

6. Chartering and Innovating

Chester E. Finn Jr.

Despite the weighty burdens under which they labor and the many obstacles they encounter, U.S. charter schools have made impressive strides on the innovation front. They've even innovated with respect to the definition of "educational innovation," which is to say many of their notable accomplishments on this front have taken altogether different forms than early charter theorists and backers expected.

That charters would innovate, however, was both expected and promised from the outset, when their proponents made four key claims.

First, these novel schools would provide needed and healthy competition for moribund and monopolistic district public schools and thus force them to change as a result of external pressure.

Second, they would provide quality education options for children who lacked them, especially disadvantaged youngsters unable to afford private schools.

Third, they would offer creative educators, community groups and organizations, entrepreneurs, philanthropists, and oth-

ers the opportunity to develop and operate their own public schools according to their own educational lights or the needs of the children for whom they are most concerned.

Fourth, these schools would serve as sources of innovation and discovery for American education as a whole, as laboratories or research and development centers, devising new forms of teaching and learning, unique curricula, distinctive ways of organizing schools and novel modes of effectively delivering instruction to children.

It is the last of those promises that I primarily examine here, although, in fact, charter-related innovation has also helped to keep the other three promises and I will note some of the ways.

The problem that the fourth promise sought to solve was embedded in the belief that U.S. education wasn't as good as it needed to be because it had failed to discover effective ways of doing things. It was stuck in a rut and too uniform from one place to another. If only American K–12 education possessed a set of daring “lab schools” to experiment with new and different educational practices (or so this reasoning went), it would make breakthrough discoveries that could then be applied on a mass scale.

Charters, at least to some people, held out the promise that American ingenuity, turned loose to innovate without bureaucratic encumbrance, union strictures and regulatory inhibition, would succeed in transforming education as it had transformed so many other sectors. Call this the Thomas Edison view of schooling. (In 1996, charter pioneer Joe Nathan identified Henry Ford and Apple's Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak as prototypical designer-inventor-entrepreneurs and models.) Putter about in the lab or workshop, without too many outside constraints, and clever, motivated, imaginative people will invent terrific alternatives to the failed methods of yesteryear. Experiments that

worked in charter schools could then be picked up by the “regular system.”

“*Without too many outside constraints,*” I said, and that was, of course, a major element of charter-school theology and of the founders’ expectations. As other chapters in this volume make clear, reality turned out to be painfully different. Compromise, constraint and a slanted playing field have bedeviled charter schools from the outset, with potentially dire consequences for innovation. Just as families that lack such essentials as bread and milk are unlikely to invent new gourmet taste treats, skimpy funding has made it a challenge for U.S. charter schools to deliver even the basics, even as myriad unwaived rules and laws have pressed these schools to ape rather than deviate from the familiar features and practices of traditional district-operated schools.

Almost from the beginning, critics charged that U.S. charter schools were not, in fact, keeping the innovation promise by coming up with anything truly original, anything that couldn’t already be found (if one looked hard enough) in district-operated public schools. Characteristic of this genre, in 2000 Gerald Bracey remarked of charter schools that, “Innovations in the broader sense of the word . . . are rare. In Michigan, for example, evaluators did not find any program or approach that had not already been tried in the public schools.”¹

Are such criticisms valid? Has this promise in fact not been kept? Was it an illusion from the outset? A good idea strangled in its crib? Or was it misunderstood (possibly by those who believed it) and misrepresented by charter critics, perhaps to serve their larger political ends? Have important innovations emerged from charter schools in particular and the charter movement in general? If so, what are they? And what’s the likelihood that char-

1. Gerald Bracey, *Charter Schools*, Center for Education Research, Analysis, and Innovation, School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, October 12, 2000.

ter schools will, in the future, serve as a significant fount of innovation?

In a limited and technical sense, the critics have a point. There's practically no imaginable education "program or approach" (to use Bracey's phrase) that cannot already be found somewhere in the vastness of American public education. That goes for good and bad practices alike, things that work and things that don't. American education has much sameness, but it also boasts astonishing diversity—and this was true before charter schools came along.

