

LEGISLATING INNOVATION: WHY CHARTER SCHOOLS
CAN'T FIX PUBLIC EDUCATION

by

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Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at Arlington in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN SOCIOLOGY

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON

May 2014

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Acknowledgements

There are many people to thank for the support, encouragement, motivation, intellectual development, and tolerance I have benefited from during the writing of this thesis and during my graduate career at UTA.

First, I must express my appreciation for the interminable love and patience expressed by my wife, Nicole, and children, Brynn and Jackson. They have provided a constant source of inspiration during this journey, and will forever remain my greatest accomplishment.

Next, I thank each of my thesis committee members for their invaluable input and direction during the formation and writing of this paper. Dr. Ben Agger, Dr. Beth Anne Shelton, and Dr. Krystal Beamon deserve a great deal of credit for the refinement of my sociological perspective. Dr. Agger, as committee chair, has been instrumental in the continued development of my theoretical direction and I am proud to have the opportunity to work with him now and in the future.

Finally, but certainly not for lack of importance, I would like to emphatically thank the remaining Sociology Department faculty at UTA. I have had innumerable positive experiences through course interactions, internships, advising, and friendly discussions, all of which have made my current time here satisfying on both an intellectual and personal level. I sincerely hope to stay in contact with each of you as my academic career continues, in whatever form it may take.

April 21, 2014

Abstract

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How do we account for the fact that, despite myriad school reform and counterbalancing resistance efforts, the education system in America seems to be in a constant state of disrepair? Some observers attribute this to the introduction of accountability measures and voucher programs, while others claim that common curriculum standards, and accompanying standardized tests, are to blame. In the face of constant opposition to non-traditional educational venues by various special interest groups, there are a growing number of educational leaders opening schools that aim to challenge institutional norms and ever-growing numbers of parents choosing to enroll their children in those schools. Realization of the promise of these new schools is in serious jeopardy due to institutional and social forces that dampen any effort to challenge existing arrangements. Using charter schools as the most relevant and powerful entity representing this trend, I examine the history and motivation behind the structure of contemporary American education and propose a new way of evaluating the efficacy of future school reform.

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Chapter 1

Introduction to American Education

The establishment of Minnesota's charter school legislation in 1991 signaled the beginning of a new age in school reform. The legislation was a “ground breaking” effort which “allowed the formation of eight results-oriented, student-centered public schools” (Minnesota 2013). While previous efforts have focused primarily on curriculum, homeschooling, school financing, and equal access within the existing boundaries of the traditional schooling system, the creation of officially recognized and sanctioned public alternatives offered the possibility of revolutionary change in education. The combined pressures resulting from “global economic competition, low achievement, poor discipline, private schools’ vaunted superiority, and declining societal values” (Wayson 1999:450) over the preceding decades foreshadowed an inevitable shift in educational policy. Unfortunately, the educational system, and more specifically the methods of instruction and content of the curriculum, as constructed in the early 20th century has proven to be more resistant¹ to even the slightest change efforts than could reasonably be imagined (Bidwell 2001). This resistance has been equally over-studied (especially in the case of charter schools) and ignored (in respect to the human or social characteristics) by the wider research community, with most analysis focusing on technical definition and explanation of institutional organization (Bidwell 2001; Lubienski 2003; Welch 2011) and comparative studies of academic outcomes (Renzulli and Roscigno 2007; Zimmer et al.

¹ Pervasive may be the preferred word for Bidwell, who speaks to the institutional beliefs surrounding education as “held in common by lay persons and educators and cross the major boundaries of demographic, social, and cultural division in its population and local, regional, and political boundaries and levels” (Bidwell 2001:107) In my interpretation, this has become more active under contemporary observation, which removes the passive connotation that pervasiveness implies.

2012). While these studies offer hints into the macro-level processes² that shepherd, sometimes less-than gently, curricula and instruction toward familiar pastures, missing is a critical discussion of the foundations upon which all reform efforts seem to be based. It is the successful identification of the synergy between these constraining institutional forces, which are commonly blamed for the lack of reform progress, and the foundational precepts of the educational system that drive those institutional forces that this study takes as its challenge.

The introductory chapter consists of three interrelated sections. For the completely uninitiated reader, as well as those not intimately familiar with the historical trajectory of education in America, I will begin with a brief introduction to and overview of the American educational system. This relies on a number of exhaustive accounts of education ranging from colonial America to the mid-twentieth century, including writings from H.G. Good, Lawrence Cremin, and Diane Ravitch, as well as a sampling of historically appropriate sources. This overview helps frame the conditions under which not only reform efforts have arisen but the conditions under which American education came to its current evolutionary state, and also illustrates the challenges encountered by those who have attempted to remake 'traditional' education throughout American history. This means that principally, education takes form as an institution where possible. Though formally organized education on a large scale is not observable for some time, there exists plenty of opportunity to evaluate the overriding currents and dominating structures of each period in educational development. I do not attempt to address all

² Welch's application of institutional isomorphism to charter schools, building on Lubienski and others' analyses, is particularly fascinating when intertwined with a larger discussion that further explores the personal motivations driving underlying social currents that cause conformity to triumph over innovation as envisioned by reform advocates.

identifiable patterns of instruction, curricula development, and administration, as this would be more appropriate in the works that provide the factual basis for this section. Instead, I will focus on breaking down the observations of historians in light of current developments in education and considering how those early theories were either bound by the status quo of the day or worked to create new paradigms that ushered forward mini-revolutions in education.

Building upon the more generic historical analysis of education as an institution, the discussion turns to the origins of the modern charter school movement. This is a much shorter history, but no less illuminated by exemplary successes and littered by tragic failures for its brief existence. Here I locate, through existing work, the generally accepted goals, purposes, and aspirations of the movement. It will be no surprise to most that ‘innovation’ is exhausted to the point of overuse and meaninglessness in this context, especially in political arenas.

A sampling of social theory and existing research will serve as a book-end to the introduction, exploring various theoretical techniques and analyses that have been applied to education in differing settings over time. Welch’s (2011) application of institutional isomorphism plays a central role in the current critique of charter theory, but other theories and theorists have equally impactful ideas to lend as well. Tyack and Tobin’s (1994) concept of the “grammar of schooling” and Milton Friedman’s economic arguments for vouchers, decentralization, and greater school choice offer interdisciplinary perspectives that nonetheless have direct bearing. Ogbu’s “oppositional culture” introduces a possible explanation for both the creation of audience-specific charters as well as observed segregation in charters. This wide-ranging selection of theory serves to demonstrate the complexity of the issue under consideration and the enormity of the problems to be solved. While narrow focus on a singular aspect of school governance or

differential student outcomes might enrich general awareness of isolated factors, the amalgamation of related micro- and macro-level variables into a singular theoretical direction serves to provide a more concrete platform from which to effect tangible change through reform.

The second chapter, *The Charter Fight*, will expand upon the introductory history of the charter school movement, with specific attention to the debate between charter advocates and charter opponents, primarily as related to the major goals of the movement. This will primarily rely on widely-accessible texts including journal articles, books, newspaper editorials, and other public communication, with emphasis placed on reviewing as wide a range of literature as possible. Exploring this level of discourse will provide a foundation for the marriage of institutional-level theory and individual-level motivations.

Following the investigation of current and prior patterns of rationalization for and against the establishment and existence of charter schools, the third chapter turns to an in-depth exploration of these concepts using a Critical Theory approach. The chapter will consider perceived failings of the charter system and explore the ability of charters, in conjunction with appropriate external parties, to successfully ameliorate these conditions. The chapter will include discussion of measurement, accountability, and acceptance, reincorporating especially the ideas of institutional isomorphism and the “grammar of schooling” (Tyack and Tobin 1994), that serve to prohibit effective changes in the educational system, which severely limit the efficacy of charter schools as viable engines for change³. More importantly, this will lead into a discussion that considers charter

³ An example of a factor, and central to the argument soon to be put forward, that inhibits charter schools almost to the point of irrelevance is the contradictory accountability placed on charter schools that on the one hand demands innovation and creative solutions to educational problems

schools, in their current form, not as a panacea to America's failures in education but also not at fault or unnecessary as part of a larger true reform effort.

The closing chapter will attempt to locate a point of synergy between the institutional factors and the foundational precepts of education present in both the historical debate and the current realities of those navigating the traditional public and public charter school systems. Additional avenues for research will be identified, including an ambitious framework for applying this analytical model to include the totality of educational philosophies present in America today. The thesis should be considered an exploratory work meant to identify and refine suitable methods for creating such a framework. Moreover, it should contribute to the current research surrounding diversity of educational options, efficacy of reform efforts as they relate to marginalized social groups, and the constricting effects of institutional isomorphism on any deviations from entrenched educational norms.

I would caution against a premature characterization of this paper as an indictment of any specific charter schools or the charter school movement as a whole. Quite to the contrary, it is intended as an illumination of the constraints, both overt and covert, placed on the charter school system which prevent many intended changes from bearing fruit. Additionally, I would hope for the analysis to serve as development for a roadmap to achieve substantive education reform in the future.

and on the other hand requires adherence to assessment measures that are incompatible with innovative and progressive instructional methods.

(Brief) History of American Education

Introduction

Without casting an eye toward past events in the formation and evolution of American educational thought, there is no way to evaluate the current climate of change and resistance in the educational system. It is with this in mind that the present section will offer an overview of the trajectory of pedagogical theory and application from the inception of organized education in the New World⁴ to the contemporary era. This will be accomplished primarily through discussion of primary sources such as letters and legislation written by leading political and educational thinkers and historical accounts by modern scholars.

