellers in Urban Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 84, no. 5 (2003): 408–09.

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