But that argument misses the point. Innovativeness per se is no virtue if the change represents no improvement. In an era of standards-based reform, in fact, the coin of the education realm is achievement or performance, not sheer novelty or unalloyed differentness. Charter schools, sometimes to their dismay, are being judged more by their success in boosting standardized test scores than by their capacity to generate a parade of inventions and innovations. Some charter people, in fact, feel confined, inhibited, and frustrated by this fact. Yet going where nobody has ever journeyed before is a dreamy ideal that is seldom realized in the 100,000-school expanse of American K–12 education, and isn't all that important, anyway. Indeed, one can argue that the education system's obsession with innovativeness per se is a romantic distraction from the need to take proven practices and known successes and replicate them in more places, deploying them in place of failed approaches and nonfunctional designs. Indeed, even within the charter movement, much of today's smart money is investing not in the invention of yet more models, but in the duplication and propagation of success.

Yet charter schools and the charter movement have made profound and valuable contributions to educational innovation in America—and have done so despite the confined scope, con-

strained budgets and regulatory shackles that inhibit them. Ten developments on this front deserve note.

First, while cosmopolitans routinely scan the entire national public-education landscape in search of ideas, innovations, examples, and trends, most people are locally oriented. For a particular child, parent, or teacher, public education consists of what's readily accessible where they live. A fine school in Portland doesn't do much for a kid in Tuscaloosa. An innovative pedagogy in the Bronx is of scant value on Arizona's Navaho reservation—and vice versa. What charter schools have been able to do in thousands of places is to distinguish themselves from the pre-existing schools in their vicinities, thus creating what, from the community's standpoint, must fairly be termed innovations and alternatives that didn't otherwise exist. Innovation in situ, we might call it. That charters have done this is acknowledged even by people like Bracey, who grudgingly notes that "some things might be considered an innovation by contrast to the local public school. For instance, if the public schools were emphasizing a whole language approach to the teaching of beginning reading, then a phonics-oriented program might seem innovative to those who adopted it."

Example: Hundreds of "Core Knowledge" schools are scattered about the land, and the concept has been familiar since E. D. Hirsch Jr. coined it more than a decade ago. Core Knowledge curricula can be found in some district schools and private schools, as well as charter schools, and no longer qualify as an innovation per se. But if your family lives in Arvada, Colorado, served by the sprawling Jefferson County school system, the fastest, surest route to a Core Knowledge school for your kids is the Lincoln Academy charter school.² Similarly, while single-sex education is scarcely a novelty in the cosmos, if you live in Albany

2. <http://lincolnacadey.net>.

and want it for your daughter or son, you will gravitate to the only places in town that offer it: the twin “Brighter Choices” charter schools, one for boys and one for girls.³

Second, while charter schools may invent few unprecedented practices that cannot be spotted in some district school somewhere, they often mix and match practices in unusual and creative ways. For example, they might be much more instructionally unified than district schools in which teachers can close their doors and ignore what everyone else is teaching. They might be small, personalized, demanding, yet serene. They might include student-initiated learning with close attention to individual youngsters’ progress followed by quick remediation when students fall behind. They often engage parents in unusual ways, including “learning contracts,” weekly progress bulletins, mandatory parent participation, and suchlike. They may combine instruction with motivation, character development, and moral formation in ways that public schools seldom do. They might have novel staffing patterns. They might be conventional about instruction but join it to health, recreation, and social services. Such blends of instructional practices, school climate and organization, staffing and leadership, and ancillary activities are rare in public education, precisely because union contracts, school board policies, and bureaucratic boundaries work against them. Thus, when one seeks innovativeness in charter schools, it’s not individual practices so much as packages, combinations, and connections among them that hold the greatest promise for children, families, and educators—and for those seeking to replicate success.