While it is possible to choose an earlier, or later, point in time from which to begin, considering the whole of educational evolution, at least from the beginning of formalized educational efforts, in America seems to be most appropriate since this provides a foundation from which to compare the availability of and accessibility to educational opportunities for all groups in American society. Women, slaves, poor and middle class citizens, and immigrants are among the groups which have experienced varying measures of inequality of opportunity during the time frame considered, and to differing degrees still experience inequality today. Without looking at the totality of educational thought we cannot hope to make sound judgments or form logical conclusions regarding contemporary systems of thought and practice.

⁴ To clarify, the beginnings of formal education in America did not begin with the founding of the New World. As would be expected, founding colonists were primarily concerned with survival in its most basic definition, which required all able bodies to do their part to secure food and shelter before all other concerns. Certainly, there was schooling conducted on an individual basis within families, or even among several families, but there is no direct way to link those beginnings with the formal organization of schools that started later.

Organization of the present section is accomplished by the creation of several layers, starting with an overall framework provided by educational historian H.G. Good (1962) which separates American educational history into a Colonial period and a National period. While there are many other frameworks that may be appropriate to use for other analytical purposes, Good provides us a natural separation between an early environment in which religion and the upper-class dominated and the current atmosphere in which equality of educational opportunity (Coleman 1968), under its various guises, is the both an enunciated goal and an underlying current in almost every educational endeavor. While limiting the historical perspective to these two periods may seem over-broad, the break between the two highlights arguably the major structural change in the education system, and is uniquely relevant for the immediate purposes of understanding the climate of educational structure. The Colonial period, from around 1609 to 1787, consists of developments and theory beginning in the early 17th century and continuing through the adoption of the Constitution; the National period, from 1787 to the present, will then consist of analysis from the inception of the Constitution through the modern day. Within this larger framework, there are various distinctions that will be made, such as the place of women and minorities, the varying levels of educational access based on class-status, and the role of religion in education.

An important note must be made of the character of education in America prior to the periods discussed. While we can locate formalized education as beginning around the early 17th century, there was of course instruction and learning occurring in the colonies starting with the original settlers. This educational arrangement was largely family-based, with some religious instruction provided both formally and informally by local pastors. Moreover, this early system was focused much more on preparation for life as a settler in a new land than it was on education for self-governance or scholarly

pursuits, which means that an entirely different angle of analysis, in addition to many more pages, would be needed to consider this earlier period. Starting from the era of the first educational legislation gives a much more accurate and relevant view of education as a formal government institution, which assists in understanding the current state of affairs in a much clearer manner.

The Colonial Period, ~1609 – 1787

As Lawrence Cremin (1972) notes, the colony of Virginia was the first to make concerted efforts to create a comprehensive, organized educational system, with records indicating a timeframe in the early 17th century. There were various motivations behind these efforts, including assimilation of the native inhabitants of the area in addition to the idea of formalized schools for families of the settlers, though at this early juncture there were so few families with children that they were little more than an afterthought. Ultimately, this was a disastrous effort, attributable to the compounding factors of forcefully attempting to assimilate an unwilling population through religious education, mismanagement of funds and supplies, and the complete lack of a stable society on which to gather support for such an endeavor. This latter problem, as will be discussed at length later, can provide for a point of frustration if tilted too far in either direction. In early America, lack of social institutions meant difficulty in organizing and sustaining educational efforts whereas in contemporary America the difficulty is instead attributable to the seemingly permanent entrenchment of social institutions. Supporting the former notion, John Winthrop argued (1628) that among the principal reasons for the failure of prior settlement efforts was that early colonists “did not establish a right form of government.” Clearly, recognition existed among leaders at the time that a proposition as

daunting as settling unfamiliar territory, especially one so far from the settlers' homeland, was not something that could be expected to succeed if the proper foundation was not in place. Taking this argument one step further, it is unrealistic to believe that an educational system would be successfully implemented where an entire society was struggling to form itself. Moreover, competing value systems also have to be measured as part of this deficiency of government, considering a government's assumed role as a mediator of interests. While landowners and transplanted aristocrats surely wished to enjoy the continuation of the formal education they were accustomed to in England, many of the 'common' people focused entirely on survival. Each group shared a keen interest in establishing a new society, but wildly variegated value systems created a stark dichotomy of priorities.

Following the premature efforts of many colonies wishing to create highly formalized educational systems at too early a juncture in their development, some colonies instead focused on legislation which held parents (as well as those harboring apprentices) directly responsible for the education of the children within their charge. A Massachusetts law from 1642 empowered the selectmen from each town to "take account from time to time of all parents and masters, and of their children, concerning their calling and employment of their children, especially of their ability to read and understand the principles of religion and the capital laws of this country" (Cremin 1972). This language is much more illustrative of the state of education in the colonies for the bulk of the 17th century than those earlier efforts in Virginia, and it provides a brief glimpse into the difference of educational priorities of colonies depending on the composition of their citizenship. Clearly then, a primary feature of educational thought from this period, as evidenced by the lawmaking efforts of Massachusetts and other colonies, is that education existed as a household endeavor for most individuals and

households. Parents and other guardians held the sole responsibility of educating children, whether on their own or through organized efforts with other families or the local church. Future reform efforts eventually led into the current era of state-controlled systems of education from this archetype, though it is important to keep in mind that the structural underpinnings of education in colonial America did not at all look like what we see today

Though it would be some time before a publicly funded and centrally administered system of schools would appear, school-organization attempts of a smaller scope are observable in clear examples during this period. Despite the introduction of what seemed to be simple legislation, many of these early efforts to establish formalized education met challenges similar to those in Virginia, as can be evidenced through the inability to enforce statutes requiring compulsory education once such systems and schools were finally established. Using Massachusetts again as a prime specimen, the Old Deluder Satan Law of 1647 illustrates the slow march toward a public and compulsory system regulated by the government⁵. In this law, towns containing more *than 50 families were required to maintain a school for the education of all children in the town*. While these schools existed under the immediate direction of the citizens of each town, usually with heavy consultation from the town pastor, the mandate from the legislature means that these schools might be considered some of the earliest public schools in the colonies; even if only due to the fines levied on those towns that did not appropriately maintain the schools, the origin of the directive made their existence public by edict if not by practice. As expected, many towns found ways to skirt the law, though not always due to a lack of importance placed on the education of their children. For

⁵ Connecticut and Plymouth instituted similar legislation in the decades after Massachusetts, with similar results. Compliance was inconsistent at best and nonexistent at worst.

example, travelling schoolmasters served as the head of several schools in a geographic region, moving from place to place every few days. Frequently there were no children present for instruction at a given school, owing to household duties and other labor needs. Towns in many cases were able to demonstrate adherence to the law in this way without allocating the funds necessary to provide a persistent educational presence.

The early 18th century is where the widespread emergence of educational organizations, curricula, and institutions show an alteration of the national mindset toward educational delivery and importance. The near-completion of the ultimate ideal was not realized until after the American Revolution, but the same currents that carried the larger national movement forward swept in with it the smaller education movement. Many individual schools existed prior to this period, of course, but there did not yet exist a common sentiment among all citizens that schools should be available to all, regardless of status or geographic location. The impetus for this shift in cultural fondness for education is traceable to growing unrest among the people and the eventual Revolution, in addition to practical labor concerns of the constantly increasing population. While there is no obvious link between social unrest and the need for an educated citizenry (in relation to what we know about the situation in pre-Revolutionary America), it is directly observable through the words and actions of many of the nation's founders, who saw education as a necessary prerequisite for the success of a new republican government (Good 1962). Benjamin Franklin, for example, received very little formal education himself but was a staunch advocate for the establishment of what he termed 'academies', which were to appear during the critical formative years of the new educational system. This idea proposed schools in which the curriculum would be suited for either vocational or purely academic purposes, and relied heavily on previous educational theorists such as John Locke for support (Franklin 1749). Franklin is also believed to have authored an

anonymous opinion article for the *American Weekly Mercury* newspaper in which he called for parents to determine at an early age whether their children should become scholars or learn a practical vocation, so that they may tailor their educational choices. A byproduct of the operation of schools that fulfill these immediate concerns of the people, such as those proposed by Franklin, is that there now existed the platform from which to educate children in ideas of self-governance and citizenship. The primary controlling ideal of the period implied that only through knowledge of society and natural law would citizens be able to actively give consent to the ruling body of the nation, and that all citizens would have to have the ability to participate in such a system without regard to social class.

Regardless of whether we consider the early or late years of the Colonial Period, it remained true that “schooling was viewed as a device for promoting uniformity, and in that sense the educational revolution was institutionalized in the colonies and put to the purposes of the controlling elements in society” (Cremin 1972:192). While the earlier model hinged on household- and church-directed education as opposed to the increased governmental organization and oversight that appeared later, the societal pressures remained constant. This is key in understanding the institutional structure of the educational system as considered in light of the charter school movement. A *prima facie* comparison of the colonial education system with our contemporary system would reveal very few similarities, and this can help to explain the difficulties in changing any part of the system. Superficial modifications such as governance structure of individual schools and small changes to funding patterns are happily accepted, though not always outwardly, by those with a controlling interest in the system, as long as the underlying goals are left untouched.

The National Period, 1787 – Present

To better understand the break in educational structure from the Colonial Period to the National Period, consider Paul E. Peterson's description of the stark contrast between the two:

In the 1780s, when the U.S. Constitution was written, schools were small, locally controlled, voluntary, faith-based, and financed mainly by student fees, much like the schools of England and Scotland after which they were patterned. Their transformation into a system of compulsory, secular, publicly financed, state-directed institutions was initiated after a half-century later and accomplished only gradually (Peterson 2010:21).

