



EPSL | **EDUCATION POLICY STUDIES LABORATORY**
Education Policy Research Unit

City-wide Systems of Charter Schools:

Proceed With Caution

Executive Summary

The charter school movement dates from the late 1980s and became a popular education reform tool in the 1990s. Some 3,000 charter schools exist today. Charter advocates made a number of claims regarding how charter schools would improve education. The charter, or contract, would free the school of many state and local district rules and regulations. Liberated from these onerous bureaucratic rules, charter schools would be more efficient and would also offer parents more choices. Most of all, the fundamental promise of charter schools was that they would improve achievement.

The City of Buffalo, New York has proposed to establish a network of charter schools under the aegis of the district school board. This appears to be the first time a large urban area has made such a proposal. This report addresses what the research literature to date has said about the performance of charter schools. It reviews the record of charter schools in the context of six questions asked in the planning document, *Creating a Network of Charter Schools in Buffalo*, prepared by the Education Innovation Consortium, a Buffalo think-tank, at the direction of the Buffalo School Board.

What Does Chartering Bring to Buffalo School Reform?

The planning document contends that charter schools would offer “true school-based decision making” and “curricular freedom subject to state performance standards.”

This report observes that the state performance standards in New York already constrain curricular freedom and school-based decision making, and that the *No Child Left Behind* law restricts them further. It also notes that Educational Management Organizations (EMOs) could well be the operators of Buffalo charters, and that these organizations, having developed their own curricula, offer no school-based freedom at all.

Can Chartering Bring Higher Levels of Accountability for Results?

Early charter advocates proposed a strict rule for judging charter schools: if they did not improve achievement, their charters should be revoked. They would be subject to performance-based accountability rather than the usual compliance-based accountability. In practice, very few charters have been terminated for academic reasons. Most charter revocations derive from the mishandling of funds or other financial problems.

Can Chartering Provide More Quality Choices for Parents?

This report observes that in evaluations throughout the nation, the evaluators have remarked on how similar the charter schools are to the traditional public schools that they have replaced.

Can a Network of Charters Promote the Transformation of the Entire System?

A hope of charter advocates has been that charter schools would be “laboratories of innovation,” and that the innovations begun in charter schools would create change throughout the district. The evaluations to date have not documented any such transformation. Often there are no mechanisms for dissemination of ideas or best practices, and in some cases the teachers and administrators at traditional public schools resent the presence of charter schools. In turn, charter school operators have not seen dissemination as one of their roles.

How Do Charters Compare Academically?

Again, the first and foremost promise of charter schools was to improve achievement. To date, no such improvement has been observed. Evaluations from Michigan, California, and Ohio find that charter schools are *at best* matching the performance of demographically similar traditional schools. This brief provides an extensive review of state and national evaluations.

Can Charter Schools Provide Adequate Services to Children With Special Needs?

While there are some charter schools that serve special needs children, the remainder has a smaller number of special education students than the public schools. In addition, the special education students that charters *do* serve generally have mild disabilities. Finally, those charters that are market-oriented—those managed by EMOs—have fewer special needs students than charters that are not market-oriented.

Recommendations

Based on the research data available to date on charter schools, it is recommended that the Buffalo School District, local and state legislators, and other education policy makers undertake the following tasks:

1. Critically evaluate the research and conclusions suggested in *Creating a Network of Charter Schools in Buffalo*. That document omitted many evaluation studies and uncritically—and sometimes erroneously—accepted the conclusions of studies it did include.

2. Ensure that agencies proposing charter schools to the school board specify in clear and measurable terms what they expect to accomplish. Many evaluations to date report only vaguely stated goals.
3. Ensure that the procedures the charter school operators will use to attain the goals stated in the charter are defined in measurable terms that will provide clarity as to whether or not the goals have been met.
4. Ensure that all parties are clear about the meaning of statements of accountability, and the consequences of not meeting the goals as stated in the charter.
5. Present charter schools as an asset to existing schools rather than a threat.

To date, charter schools have had little influence on the operations of traditional public schools, and some charters have been resented. If the district goal is transformation of the district schools, charter schools must be seen as a welcome addition to public education, and there must be clearly defined mechanisms by which charter schools contribute to the improvement of non-charter schools in the district.
6. Ensure that proposals offer specific and adequate statements about the administrative, personnel, and fiscal skills of those who will be in charge of managing the school. Many charter schools, and not only those whose charters have been revoked, have had personnel and financial struggles.
7. Ensure that proposals have specific statements about their approach to special education, and that this approach is consonant with district goals.

8. Obtain the services of an external, disinterested party to track the progress of charter schools and to conduct an evaluation *prior* to the opening of any charter schools under the proposed Network.