Example: New York City’s Harlem-based “Village Academies,” the first of which began in 2003, are remarkable meldings of school features tailored to the schools’ missions and their inner-city, early-adolescent clienteles. These features were carefully re-

3. <http://www.brighterchoice.org>.

searched and meticulously assembled by school founder Deborah Kenny.⁴ Thus the schools combine a liberal arts curriculum with extra attention to reading and math skills; they have a nine-hour school day and 200-day year; they're organized into "small learning villages" that strive to individualize attention to students; and they commence college counseling in sixth grade.

Third, for a nontrivial number of public-school systems, the chartering mechanism, constrained as it is, has allowed them to try things they couldn't easily do within their own even-more-confining bureaucratic rules and contractual restrictions. "Pro-active chartering," we can call it. Whether it's networks of start-up schools in big cities like Chicago, New York, or Philadelphia, unusual school alternatives in the Minnesota towns of Northfield, Waseca, and Faribault, Houston's "Accelerated Learning and Transition Academy," the Los Angeles campus of "High Tech High," or virtual charter schools in a number of Ohio districts, some reform-minded superintendents and school boards have seized on the charter option as a way to test or demonstrate changes that they know make sense but are otherwise powerless to effect. Unfortunately, many other superintendents lack the vision or political will to do this—but in those situations it's not unheard of for other community leaders to seize upon the charter mechanism to inject quality and options into the city's education offerings, as Indianapolis mayor Bart Peterson and Oakland mayor Jerry Brown have done.

Example: Chicago's "ACE Tech High School"—ACE stands for "architecture, construction, engineering"—was created as a charter school because local building trades firms and unions had long had great difficulty working with the school system's vocational education department, and because it was crucial that skilled union tradespeople who were not state-certified as teach-

4. <http://www.villageacademies.org>.

ers be able to instruct its students.⁵ A knowledgeable observer of the Chicago scene remarks that this school's creation "caused an interesting and even amusing level of stress within the local labor movement as one branch of labor created a school in order to do a better job than another branch. The teachers union was not happy but the building trades couldn't have cared less."

In Colorado, where, until recently, districts have been the only charter authorizers—and many proved grudging in this role—several superintendents recognized that the charter law could be deployed for the district's own purposes. Denver, Montrose, and Strasburg, for example, launched charter schools to provide alternative programs for high-risk students and/or "recovery" programs for dropouts.

Fourth, any number of promising schools might not have happened at all, and certainly wouldn't have spread, but for the charter option. Prominent examples include Core Knowledge, KIPP, The Met, High Tech High, Aspire Public Schools, National Heritage Academies, and Edison Schools. "Virtual" schooling would not have reached nearly as many youngsters in nearly as many states were it not for the invention of "virtual charter schools," such as the networks run by Connections Academy and K12.⁶ Though successful replication of good schools remains a huge challenge for public education in general, the fact is that these schools are different enough, sometimes controversial enough, and often in need of such unconventional resources (people, budgets, calendars, schedules, materials, etc.), that chartering enabled them to thrive and spread in ways that district governance only occasionally allows. We can contrast this with the tale of "New American Schools" in the early 90s, which devised some interesting (and some banal) school designs but relied on states

5. <http://www.acetechnical.org/index.htm>.

6. <http://www.connectionsacademy.com> and www.k12.com.

and districts to embrace and implement comprehensive change models. By comparison, chartering fosters the spread of these other models today.

Interestingly, the “scaling” of charter-led innovation is not occurring within the district-school system so much as via the spread of successful charter models through the fascinating new entities known as Education Management Organizations (EMO’s) and Charter Management Organizations (CMO’s). (The former are profit-seeking firms such as Edison, Mosaica, White Hat and National Heritage Academies. The latter are non-profit organizations.) Virtual or shadow school systems—systems that replicate and refine successful models first developed as one-off schools—are arising via these enterprises, sometimes across a state or region, sometimes across the nation.