The national period is where a major shift occurs in the educational landscape of the nation, with a transition from household and varied forms of private education to increasingly public systems (as opposed to sparsely available individual public schools) and the eventual dominance of the educational system by the several levels of government. This transition, though clear, was not immediate. Until the middle years of the 19th century, the school system largely resembled that of the Colonial Period; namely, there was little demarcation in the organization of schools, or an overabundance, depending on the perspective. Most schools remained locally administered, though without the presence of a larger governing body to provide an atmosphere of common purpose among schools in areas that served common constituencies. One might use Horace Mann's efforts to professionalize the teaching occupation and create common schools as a defining moment in this transition. Central control of schools began to be seen as a way to more tightly control the assimilation of all members of a society whose members varied widely in terms of class, race, and ethnicity. Overtly, however many 'revolutions' and reforms may have appeared in the intervening years, the main shift in

educational thought is clearly that the “common man demanded schools that were common in the sense that children were admitted free and without regard to social class” (Good 1962:140). It is a reform tenet that bears directly on the idea of the eventual rise of charter schools, though there were, and are, many other important factors.

Also apparent are the more subtle nationalistic indoctrination efforts that accompanied the new public systems. They are certainly too numerous to note individually, but a cursory exploration of the writings of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Rush among others, show that education for purely scholarly or vocational readiness was certainly not the only stated goal of America’s early leaders. As Urban and Wagoner recount, Jefferson “firmly believed that the new states (and eventually, the new nation) could not survive long if the general population remained ignorant of the ‘true’ laws of government and social order” (2000:70). Even considering ideas from educational reformers such as Horace Mann, who believed that children should be molded into acceptable members of society (Peterson 2010:17), it is apparent that academic knowledge has always been but a portion of what schools are expected to impart upon students. The idea of creating rational, informed, and loyal citizens is arguably an important goal for a society to strive for, but the use of the educational system as a vehicle through which to attain it means that time is taken from academic instruction. This is not to imply nefarious motives on the part of the founding fathers, but instead to recognize that the public education system must be viewed from many angles in order to fully understand the outcomes desired by those who initially designed its operation as well as those who continue to push for its continuance or reform.

Conclusion

Not to be overlooked in this early phase of national development is the place of women, slaves, and other minority groups in relation to the educational aspirations of the day. Particularly in the very early years of the Colonial Period, but certainly of note in later periods as well, is the lack of serious attention given to female education outside the home and for purposes other than those in support of a husband. Consider that as late as the early 19th century, revolutionary educational thinkers such as Thomas Jefferson (1818) and Benjamin Rush (1787) claimed that a woman's education should be focused on handling her husband's assets in the case of his death and educating her children, if much thought should be given to the matter at all. Jefferson admits giving very little thought to the subject, where Rush does appear to be a bit more progressive in saying that the education of women should be "accommodated to the state of society, manners, and government of the country in which it is conducted" (1787). This pattern of disinterest in the education of women continued on a large-scale well into the 19th century, somewhat broken when Oberlin College became the first post-secondary institution to offer its general courses to women in 1838.⁶ Even less attention was paid to the education of slaves and indentured servants, though it is only midway through the colonial period that these groups were present in significant numbers. A similar discussion exists in relation to immigrants, although the concept held no substantive meaning for education purposes until the early- to mid-18th century. It will suffice to state that most education for these groups during both the colonial and national periods was informal and in many cases conducted in complete secrecy.

⁶ Though by most accounts, this 'general' course made available to female students was not on par with the program offered to male students.

The final transition of importance to this paper is the shift in educational structure that accompanied the Industrial Revolution. Rather than an emphasis on democratic socialization, as enunciated by Benjamin Rush and other early educational thinkers, the needs of a new economic system and radically different mode of production dominated the landscape. While the country had already begun the long march toward standardization in order to accomplish the goal of creating a well-informed and self-governing population, the overall structure of schooling was still very much a local affair that was responsive to local needs. The introduction of assembly lines, factories, and other demands of mass production required a much more rigid educational process, along with a focus on socializing the public for work in structured factories rather than for life on farms.

History of the Charter School Movement

Charter schools⁷ represent just the latest in a long line of reforms introduced into the American educational system over the last century. As Wayson (1999) points out, the charter movement follows a tradition of reform most recently dating back to the open schools and magnet schools of the 1960s and 1970s, and similar to those efforts, charter schools represent a, perhaps hasty, reaction to a societal change.⁸ As noted in the introduction to this paper, the Minnesota Legislature implemented the first charter

⁷ Referred to from this point forward as simply ‘charters’.

⁸ As was the case with demand for increased rigor in science and math education during the U.S./U.S.S.R. “space race”, the appearance of charters less than a decade after *A Nation at Risk* is likely no coincidence. Viewing open and magnet schools in this same light, it might be said that each of these efforts are connected due to a changing shift in expectations over time without a corresponding change in the prevailing instructional or curricular philosophy. This is particularly relevant for the future of the charter movement, as expectations dictate how success is measured.

legislation in the U.S. in 1991. Charters did not, however, represent a wholly new educational paradigm. In fact, significant groundwork had been laid in the years and decades prior, though the national welcoming of another round of school reform did not begin to gain traction until after the seminal report *A Nation At Risk* was published in 1983. The wave of outrage fueled by this report, in which the public school system is unequivocally blamed for the U.S. “being overtaken by competitors throughout the world” (Gardner 1983), cleared the way for a new crop of reformers to advance their ideas. Credit belongs to Ray Budde, an educator from Massachusetts, for formally introducing the concept of charters in his 1988 book *Education by Charter*⁹. Budde’s chief proposal was not to create entire schools, but rather to start with specific disciplines within existing schools. Teachers would apply to receive charters that would allow them freedom from traditional constraints on instruction for a specific period, typically three to five years. In that time, they would be free to modify curricula and devise instructional strategies without concern for traditional administrative rules (Budde 1988). During that same year, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, Albert Shanker, proposed that teachers should have the ability to create and run autonomous schools using existing school facilities, taking Budde’s ideas a step further. However, the sentiment was the same. Teachers should have the ability to create and maintain innovative learning environments, with the ability to “move out of a lock-step situation” (Shanker 1988). The Citizens League organization used the ideas from Budde and Shanker to produce their study *Chartered Schools = Choices for Educators + Quality for All Students*. This study, conducted by the School Structure Committee of the Citizens League and completed in cooperation with various Minnesota educators and lawmakers, took the important step of

⁹ Even this writing does not appear to reflect the earliest ideas on the topic, as it is recognized that Budde published works in the 1970s that make up substantive content in the 1988 book.

defining charter schools as a process, rather than as simply another name for traditional education:

The chartered school concept recognized that different children learn in different ways and at different speeds, and teachers and schools should adapt to children's needs rather than requiring children to adapt to the standard system.

A chartered school is a public school and would serve all children. Students would be integrated by ability level and race. Chartered schools could not select only the best and brightest students or the easiest to teach (Rollwagen and McLellan 1988).

In addition to outlining what were to become many of the hallmarks of the charter movement, the report made specific recommendations to the Minnesota legislature regarding next steps, such as an implementation deadline of 1992, of which lawmakers clearly took note. With the proposed Minnesota charter legislation, several key changes were made, including the ability for non-educators to apply for and run charters as well as the ability for entities other than local school districts to maintain the ability to oversee charters. These changes represented significant deviation from traditional educational thought, as they both opened the door for individuals and organizations outside the education establishment to significantly influence educational practice. Limited in original scope to only eight schools, the chance for transformative change in the system was greatly tempered, but this was likely a critical factor in the acceptance and passage of the law. Without serious threat to the existing system, established education organizations, such as school boards and teachers' unions had little reason to devote significant resources to defeating such a proposal. However, the more significant part of the eventual legislation dealt with the idea of charters as innovative educational entities, stating as an explicit goal that charter schools should "encourage the use of different and

innovative teaching methods” and “create different and innovative forms of measuring outcomes” (Minnesota 2013). Plainly, charters imagined in this context should not maintain superficial distinction from traditional public schools¹⁰, but should instead create an atmosphere of learning that takes risks and does not rely on the existing system as a foundation. As I will discuss in a future chapter, this ideal has sadly been aggressively co-opted and torn apart by various factions from both within and outside of the charter movement.

Singly defining charters, in a comprehensive manner, is no easy task given the legislative differences between states. Where there appears to be consensus among most lawmakers that charter schools should be innovative, there is a dearth of agreement in nearly every other functional area. Charters may receive their authorization through state- or local-level agencies, or a combination of the two. Some states allow only non-profits to manage daily operations, while other states allow charters to hire for-profit companies to run their schools.

Since that first piece of charter legislation passed in Minnesota, an additional 41 states have enacted similar laws to allow charter schools to operate within their boundaries, and as of the 2009-2010 school year, 40 states had at least one operating charter school, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The degree to which charters are allowed autonomous operation varies greatly, however, with some states restricting charters to existing public schools (Mississippi), others limiting the number of charters severely (Kansas, Mississippi, and Utah), and one (Alaska) treating charters fundamentally the same as all other public schools. That the charter school

¹⁰ Referred to from this point forward simply as ‘public schools’. Though charters are public schools, there are a number of clear distinctions that can be made in areas of governance, finance, and oversight that create a natural cleavage between them.

system, and theory in general, is an idea still in active development is an understatement. From the early days of the charter theory advanced by Budde and Shanker, the idea of this alternative schooling method has morphed from a discipline-specific instructional project to a proposal for entirely new schools within the existing system (and in Shanker's vision, within the same buildings) and finally to the current iteration that aims to change school governance not only within the charter school system, but throughout all public education. Additional modifications to the original ideal are all but certain as research is conducted to ascertain the efficacy of charter schools as a viable educational model. What standard they are judged by is the crucial factor to consider, and is the central critique of this paper.