Though such models are common in the business sector, U.S. school systems have traditionally been geographically defined. We are now discovering via charters, CMO’s, EMO’s and kindred enterprises, that a single entity can successfully operate similar schools in many communities scattered across the landscape. The management arrangements differ but the implications are profound, not just for school organization, administration and delivery but also for the appearance of what can fairly be termed “brand name schools” that may one day be as ubiquitous as Holiday Inns, Toyota dealerships and Olive Garden restaurants.

Organizations pushing hard for large-scale school reform, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, have discovered to their dismay that, except in rare circumstances where the political and leadership stars are well aligned at the top of a school system, changing existing district schools—particularly in big cities—is excruciatingly difficult. They’re finding it faster and more productive to launch new schools. That, in turn, attracts them to the charter option and to CMO’s, EMO’s, and other means of taking charter-devised innovation to scale.

Example: The Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) schools began as charters and most of them (forty-two of forty-eight at present) remain charters, though there's no fast rule that they must be. But because they expect so much of their teachers—ultra-long days, weeks and years, plus 24/7 cell phone accessibility—it's exceptionally difficult to work this out within the bounds of a conventional salary schedule, state certification rules, and union contracts. Additionally, the KIPP curriculum, while tailored to a state's academic standards (and often blowing the lid off local test scores), is distinctive and not well suited to a district's standard offerings. Moreover, one of the “five pillars” of KIPP is that the school must be a “school of choice,” which is usually much easier to secure under the rules of a charter law than under the constraints of a district's attendance zones and bus routes. The KIPP organization is not, strictly speaking, a CMO. It's more like a leadership training, school development, and franchising operation—yet another organizational innovation spawned by the charter world.⁷

Fifth, though districts may not embrace different practices because they were piloted by charter schools, pressure from charter-induced competition has prodded a number of districts to innovate with their regular schools, if only to stanch the pupil hemorrhage and appeal more directly to parents who suddenly have viable alternatives for their daughters and sons. A 2001 federal study of “ripple effects” found every school system in a five-state sample making changes in “business and/or operations in response to charter schools. In 90 percent of those districts, leaders indicated they made changes in multiple areas of their district's operations in response to charter schools.”⁸ Other studies are more

7. <http://www.kipp.org/kippschools>.

8. Gregg Vanourek, *State of the Charter Movement 2005*, National Association of Public Charter Schools, <http://www.charterschoolleadershipcouncil.org/pdf/sotm2005.pdf>, page 24.

skeptical about the extent to which district schools have changed their practices in response to charter-driven competition, but everyone in the charter movement has anecdotes that suggest this is occurring.

Examples: The Ohio landscape is figuratively strewn with “virtual” schools started by districts in reaction to the thousands of students who have exited in favor of statewide virtual charter schools (and because districts spotted the availability of federal and state start-up dollars for such initiatives). Minnesota’s Forest Lake district started a Montessori school of its own after parents sought to launch a charter school in the Montessori mode.

A decade ago, one of America’s sagest school superintendents, Boston’s Tom Payzant, in collaboration with that city’s teacher union, initiated a network of semi-autonomous “pilot” schools, now numbering seventeen such.⁹ Here is how the Boston Foundation and Payzant explained them in 2002:

Pilot schools resulted from an agreement among the Boston Teachers Union (BTU), the Boston School Committee and the Mayor, which was incorporated into the 1994 collective bargaining agreement between the BTU and the Boston Public Schools. Pilot schools were created, in part, as a direct response to the competition posed by charter schools. . . . Dr. Thomas Payzant, Superintendent of Boston Public Schools, welcomed the Foundation’s support for encouraging the conversion of existing schools, saying, “Pilot schools are a critical part of the Boston Public Schools’ reform agenda. They were conceived by the district and the union working together. Parents want their children to attend, the results are impressive, and they keep the district competitive. Now, it is important to encourage more Boston public schools to seek pilot status.”¹⁰

Unfortunately, the Boston venture also shows how vulnerable

9. <http://www.ccebos.org/pilotschools/schools.html>.

10. <http://www.tbf.org/About/about-L2.asp?ID=97>.

such innovations are to shifts in the political winds. When the local teachers union acquired a new president in June 2003 (for the first time in twenty-eight years), he turned out to be a critic of the pilot-school program, objecting, in particular, to the schools' freedom to set their own teachers' hours and calendars and to decide how and whether additional "stipends" would be paid to those who work longer. "Forced overtime," union president Richard Stutman termed it, as he sought to curb the schools' autonomy in personnel matters—and to extract more salary dollars from the school system. The result, in mid-2005, was termed by *Education Week* "an increasingly bitter standoff" between union and district that, among its consequences, is preventing at least one more elementary school from joining the pilot network, even though its teachers voted (two years ago) to do so.

Sixth, charters have, as intended, created havens for disadvantaged youngsters in need of decent alternatives to bad district schools and unable to afford private schools. From the children's standpoint, at least, that amounts to a major innovation. Although Milton Friedman, father of the voucher movement, terms charters "a halfway solution," and although not every charter school is a good school, the waiting lists at many attest to their popularity and the demand for more of them. The Charter School Leadership Council estimates that, if there were enough charter schools today to accommodate all the girls and boys on waiting lists—20,000 in California, 15,000 in Massachusetts, etc.—total charter enrollments would be 20 percent greater and some 700 more schools (at their present average size) would be needed. The reason demand outstrips supply is, of course, the many caps, constraints, and obstacles that block the creation and expansion of charter schooling in nearly every state.

The overwhelming majority of today's 3,400 charter schools are located within the borders of troubled urban school systems large and small, and most of their million pupils are poor and

minority. Vanourek says that in 2002–2003, 58.6 percent of charter students were minority and 35 percent were eligible for subsidized federal lunches (and there's reason to suspect undercounting). Moreover, a large fraction of charter schools specifically seek to serve pupil populations that are needy in other ways. A 2003 survey reported that "28 percent of charter schools target low-income students or dropouts, 27 percent identify gifted and talented students as a target population to be served, nearly a quarter target English as a Second Language (ESL) students, 18 percent view teen parents as a focus, 12 percent specifically seek disabled students, 11 percent target court-adjudicated youth, and 10 percent target expelled youth."¹¹

Examples: Within four years of its founding, Washington's KIPP "Key Academy" was the highest-scoring middle school in the District of Columbia. Its cousin in the Bronx, one of the nation's two original KIPP schools, has for eight straight years been ranked the highest performing middle school in that impoverished borough.

The W.E.B. DuBois Academy, one of Ohio's highest-performing charter schools, now styles itself the "best school in Cincinnati," a claim that nobody in the Queen City seems to dispute.

The Chicago Charter School Foundation (CCSF) operates seven campuses serving some 4500 Windy City youngsters. Demand for places in these schools greatly exceeds capacity. In the summer of 2004, for example, 1700 more youngsters applied than could be accommodated—illustrative of the desperation felt by many Chicago families to find better education options for their children than the district itself provides. This abundance of applicants, and the fact that CCSF uses a randomized lottery to determine which applicants will attend its schools, means that it's also an excellent place for careful research, which was undertaken

11. Vanourek, page 12.

by Harvard economist and Koret Task Force member Caroline M. Hoxby. She and a colleague report that CCSF students (who entered between kindergarten and fifth grade), after spending an average of two years in their charter schools, score, on average, six percentile points higher than similar youngsters who were “lotteried out” and remained in the regular district-school system.

Seventh, chartering has become an option—not necessarily a good one—for transforming dysfunctional schools in the era of standards-based accountability. The basic charter “bargain”—greater operational freedom in return for stronger academic results, with the school’s very continuation dependent on its success in delivering those results—meshes well with standards-based reform. Congress and several states now see “chartering” as a way of reconstituting faltering district schools.