Theoretical Considerations

Foundations of Modern American Education

Examining theories of education as a social institution as well as non-traditional educational paradigms represents a valuable exercise in the journey to an improved system of education. While most of the focus in this section is afforded to theories that support the idea of institutional isomorphism as a driving factor behind the failure of charters as a transformative force, it is necessary to begin with an acknowledgement of the theories that helped to shape the educational system as it exists today. Building upon the earlier section detailing the trajectory of American education as an institution, an obvious shift in educational delivery occurred during the nineteenth century from a system that placed the impetus on households to educate children to a more standardized, school-based system. This meant not only that there was a more formalized and consistent method of delivery of knowledge but, as some claim, that

education, as an institution, became increasingly “universal, tax-supported, free, compulsory, bureaucratically arranged, class based, and racist” (Katz 1971:106). While reformers heartily endorsed the idea of universality, they hoped to actively disrupt the class-based existence of educational facilities. During the Common School Movement (CSM) of the 19th century, which shares its foundations with the populist sentiment sweeping the nation at the time, the demand for schools that were open and available to the public and that offered a common curriculum accessible to all students. The nature of the movement, however, was not borne simply out of the desire for improved education. Instead, we can trace roots to several interconnected social movements of the time. The workingmen’s movement represented a deliberate and vehement rejection of an entire social system that more often favored an elite upper class and held opportunity for the lower classes out of reach. Many of the workingmen’s parties saw parity of educational opportunity as critical to effecting change in society. Much like very early American educational thinkers, “they clearly believed that education would secure political authority of the people” (Welter 1970:123). Horace Mann’s educational theory followed a very similar trajectory, focusing on the fact that citizens must receive specific education to self-govern, and that this ability to self-govern should result in a natural breakdown of class barriers. Where Mann’s philosophy differed from parallel ideas, however, was in the idea that the potential for innovation, growth, and wealth did not equate to a zero-sum game. By universally distributing educational access to all persons, Mann believed that an approximation of true equality was not only a probable outcome, but instead an inevitability (Welter 1970). Independent of any definitive results that may prove or

disprove Mann's expectations, it is clear that the demand for universal education¹¹ prevailed, and has been a core component of America's educational system for the last century and a half.

With the concept of universality loosely settled, theories of education began to concentrate on the functional purpose of schools in the late 19th century, marking arguably the only significant philosophical debate that has consistently remained at the forefront of national education discussions through the present. Prior to the transition from education as a familial responsibility to education as a utility of the state, the underlying purpose of school was clear. Any education worked first to prepare children for life in democratic society, a focus that continued through the end of the 19th century and into the 20th century. However, expectations of how and what schools were expected to inculcate in students accompanied significant changes in the foundation of American society by way of the Industrial Revolution. No longer adequate for schools to prepare children for a simple life in predominantly agricultural society, they now needed to embed in students the knowledge and attitudes necessary to succeed in a much more rigid and industrialized society "characterized by impersonality and transience (sic)" (Cremin 1970:137). The Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education, appointed by the NEA in 1913, addressed ongoing and emerging issues related to the reformulation of secondary schools in all areas including not only administrative structure¹², but also curricula standards. The Commission also considered how to integrate emerging

¹¹ Universal education, defined here as the ability, or even birthright, of every child to receive an education provided and financed by the state, rather than the preferred ideal of universality, which would consider quality of education received as well.

¹² Many of the administrative changes suggested by the Commission are not present today, or have been modified significantly from their original form, and have little bearing on current educational structure in the present context. For this reason, the majority of these suggestions are not mentioned specifically.

“currents of educational thought” (Cremin 1970:147) into an actionable set of objectives for schools to meet, which resulted in the *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*. In this report, the Commission advances seven objectives (the Cardinal Principles): health, command of fundamental processes¹³, worthy home-membership, vocation, civic education, worthy use of leisure, and ethical character (Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education 1918). The clear division of elementary grades (kindergarten through 5th grade) from secondary grades (6th grade through 12th grade) and the expansion of varied vocational programs and tracks are changes in curricula and school organization recommended by the Commission that are present in almost ideal form today. The mandates for vocation and civic education are particularly interesting inclusions for the larger discussion in this paper, as the presentation of these topics in the report heavily emphasizes service to society and appreciation for how the individual’s work supports the greater community. Given the large-scale occupational shift during the same period as the drafting of the report, it seems inevitable that placing such an emphasis on work as a civic duty would shape not only the content of instruction, but also the manner of delivery. The eventual result, while neither the intent of the Commission or solely due to the report, was an educational system that began to implement principles more in line with Frederick Taylor’s scientific management theory¹⁴ than the idea of student individuation found in *Cardinal Principles*. This one-size-fits-all approach to

¹³ The Commission defines fundamental process as the basics of reading, writing, math, and language. The need for actual proficiency, rather than basic awareness, in these areas warrants their inclusion in the Cardinal Principles.

¹⁴ In fairness to both Taylor and the authors of *Cardinal Principles*, it is well documented that many prior reformation efforts preceded the 20th century and put into place such concepts as strict row/desk seating and complete deference to authority (represented, obviously, by the teacher). The onset of massive social change brought on by industrialization, along with Taylor’s new scientific management, however, gave formal structure and direction to those in charge of school administration.

education has faced assault at various times during the intervening century, and yet the current prominence of the standardization movement serves as a reminder that it has not been defeated.

John Dewey's educational theories offer stark contrast to the inflexible standards demanded by the industrialist mindset¹⁵, which he referred to as the "mechanical massing of children" (1915:51), though primarily in terms of instructional locus rather than sought after outcomes. In *The School and Society* (1915), Dewey takes a pragmatic stance on the relation between education and the new industrial society: the Industrial Revolution had so completely changed the fabric of American life, including disrupting traditional family education in both form and substance, that the only reasonable response required a wholesale change in the system of education. As a hero of the progressive education reform movement, Dewey proposed that the changes needed in education should derive from traditional familial education by emulating the hands-on nature of learning experienced in the pre-industrial¹⁶ period. Chief among the ideas presented is what we now associate generally with experiential learning. Rather than students sitting in neat rows of desks listening to lectures, Dewey advanced a system in which students experience lessons through creation or production. Far from discouraging the preparation of students to enter the newly industrialized workplace, this method encourages actual practice of skills needed to succeed in that environment. The overall impact of Dewey's theories on contemporary education is difficult to measure. Experiential learning, not

¹⁵ Dewey's theories, while opposed to the factory model of schooling, were admittedly sensitive to the industrialization of the nation. Offering an opposing model should not be taken to imply a rejection of an unmistakable social change, but instead as an alternative way to prepare students for the new realities of life in America.

¹⁶ Pre-industrial is used as a descriptor here rather than agricultural mainly due to the observation that many cities had seen significant growth prior to the Industrial Revolution, and while the education of city children was not farm-based, in many cases the mentor-apprentice educational relationship paralleled the familial education experienced on farms.

typically observed in public education today, sees relatively few schools basing their entire curricula on the concept. Schoolroom organization exists in exactly the same manner that Dewey noted, and opposed, almost a century ago, which supports the lecturing of students rather than eliciting their active participation. However, various academic subjects such as biology and chemistry, as well as newer fields involving computer topics, have long implemented a hands-on approach to learning. Ultimately, Dewey marks the beginning of a wave of reformers that have succeeded in leaving an indelible mark on education without successfully effecting massive change. Instead, we see the most successful reforms hanging on to the periphery of education and the rest relegated as failed efforts and historical footnotes. As I move on to discuss contemporary theories influencing the trajectory of education and reform today the reasons underlying the paradox of Dewey's success, along with the charter movement and others, will be clear.

Theories of Charter Perpetuation and Resistance

Relevant to the present discussion on the efficacy of the charter school movement are several theories involving charter school creation and expansion, the need for standard measurement in education, and most importantly, resistance to change in educational systems. There is not a point in time at which it is possible to pinpoint a 'need' for charter schools, or any other educational reforms, but rather a constantly changing public sentiment regarding the performance of public schools in relation to the rest of society. With this in mind, theories discussed here simply offer some perspective on various parts of the charter dialogue rather than identify concrete reasons for charter implementation or explanations for success and failure.