State (or district-initiated) interventions into poorly performing schools can take the form of chartering them, reconstituting them as charters, or closing them down and replacing them with start-up charters, perhaps operating in the same building. Some versions of reconstitution-via-charter are causing heartburn among charter aficionados who contend that the people associated with a school have to *want* it to be a charter school for that approach to have a decent chance of succeeding, i.e. that “involuntary charter school” is an oxymoron. Still, if the reconstitution is thorough enough, such as emptying out the building and in effect starting a new school in the old structure, it may succeed as a charter school. Colorado has pioneered a version of this with its own state accountability law, which provides that after several years of low performance by a district school, the state will issue a “request for proposals,” inviting outside groups to propose converting that school to a charter. For various reasons, little has yet occurred under this provision, but in early 2005, with KIPP’s help, the Denver Public Schools “reconstituted” the chronically

low-performing Cole Middle School as a charter to be known as “KIPP: Cole College Prep.”

California has a similar provision on the books. As one option for a chronically low-performing school, parents may petition the state to convert the school into a charter. Nobody has done this yet, but the Sacramento school system engaged in a version of it in 2003 when, rather than face a state takeover, it closed the venerable Sacramento High School and reopened it as a charter school run by a non-profit group called St. Hope Public Schools. (By all accounts, the school is thriving under its new structure.)

Much more of this sort of thing may be on the horizon courtesy of No Child Left Behind, which prescribes, among the options afforded districts for transforming low-performing schools in “corrective action” (and that have proven resistant to improvement via milder interventions), that “re-opening the school as a public charter school” is now a federally-sanctioned intervention strategy. How this will work is anybody’s guess.¹²

Eighth, the charter movement is drawing new people into public education—and keeping them there longer than the traditional system could. This is palpable at the annual “summit” sponsored by the New Schools Venture Fund, where hundreds of education innovators (and some profiteers and hangers-on) throng a hotel lobby and corridors, gossiping, exchanging business cards, exploring deals, commiserating about political and bureaucratic obstacles, and talking about curriculum, teachers, technology, and test scores.

One cannot help but contrast that scene with standard-issue education conferences, where real innovativeness is in short supply, resentment of change is the norm, and the best-loved speakers are those who rationalize the current performance of U.S.

12. See <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/54/25/5425.htm> for additional information.

schools and decry the scoundrels who aver that the nation is in jeopardy.

Attendees at the “New Schools” confabs also appear younger, keener and leaner, less fixated on the next cocktail hour or exhibitor break.

Example: The SEED Foundation is a non-profit group in Washington D.C. that runs the country’s best-known college-oriented charter *boarding* school, designed for disadvantaged teenagers from such troubled circumstances that going home after school each day is not wise.¹³ It’s becoming a model for other communities, even as it does an exemplary job of meeting the educational needs of several hundred D.C. youngsters. The two impressive young men who founded and still lead the school—one with an MBA in finance from Wharton Business School, the other a trustee of Princeton—wouldn’t likely be found working within the public-education system absent the charter opportunity. Nor have they lost their sense of enterprise. If all goes well, Baltimore will soon be home to the second SEED academy.

Ninth, though charter schools should not base their reputation for innovativeness on pure novelty or invention, some have characteristics so distinctive as to be genuinely difficult to find in traditional district schools. These include grade configurations that are rare in public school systems, such as schools spanning grades 6–12 and K–12 on a single site, easing or eliminating damaging transitions for kids and giving parents the option of circumventing the middle school entirely. They also include imaginative dropout-recovery schools that enable students to earn money while learning both technical and academic skills. (See, for example, Dayton’s ISUS and Mound Street charter schools.)¹⁴

13. http://www.seedfoundation.com/SEEDfoundation/SEEDSITE/Program_overview.htm.

14. Learn more about these schools at <http://www.cew.wisc.edu/charterSchools/profileISUS.asp> and <http://www.moundstreet.k12.oh.us/moundstreeta/site/default.asp>.

Minnesota's statutory requirement that teachers comprise a majority of each charter school governing board, though placed in the law to placate the teacher unions, has actually given rise to some unusual administrative arrangements. The EdVisions "co-operative" believes strongly in "teacher ownership" of its ten affiliated charter schools, pivoting off a design pioneered at the Minnesota New Country School, a rural school that has no principal and is led by a team of teachers.