Identifying original ideas of charter creation is a very troublesome task. The charter history section of Chapter 1 introduces the individuals generally credited with defining the original concept, so this section will instead focus on a more specific reason cited for charter creation over the past two decades. To begin, theories supporting the need for charter creation and expansion are not limited to the period after which charters came on the national scene. Indeed, many of the reasons justifying charters in specific communities arise from historically persistent levels of unequal access to quality educational facilities. In the years following federal desegregation mandates, it became clear that not all states and localities would comply with rulings requiring equal access for all students. In response, many leaders in the Black community began to call for increased local control of schools and even the creation of Afro-centric schools that would allow for direct influence over subject matter and instruction. Similar desires were voiced by leaders of other groups focused on various ethnic and social issues as well (Tyack and Cuban 1995). Anthropologist John Ogbu provides perhaps the most complete argument for the creation of group-specific schools, particularly for African-American students, though not directly. Ogbu's concept of oppositional culture sets forth the claim that Black citizens' status as involuntary minorities¹⁷ leads to active rebellion against accepted hallmarks of the dominant culture, which in the case of schooling includes academic success and otherwise 'Acting White' (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Ogbu 1978, 1992, 2004). To combat the need for these acts of rebellion, Fordham and Ogbu suggest three areas in which change is necessary: the "existing opportunity structure, though an

¹⁷ Involuntary minorities, as defined by Ogbu, refer to those minorities present in a society due to a forced inclusion rather than chosen immigration. African-Americans are the most obvious example of this in American society, with Native Americans similarly situated. Voluntary minorities, such as most Asian-Americans, are considered to have wholly different, and decidedly less antagonistic, orientations to the dominant culture due to their method of entry into the society.

elimination of the job ceiling and related barriers” (1986:202), “educational barriers, both the gross and subtle mechanisms by which schools differentiate the academic careers of black and white children, should be eliminated” (1986:203), and that “*the unique academic learning and performance problems created by the burden of acting white should be recognized and made a target of educational policies and remediation efforts*” (1986:203). Short of somehow effecting unprecedented change in the social dynamics driving the first two areas, it is likely that the third suggestion holds the most promise. Many individuals and organizations have leveraged educational policies, such as charter school legislation, extensively, hoping to combat racial inequality by providing alternative school environments to serve audiences for which ‘acting white’ creates detrimental outcomes. An example of such an organization is the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), which serves a student body composed of 95% racial-minority students and boasts an 80% college attendance rate for graduates (KIPP 2014). Combatting oppositional culture theory, while not an overt goal of KIPP, is nevertheless present in their approach to creating a culture of student success and targeted placement in low-income and minority-predominant neighborhoods and represents a common trait of many charters. The alternate proposition of charters used as vehicles for ‘White Flight’ will be discussed at length in the section analyzing equity debates in charters.

The need for standardized testing in education provides an interesting dichotomy in the charter debate. Consistent and objective testing that can be aggregated and generalized makes available an opportunity for charters to prove any superiority in outcomes using a measurement tool that is not only widely available, but also almost universally mandated. However, in their purest form, charters are intended as bastions of innovation and divergent practice that cannot be easily measured and certainly not quantifiable through any sort of ‘standard’ test. Nevertheless, standardized testing is a

reality that most charters face during curriculum design and thus has great impact on perceptions of charter viability. Moreover, the debate over standardized testing, while not completely new, has an observable line of demarcation in relation to charters. With the introduction of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001, new educational standards were enacted requiring all states, and by association, schools, to increase levels of achievement in literacy, math, and other fundamental areas. Coming an even ten years after the first charter legislation was passed in Minnesota, NCLB changed many of the rules that charters would have to adhere to when reporting academic achievement. Mandated standardized testing for all public schools in most states meant that charters, either through pre-emptive legislative changes or pressure from parents' groups and teachers unions, were required to meet the same levels set for traditional schools, and were required to take the same tests. The introduction of this form of assessment in the charter timeline is unfortunate, as the charter concept was still undergoing initial development in the early 2000s. While many charters were still determining how to manage the expectations of parents, authorizing boards, interest groups, and students, and at the same time attempting to implement new curricular and governance models, NCLB essentially hit the 'reset button' on their efforts. The arguments against standardized testing in charters is a virtual echo of the arguments against standardized testing in all schools; the tests are likely to be biased, teachers do not support the tests, time is taken away from authentic instruction, etc. (Hall 2001; Kohn 2000). A more important argument for the current discussion, which also runs parallel to many of the traditional arguments, is the idea of using standardized tests to determine the efficacy of schools with a primary directive of innovation. The closing chapter will address this issue, as it is central to the critique of the current place of charters in the public education system.

Welch (2011) introduced the idea of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) to the charter school discussion, marking the most significant pairing of theory and education to date in this debate. The idea that new educational organizations, such as charters, face tremendous pressure to conform to established norms while simultaneously attempting to prove their efficacy as a viable alternative to traditional structures illustrates the difficulties inherent in creating and maintaining unconventional practices when conventional measures, such as college entrance and other standardized achievement tests, are being employed to determine organizational effectiveness. By using this theory as the foundation for a critical approach to education and charter efficacy, one observes that the first and most pertinent flaw is a classic case of cognitive dissonance. The sustained cry, almost universally among interested parties, in the landscape of American education is one of improvement of outcomes for all students. However, new reform efforts typically receive judgment by parties utilizing established norms and benchmarks, often using the same measurement tools (most recently standardized tests) and allowing little time for adjustment and improvement. As Meyer and Rowan (1977) correctly note, most organizations facing this sort of pressure inevitably acquiesce to traditional practice, lest they be denied legitimacy. Confounding the true depth of this problem is the insistence among charter opponents that charters have failed to succeed despite a reduced scope of governmental control and general freedom from traditional educational bureaucracy. However, this argument covers only one (coercive isomorphism) of three forms of isomorphism outlined by DiMaggio and Powell. Welch summarizes these three forms as “*normative isomorphism* (professional values and practices...)”, “*coercive isomorphism* (formal external pressures...)”, and “*mimetic isomorphism* (imitation through interaction with peers...)” (2011:56). Clearly, there are multiple dimensions and perspectives through which to view the success and/or

failure of charters in addition to accomplishments gained by removing or reducing governmental control. These additional areas of analysis will figure heavily into the final chapter's critique of the place of charters in the larger environment of public education.

Closely associated in concept to institutional isomorphism is the identification of traditional educational practices as the 'grammar of schooling' (Tyack and Cuban 1995; Tyack and Tobin 1994). The grammar of schooling "has become taken for granted as just the way schools are" (Tyack and Cuban 1995:85), underscoring the durability of the system into which charters, along with other reforms, have the challenge of penetrating. In *Tinkering Toward Utopia* (1995), Tyack and Cuban outline many attempted reforms to established educational norms, including schools that eschew traditional grade level structures and class periods, modifications to subject-matter departments, and the introduction of independent study as the core component of educational programs, noting that where most of these innovations have been implemented they represent rare exceptions and are mostly considered niche educational offerings. Much like Wohlstetter and Griffin (1998) found later, the authors attribute observed successes to "highly favorable conditions" (1995:101) in the environments in which they take place¹⁸. The majority of reform efforts, however, do not encounter such favorable conditions that they are able to persist, even as novelties.

Combining two final theories suggests that social reproduction vis-à-vis the predominant economic and social order is the root cause of reform resistance. The *prima facie* logic here is solid, as it stands to reason that those with the most favorable position

¹⁸ Similar to Welch, Tyack and Cuban in this situation were referring to the Eight-Year Study, which followed a number of schools in the 1930s and 1940s, that was undertaken specifically to determine the effect of increased freedom in teaching, curricula, and governance on student outcomes in secondary education. The parallels to the charter experiment of today are especially interesting, though there are key differences restricting an honest measurement of charter success.

in the social structure would both have the ability to effectively influence policy to benefit their group and that they would have the desire to maintain their position. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis address this theory directly in *Schooling in Capitalist America*, wherein they claim that the "social problems to which... reforms are addressed have their roots not primarily in the school system itself, but rather in the normal functioning of the economic system" (1976:245). The natural extension of this is that the undertaking of any reform effort must start with an awareness of the reproductive forces at work in the educational system. Without acknowledging these currents of resistance, it is impossible for reformers to properly formulate and implement specific changes to combat the implicit economic aims of schooling. Generation of a skilled workforce, legitimation of the "technocratic-meritocratic perspective" (1976:56), acceptance of status group divisions, and introduction of owner-worker relationships in the economic system are all described as fundamental underlying goals of American education. Along this same line of theory, Bourdieu and Passeron argue that the entire "dominant cultural arbitrary" (2000), not only the economic system, is reproduced via education. The authors describe this as a necessity of any educational system operating as a self-perpetuating entity, "*given that an ES cannot fulfil its essential function of inculcating unless it produces and reproduces*" (2000:56, emphasis in original). This reproduction permeates all facets of education, ranging from curricula and instruction to teacher training and preparation, or the "production of... agents" (2000:60). More critically for the issue of charters and mandates of innovation, however, is the idea that on an institutional level, education systems not only reproduce the predominant social structure, but also actively instill a sense of false consciousness in all parties involved as to the genuine aims of the system. Claims of education as a meritorious, egalitarian institution are advanced to legitimate the system, which then creates a perfect environment in which it can reproduce itself not forcefully,

but through its own inertia¹⁹. Here again, challenges to the established order of education threaten not just education itself, but also the entire social structure. Key to understanding this theory in practice is the notion that while reproduction occurs via complete control over teacher and administrator production, curricula, instruction, etc., the 'agents' supporting the reproduction are just as much victims of the process as those receiving inculcation. The system itself is self-perpetuating, with no active work required by individual actors other than to not defy the existing arrangement. In both of these theories, despite their differences, there is an emphasis on the institution of education as part of the larger societal system. From this perspective, it is possible to consider resistance to reform not as borne out of desire to suppress alternative paradigms, but instead as proof that the systemic pattern of reproduction is well-established and accepted as inescapable.

¹⁹ This concept is more fully explained by Bourdieu and Passeron as 'symbolic violence', which is the process by which institutions (or "powers") are able to "impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of [their] force" (2000:4).

Chapter 2

The Charter Fight

From the beginnings of the charter school movement, the primary justification for the need for charter schools rested in the assertion that public schools are no longer equipped to serve the changing academic needs of children, given the changes in the country's workforce over the last several decades. In the seminal work *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, John Chubb and Terry Moe enunciate this sentiment best, indicating that not only has the traditional public school system failed to respond to rising challenges, but that the system is, in fact, unable to do so (1990). As one possibility, researchers describe the charter response as based in a functionalist perspective wherein failings in public schools will naturally result in additional educational options due to parental and community demand (Teske and Schneider 2001; Zhang and Yang 2008). Some have even suggested that there is, in fact, a lack of inclination to attempt positive change, resulting in a "disillusionment" among the general populace, as well as political and legal leaders, with regards to traditional public education (Knaak and Knaak 2013).

Charter proponents advance several goals designed to combat the perceived inability, or unwillingness, of the public school system to change. These goals cover a wide range of functional areas, from improving student achievement, increasing community and parental involvement in education, influencing educational practices in all public schools (Arsen and Ni 2012), and providing equal access to quality instruction to disadvantaged populations. Opponents utilize an almost infinite number of arguments against charters, including charging them with "becom(ing) instruments of segregation, deplet(ing) public school systems of their resources, and undermin(ing) the public good" (Renzulli and Roscigno 2007:31), fiscal mismanagement (Knaak and Knaak 2013; Piph

1997), “cream-skimming” (Apple 1998; Forman Jr. 2007), and a record of poor performance. Truly, the debate has taken on a tenor and level of rhetoric usually reserved for “religious wars” (Teske and Schneider 2001:609). Irrespective of the ideological viewpoint from which we assess the movement, however, we can consolidate the primary contentions into three categories: competition, equity, and innovation (Good and Braden 2000; Johnson and Medler 2000; Lubienski and Weitzel 2010; Zhang and Yang 2008). Not all charter advocates agree with, or are interested in, all three of these categories, but they do encompass the vast majority of issues and remedies claimed by the movement, and thus make up much of the battleground on which the charter fight wages.

Further obscuring the fight over charter legitimacy is the inability to definitively label advocates and opponents of the movement. Charter support exists across political ideologies, ethnic groups, social classes, and even educational philosophies. Charters have received backing from free market proponents, social reformers, and even teachers’ unions (Lubienski and Weitzel 2010). This perhaps explains the wide range of issues addressed by charters, as well as the success of advocates in advancing the movement as far as it has.

Competition

Competition, or “an increase in competitive forces” (Linick and Lubienski 2013), as an explicit objective of the charter movement persists as a difficult concept to adequately define. The intent of the majority of state legislators is clear when reviewing statutory language: charters, as centers of innovative educational practice, should devise creative methods of learning that will benefit all students, not simply those attending

charters. As Linick and Lubienski (2013) observe, charter advocates frequently use the inevitability of competition as a rallying cry, typically referring to the ability of charters to engender improved curricular and instructional practices in public schools. The authors point to both external and internal factors that affect the response, or non-response, of public schools to the presence of charter-based competition including the market share of charters, degree of student loss, overall student population size, quality of competing charters, district culture, and prior organizational behavior. Additionally, the authors summarize three patterns of public school response observed through repeated research. Public school may respond by systematically creating solutions to directly solve challenges to their prominent position in a district, such as reallocating resources to areas which competing schools may have an edge. This represents the most desirable reaction, in the view of charter advocates, since it is the most likely to create substantive change. Next, public schools may respond, but not in any observable pattern due to the divergent nature of districts. Here we begin to observe a problem with competition that relates to the local nature of schooling. Since districts are able to act independently of most oversight, they may not feel competitive pressures equally, causing delayed improvements or even regressions in achievement. Lastly, public schools may ignore all apparent burden to improve. This makes measurement of improvement or regression due to charter competition impossible and may even help to support arguments that aid charter opponents.

Even when competitive pressures are felt and reaction occurs, research by Arsen and Ni shows that public school responses to charters do not always focus on curriculum and instruction (2012). In fact, in the exact opposite direction, the authors “find limited evidence that charter competition is associated with districts devoting a lower share of their spending to instruction and a higher share to noninstructional support services”

(Arsen and Ni 2012:32). One possible reason for this could be the nature of charters in Minnesota, the site of the study. Schools in that state collect all state funding designated for a pupil, where other states limit charters to a lower percentage of the public school funding level. This is a potentially critical difference in funding policy, as schools will obviously react in different ways depending on what is at stake. When funding becomes a zero-sum game, competition for students follows suit. The competition, therefore, becomes a marketing race rather than an achievement race. This is largely inconsequential, however, as studies showing charter superiority in various contexts (Loveless 2003; Nathan 2004) as well as those claiming either decreased or equal performance compared to public school students (Ravitch 2013; Renzulli and Roscigno 2007; Zimmer et al. 2012) all focus on the use of standardized testing. With all schools aiming at the same target, public schools must find areas in which they can differentiate themselves from charters that do not include instruction and curricula, since these areas are largely identical. This has created an atmosphere in which the only way for schools to differentiate themselves is through advertising and not superior academic performance.

A great deal of research also exists focusing on the lack of accountability demanded of charters, and provides the most successful argument against their appropriateness as a competitive force (Coleman 2009; Garn and Cobb 2001; Manno, Finn, and Vanourek 2000; Ravitch 2013; Renzulli and Roscigno 2007). The link between accountability and competition is natural, since organizations that not held accountable for results likely will not create significant competition in their areas of operation. Instead of focusing on the level of achievement reported, observations by opponents indicate that charter schools simply do not have proper oversight, and more specifically that there is not consistent enforcement of oversight measures. However, evidence that accountability is of primary concern to charter leaders and teachers is abundant (Gawlik 2012; Nathan

2004). A probable cause for the alleged lack of oversight is no doubt tied to the diverse set of charter operators, authorizers, accountability standards, statutes, and local values present within the charter system. Whether a lack of oversight exists in all places, most places, or only in a few, the inability of charter school supporters to point to a singular system of accountability with consistent results provides opponents with ample ammunition with which to criticize the movement. Accountability is further obscured by a lack of available data, which is due to several factors including the relative age of charters in the educational timeline, incomplete systems of measurement, and complicit agreements between charter authorizers and charter leaders to avoid stricter reporting rules (Manno et al. 2000).

Despite the intent of charters to create a competitive atmosphere, it remains that the restrictions placed on charters through accountability requirements and other oversight measures, whether enforced or effectively ignored, inhibits their ability to affect change. Only when “each family chooses its most preferred option and the system of schooling responds in the long run by reflecting favored options and eliminating those without adequate demand” (Levin 1991) will real competition exist.

Equity

Issues of equity are frequently, and rightfully so, at the forefront of the charter school debate. Before beginning the discussion on the ability of charters to function as vehicles of equity, however, we first need to define what equity means in this particular application. The argument for equity has taken, and continues to take, many forms in

school debate including equity of access²⁰, equity of outcomes, and funding equity. The allure of organizational freedom has drawn many educators to alternatively view charter schools as a vehicle for social justice, wherein they may create environments suitable for providing disadvantaged populations with educational outcomes superior to those available through public schools (Eckes and Trotter 2007). Certainly, the charter school system was “not created to specifically remedy racial disparities in education or to serve minorities, but charter schools do have consequences for educating racial and ethnic minorities” (Renzulli 2006:619). In this context, many charter school founders and leaders have used recruitment strategies specifically designed to cater to such populations, as well as placing charter schools in urban areas, in order to position themselves to have the greatest impact possible for their desired students and communities (Eckes and Trotter 2007). The majority of this debate has centered on the concept of race, and very little has focused on potential effects of social class, parental levels of education, and similar variables. While research does exist in these peripheral areas, I will address the primary debate in this section.

Many opponents claim charters provide an outlet for affluent White students and parents to flee public school systems that have become racially integrated (Levy 2010; Renzulli 2006), attributing elements of racial competition theory (Renzulli and Evans 2005), political leanings (Levy 2010), and the high concentration of White students choosing charters (Garcia 2007). The dominant line of thinking in this realm of research is that as minority enrollment becomes increasingly dispersed, White parents will attempt to move children into charter schools as way to escape, whereas in areas in which minority enrollment is more condensed (i.e., public school segregation exists), Whites will simply

²⁰ This may also be thought of as equity of opportunity, and is what will be focused on primarily in this section.

stay in the public schools since they are already experiencing low levels of exposure to those minority students. Renzulli and Evans (2005) examine the incidence of White Flight using racial competition theory and claim that charter schools serve as vehicles of resegregation for Whites who are experiencing competitive pressure from minorities in public schools. The approach used in this article differs from many previous studies, and is similar to Renzulli's (2006) later work concentrating on Black enrollment in charter schools, in that it takes a localized approach. This is keeping with the tenor of racial competition theory, and allows the authors to make comparisons of individual schools within districts rather than looking at aggregate numbers that may be misleading as to the distribution of students across all schools. The results indicate that "whites move to charter schools when whites and non-whites are distributed proportionally among their district's schools" (2005:412) Controlling for class, region, type of charter school, and other variables, these results held constant throughout the analysis. Combined with other studies (Renzulli 2006; Weiher and Tedin 2002), we may point to a resegregation trend occurring among both White and Black students via charter school enrollment, and that the phenomena do appear to occur in differing ways depending on the level of racial integration present in local districts.