Others have used chartering as a way to solve structural or governance problems that once plagued them. For example, several rural communities in Colorado—Marble, Guffey, Dinosaur, Paradox and others—were aggrieved because district consolidation had erased their sense of local control of their public schools—something especially important in tiny towns where the school is often the center of community life. District headquarters might be as much as fifty miles away, literally on the other side of the mountains, and they may subscribe to very different cultures and values than do those in the schools they govern. The charter law, in effect, enabled the rural communities to "secede" from these sprawling districts and recapture community ownership. What's unique here is not what goes on inside the school. What's unique is a functional governance arrangement that is well-tailored to a community's circumstances but otherwise unattainable within the ever-larger structures that dominate American public education.

Tenth and finally, chartering as a concept is beginning to creep into a few other domains.¹⁵ Ohio has developed a modest program of "charter colleges of education" that prepare candidates for "alternative certification" and California State University at Los Angeles boasts a "charter college of education."

15. Some analysts say it was widespread in many other domains long before it percolated into public education and that, in fact, innovation is seeping the other direction.

Virginia's legislature came close to "chartering" that state's public universities and conferring greater autonomy on them; in 2005 lawmakers agreed to a plan whereby (without using the charter label) interested campuses can approximate that status.

Major changes in Colorado's public higher education system in the past few years were modeled on charter-school governance, with individual campuses getting many state regulations waived in return for negotiated "performance contracts."

Iowa now calls six of its state agencies (e.g. child welfare, corrections) "charter agencies" and exempts them from many bureaucratic rules and routines in return for fiscal savings and measurable consumer benefits.

The word "charter" isn't the crucial element. What's distinctive is the shift from large bureaucratic structures, uniformity, and command-and-control governance to something more like a contractual arrangement between the public and a provider of public services. Charter sponsorship, as explained in chapter 4 in this volume, is akin to outsourcing the provision of those services rather than their exclusive delivery via government agencies and government employees. This is becoming more and more widespread in myriad domains within and outside of education.

That's ten, and to my eye they add up to plenty of important innovating. On balance, it can fairly be said that, while there may be few things that a given charter school is doing that a district somewhere isn't also doing, the American charter experience is, in fact, yielding an immense amount of desirable innovation on multiple fronts. It's doing so, moreover, in spite of the myriad constraints upon it. Perhaps adversity begets creativity—or in the more familiar phrasing, necessity is the mother of invention. But one should also try to imagine what more might have been accomplished on the innovation front if the playing field weren't so steeply tilted against the charter venture.

That's not to say that all such schools are succeeding or that

the charter experiment is a slam-dunk success. Indeed, we've also learned over these fifteen years that putting the charter label on a school doesn't make it a good one. But charter schools that are really bad have closed down, hundreds of them, albeit not enough yet (good sponsorship remains a work in progress), which is more than one can say for district schools. Thus, chartering is also an important, if not yet fully successful, innovation on the accountability front, which is particularly important in an era of standards-based reform.

What does the future hold? Most importantly, I believe, we can glimpse the emergence of a new model for organizing and governing public education—and for creating new or different schools. Ted Kolderie calls it public education's "open sector," the part that's free from traditional geographic boundaries and district bureaucracies, the part that allows for invention and innovation. But it's even more than that. The organizational changes we're witnessing suggest that charter schools may themselves be taken to scale—and that the results-based and always contingent relationship between a charter school and its sponsor might even become the norm rather than the exception in American public education. That would be one heck of an innovation.

What will keep that from happening? Self-destructive forces within the charter movement will contribute but the successful spread of this promising innovation will be blocked, above all, by the intense political opposition of those who are now pressing hard to contain it; who want to burden it with even more shackles; and who absolutely, positively don't want it to spread. Don't believe them, though, when they cite charters' alleged lack of innovation as a reason why it shouldn't.