Considering a sampling of literature from the other side of the debate, White Flight seems less likely as an inevitability or even primary goal of the charter school system and more of a case of tunnel-vision that focuses on one outcome while ignoring other equally viable alternative explanations. While critics cite White Flight as a reason for limiting the reach of charter schools, many studies appear to easily refute the claim by observing that minority students are clearly represented at much higher rates in charter schools (Frankenberg and Lee 2003; Parker 2001; Rapp and Eckes 2007). However, it is less than sufficient to use aggregate numbers to explain away what is a distinctly local

occurrence and has the greatest impact to students living in individual communities in which it occurs, rather than the oft-cited 'average student'. Using this as a criterion for defining adequate studies, it appears that many researchers have identified alternative explanations for patterns of segregation that take into account the segregation observed across racial/ethnic boundaries, rather than concentrating only on one racial/ethnic group.

Eckes and Trotter (2007) begin their study of charter school recruitment strategies by contradicting a claim made by many White Flight claimants that the charter school system as it exists currently serves to support White Flight due to the ability of students to enroll across district/geographic lines (Levy 2010). Specifically, the authors observe, "unlike traditional public schools, charter schools may have the opportunity to increase student body diversity by drawing students from across traditional school district boundary lines" (2007:62). Most interesting about this proclamation is that individuals in each ideological camp use Frankenberg and Lee's (2003) study of charter school racial distribution patterns as support. The primary aim of the study was to determine whether charter schools use specific recruitment strategies to ensure diverse student bodies. As should be clear by now, many critics believe that school choice in the form of charter schools will lead to White Flight and further racial segregation than exists in the traditional public school system. The areas of recruitment and admission are natural points of analysis in determining the state of the charter system as related to segregation, and two areas in which integration strategies should be devised. The authors observe that most charter schools, usually due to state legislation, are required to admit students on a first-come first-served basis, with a waiting list maintained in the same manner. While this is true of almost all charter schools, the extension of these policies to examine further is the way in which students are supported and/or excluded from the system once they gain

admission. In the study, the authors considered the hypothesis that “charter school leaders, from the eight high-achieving charter schools in the study, would rely on state statutory language to achieve greater student body diversity at their schools” (2007:67), determined through repeated interviews with charter leaders. However, considering the statutory language, student body composition did not appear to be affected by way of increased integration, and this appears to be a conscious decision on the part of the charter school leaders. This supports the idea of self-selected segregation on the part of not only the minority parents and students, but more fundamentally by the founders and leaders of the schools themselves.

Innovation

High-performing schools, whether charter or regular, have cultures radically different from what is in run-of-the-mill schools. That culture does not automatically accompany a charter; it must be negotiated daily, regularly, and continuously (Wayson 1999:454).

As of 2010, 32 out of 41 states with charter school legislation included notions of innovation or unique and high-quality teaching. At the same time, every state²¹ with current charter school legislation mandates that charters must meet the same statewide assessment standards (via standardized tests) as other public schools, despite the enunciated desire for innovation in not only curricula and instruction but also in assessment and performance measurement. The resulting state of charter operations is that most schools implement innovations in structure and governance model rather than instruction and curricula (Lubienski 2003). While some reformers may expect that improvements in classroom instruction, and by extension educational outcomes, are a

²¹ With the exception of Rhode Island, which has historically had a very progressive stance on performance measurement.

logical result of structural changes, the reality is that isolated changes in governance, instructional methods, curricula, etc. are not intrinsically tied to innovation. Only a combination of effective and inclusive school governance, with all educational leaders (administrators and teachers), educational stakeholders (local communities, businesses, and parents), and educational consumers (parents and students) providing meaningful input and having equal voice in decision-making, combined with engaging curriculum and classroom instruction will lead to significant innovation and improved student outcomes. In order to accomplish such a momentous shift in educational practice, however, it is critical to define²² what innovation means in terms of educational delivery and outcomes. Complete consensus on this point is improbable, as evidenced by the several forms of innovation in theory and practice among charters. In different contexts, innovation is recognized as: practices that are unique to the local community, practices that are not innovative but combined in new ways, the mere existence of educational choice, and differences in school governance (Lubienski 2003). Since definition of innovation itself is a muddled, somewhat contentious topic, it is a reasonable assumption that the debate surrounding charter-driven innovation exists on an equal level of disarray.

Much of the innovation debate centers on the idea of market-driven change, mirroring parts of the charter vs. public school competition debate. As Preston et al. observe, there are a great number of school choice advocates who “maintain that market-style mechanisms of consumer choice and competition between autonomous schools will encourage diverse and innovative approaches” (2012:318). This idea seems reasonable

²² Definition in this case requires compromise without attempting to create a rigid list of attributes that constitute a simple “checklist”, or conversely ignoring that innovation has identifiable characteristics. The challenge is largely a political one, with various interest groups constantly vying for the right to use their definition. This is a large part of the problem ahead for not only charters, but all education reformers.

at first glance, but requires several assumptions and lacks adequate definition. Not only do believers of this model have to suspend notions of traditional consumer behavior, which in most cases does not as significantly impact future quality of life as does education, but they also must trust that any innovations will improve student outcomes. Observation shows that this is not always the case in what amount to the closest approximations of free market education systems available for study. Evidence suggests that recruitment strategies, which we can equate to advertising in a free market system, receive a disproportionate amount of resources in localities where competition for students follows a market model, for example (Arsen, Plank, and Sykes 2001; Eckes and Trotter 2007). Researchers observed an instance of this phenomenon by examining Michigan schools, where chartering authority is available to a wide range of organizations including school districts, universities, and others, and where funding follows the student (Arsen and Ni 2012; Arsen et al. 2001). Competition for students is considered a zero-sum game due to this practice and in true market fashion, funding is allocated where it is presumed to best sustain the organization. This is not to imply that recruitment and advertising are not necessary, but instead that in a free market system of education, with mandated outcomes for all providers²³, innovation may very well take form in areas other than instruction and curricula.

While some reform advocates accept innovation as represented by almost any divergent practice, whether in the classroom or the administrative office, there is no doubt that most legislative action on charters intends to engender improved student outcomes

²³ This, in my view, is a critical distinction to make between the realities of a true free market system and what currently constitutes a free market system in education. Because the market of educational consumers is not the ultimate arbiter of success, the incentive for providers to distribute funds more equitably between innovations in practice and recruitment of new “customers” is not as great.

through teaching and learning methods that differentiate themselves from traditional practice. Certainly, the most relevant concern, then, is not only what drives innovation, but also under what conditions innovation is not only possible, but also probable. Wohlstetter and Griffin (1998), through a study of charters in three states (Massachusetts, Minnesota, and California), determined that charters “tended to be more successful in creating learning communities” (1998:26) when there are several conditions present. Among these conditions are “higher levels of autonomy”, links to “supportive networks/ organizations”, and “high levels of support from parents” (1998:26). Perhaps these results are an indication that successful innovation is a process driven by educational consumers rather than solely through the efforts of legislators. This is hardly a new idea, as early charter critics called to “let the people responsible for carrying out the job to be full partners” and “work collaboratively” with all vested parties (Garcia and Garcia 1996:36). The key to understanding innovation in this context is viewing innovation as a process rather than an individual breakthrough in a singular area such as school governance or instruction.

The fragmented nature of charter implementation obviously fuels the current environment in which innovation is at the same time prevalent and absent, depending on the perspective of the observer. Although I have mentioned that charter legislation itself is simultaneously similar across states and generic as to directives for action, the specific ways in which charters are received through authorizing entities is vastly dissimilar in most states. Moreover, the degree to which innovation is recognized as such varies depending on locale and historical expectation of students and other educational consumers in that area. For example, researchers have observed separately the “similarity of charters to each other and to regular schools” and have found “no innovations in curriculum” (Knaak and Knaak 2013:52), while also recognizing that

innovation may exist in forms that are not necessarily transferable and are suited only to a specific population (Miller et al. 2012). For each anecdote of a charter school that performs poorly, it seems, there is a KIPP Academy, MET, or High Tech High challenging the assertion that charters cannot innovate while achieving excellent results. Indeed, it is true that “because of the tremendous variation among charter schools in terms of size, structure, mission, and a host of other variables, it is very difficult to make... categorical generalizations about them” (Virtue 2012), especially in relation to the presence, amount, type, or effectiveness of innovation. Unfortunately, with a topic as personal, and political, as education, it is problematic to claim an inability to measure or otherwise hold accountable changes to the existing system, especially when those changes bring with them the promise of improved outcomes.

Lubienski argues that the current, and past, environment “indicates that charter schools are diversifying options for parents but not offering innovations in the manner anticipated by reformers” (2003:397). Instead of creating new and interesting curricular programs and implementing alternative grade structures, many charters have focused on competition for students and fallen back on established norms in actual practice. An attitude of “not with my kids” (Garcia and Garcia 1996) in relation to experimentation drives these trends from the bottom up, while the larger mechanism of institutional isomorphism pulls back on deviations from established norms. The default ‘innovation’ of providing public schools outside of the traditional district structure is likely the only point at which all parties can reach consensus. Luckily, for those who aspire to reform education in some way, innovation truly is in the eye of the beholder. Depending on the intended audience and environment, almost any combination of new ideas are innovative. As supported by many successful charters and charter networks across the country, innovation and success are not mutually exclusive concepts, though the

methods used for measurement of each have great influence over public perception. It is to this point that the final two chapters will speak.

Chapter 3

Why Charter Schools Aren't the (Only) Answer

Public education is about much more than learning how to take a test, job preparation, or even critical consciousness raising; it is about imagining a more democratic society and a better future, one that does not simply replicate the present (Giroux 2012:9).

Within the confines of the public education system, charters simultaneously represent a powerful threat to established norms as well as a hollow policy experiment unlikely to effect substantive change. Unfortunately, for those parents, students, and educators who have put their faith in the promise of charters to provide significantly improved outcomes, this dichotomy underscores the substantial challenge ahead for those who choose to stay the course and fight for success. Not only do these reformers face the myriad hurdles present with influencing any legislative action, but also deeply ingrained institutional resistance. Going back to the generally recognized goals of competition, equity, and innovation, identification of the movement's struggles is simple. Each of these goals are hindered significantly by existing education policy, which is designed not to allow charter schools to freely pursue their shared vision of improving public education, but instead to placate various interests on both sides of the charter school debate while providing little in the way of authentic reform. This process ultimately serves as a legitimated reproductive mechanism that allows charters to exist and concurrently instills a sense of false optimism in those who believe in their ability to provide fundamental change. A comprehensive approach to future reform is essential in light of these challenges, and this will be the focus of the closing chapter.

Three areas are of particular interest in the formulation of an approach that properly recognizes education from an institutional perspective and considers social

structure ahead of educational idealism: measurement, accountability, and acceptance. The ideas of measurement and accountability are closely tied together in the current iteration of charter operation in that most observers believe that “charter schools are supposed to be held accountable for their performance by their respective authorizers and by parental choice in the educational marketplace” (Vergari 2007:16). Because charters retain freedom from bureaucratic entanglements by disassociation from traditional school districts, most believe that they are free to focus on student outcomes independently. However, as I will discuss, charters are still accountable to authorizers and parents who largely see standardized tests, such as state assessments and the SATs, as the benchmark for measuring achievement. Moreover, the close relationship between standardized tests and college acceptance further complicates the issue. Where parents may desire an alternative educational experience for their children, college acceptance continues to loom as a desired outcome, and standardized testing predicts to continue as part of this process for the near future. Plainly, a reimagining, and appropriate separation, of both measurement and accountability concepts is necessary to allow charters the freedom to fulfill their originally imagined purpose of innovative teaching and learning. More importantly, acceptance of charters as a valid alternative within the educational system is an absolute requirement. Unfortunately, this is also likely the most difficult area to address in practice, if not theory. Without widespread societal acceptance of alternative schooling paradigms, which requires inclusion of many reforms, all other issues are functionally irrelevant. As discussed earlier in this paper, there are several theories that illuminate the difficulties present for divergent practices attempting to gain acceptance into the existing system. Addressing the pressure created by the economic and social systems is just as important, if not more important, than introducing reforms aimed solely at the ‘grammar of schooling’. In the current environment, there

exists little motivation to change because education is seen as a meritorious institution rather than a reproductive one. Public challenges to this assumption are essential to beginning a new culture of acceptance for alternative methods, including charters.

It is in the view of 'institutional isomorphism', the 'grammar of schooling', and what I will refer to as the 'capitalist motive' that the present theory of charter schooling in America derives. I categorize the convergence of these individual theories as a form of educational false consciousness (EFC) that applies across numerous educational reform fronts, not only charters. Charter schools, however, present a unique opportunity to address every aspect of resistance attributable to EFC due to their designed autonomy in governance and claimed autonomy of instructional and curricular efforts. The basic premise of EFC in the charter context is that the combination of the dominant social structure and accompanying economic order serves as the true determinant of success. Far-reaching deviations from the established norms of schooling, such as ideal type charters, are destined to fall short of any transformational aspirations because of the threat they pose not only to the educational system but also by association, to the larger social structure. The existence of charters, then, speaks more to the deliberate misrepresentation of education as a vehicle for mobility within a meritocratic system than a genuine egalitarian sentiment, at least at the institutional level. This is why, despite the apparent focus on student achievement and equality of opportunity, politics rather than education dominates charter policy discussions. Moreover, it appears that "the future of charter school politics is likely to be shaped more by the respective values and mobilization power of the... advocacy coalitions than by data on student performance" (Vergari 2007:15), which illustrates why attainment of the charter ideal has yet to be realized.

Measurement

The present methods for measurement of charters, in terms of student success, signify a fundamental flaw that prevents the charter concept from reaching its transformational potential. While there are slight deviations, statewide tests are used almost universally for primary measurement of instructional programs. For example, Texas requires all charter schools to administer and report on the “statewide assessment program to the same extent as other public schools” (TEA 2014). Based on current legislation, every state except Rhode Island has implemented a similar standard, while many states, and in some cases individual authorizing entities, have additional performance requirements as well. There is nothing inherently flawed in the idea of using an objective measurement of achievement, but there is deep dysfunction in the widespread execution of the idea today. If the overt goal of charters, via legislative mandates, is to create innovations in teaching and learning, why do the expectations remain constant regarding specific outcomes? It would stand to reason that there are a large number of traditional public schools around the country operating at high levels of efficiency and achievement. Improving all schools, with an eye toward existing measurements, should begin with these traditional environments rather than burdening a new sector of schools who not only have to concentrate on standardized testing requirements, but also independent governance. The concept of *coercive isomorphism* plays heavily into the continued emphasis on standardized testing and Carnegie units, as many parents are not willing to send their children to schools with an assessment program that is based on what is perceived as an unstructured or unfamiliar concept. Still others desire new schools not because of discord with the curricular programming available in public schools, but in the hope that ‘innovative’ instructional practices will

lead to improved outcomes. Even where parents are supportive of alternative measurement tools, the mandates of the public funding system loom, which again force charter leaders to tailor their curricula to a longstanding knowledge base that may or may not align with their preferred instructional goals.

The problem of conventional measurement is not restricted to the implementation and social validation of such measures but has also permeated the overall charter debate. As Welch describes, “both supporters and critics of charter schools use conventional measures to make their respective cases” (2011:60). While confronting the efficacy of traditional measurement is the focus of this section, the results of such student testing data is not necessary in this discussion, as neither the content nor the outcomes of the measurements themselves are of concern. This is one of the more important aspects to address on the pathway to true educational reform, as there is no reason to believe that alternative educational philosophies cannot result in satisfactory outcomes using conventional measures. However, mandating use of these conventional measures presents an enormous hurdle for potentially innovative schools to overcome. The pressure to conform to testing and other standardized assessments does not directly require that educational leaders tailor their materials for adequate success on such assessments, but the tendency for instruction to lean in that direction results from a fear that any other educational outcome is somehow inferior, which reflects poorly on the schools, teachers, and in the long-term, the students. This fear “has diverted attention from an important part of the charter concept—schooling innovation” (Neumann 2008:51).

Using High Tech High in San Diego as an example, it is apparent that charters can both implement radically innovative instructional and curricular programs and at the same time produce students who perform at a high level on standardized tests, even

when accounting for traditional demographic variables. As Richard Neumann observed in his study of the school, an interdisciplinary approach dominates the learning process, with specific instruction related to single academic disciplines replaced by a model where students address real-world problems and consult with subject-matter experts. Assessment consists primarily of portfolios and Presentations of Learning (POLs), but students also take the state mandated standardized tests at designated grade levels (in this case, California's STAR test). Proving that conventional instruction is not necessary to achieve excellent results on conventional measures, High Tech High placed in the top 10% of all high schools in California on the STAR test for years 2001-2004, and only slightly lower for the 2005 school year. The school also boasts a very low dropout rate and its demographics purposefully mirror the demographics of the district as a whole. Thus, we can see that this is not a case of cream-skimming the district's top students, and not due to discarding innovation in the pursuit of excellence on state mandated tests. Far from expressing support for standardized testing, this example shows that it is not a requirement of a school to focus wholly on testing in order to achieve testing excellence. In spite of such charter examples, not addressed remains the issue of whether standardized testing should be viewed as a valid measure of success in education across all education providers.

Observers have suggested that "conventional desires can only thwart the forms of innovation that many envisioned at the dawn of the charter movement" (Welch 2011:60), but this is at best a half-truth. Legitimizing 'conventional desires', represented by state standardized tests, SATs, Carnegie units, etc., is the underlying issue to be resolved. The presentation of these methods as the only valid tools available is where the true problem rests. As evidenced by schools using portfolio and project-based assessments, it is possible for students to receive a well-rounded liberal arts education

without the restrictions imposed by narrow testing programs. With this in mind, using conventional measures should not represent a foundational aspect driving the formation of new schools, particularly ones that seek to challenge the status quo. However, if students are educated in a holistic manner that fosters not only personal growth, but also values the utility of classical subject matter that is integrative and interdisciplinary, there is no reason to believe that they will not fare well on new as well as existing measures. The case of HTH is a prime example of this phenomenon, as the school unquestionably utilizes an innovative instructional program yet excels on standard state tests. That is not to say that an overhaul of standardized measures is without merit. It is possible for students, particularly in alternative schooling paradigms, to productively focus much more heavily on one subject area to the detriment of other less immediately critical subjects. There are also biases in test creation that are difficult to overcome that rely on the assumption that there is a single body of knowledge that is useful and necessary for all students. Where reformers should focus going forward is on supporting a diversity of measurement options that relate to the educational outcomes sought by the local community.

Accountability

Accountability, separated from its common synonym of measurement, currently takes form in the charter authorization and reauthorization processes. While complete and transparent accountability is important for all publicly funded organizations, the restrictive limits on reaffirmation create an environment in which charters do not have adequate freedom to innovate. For example, the chartering process in most states limits guaranteed operation to five years or less, at which point schools must be reaffirmed for

another set period. This presents onerous obstacles in terms of a school's ability to innovate internally, as well as the ability of the charter system as a whole to engender innovation externally through competition.

Consider the challenges presented by a typical chartering and reaffirmation process. State A (SA) grants Charter School B (CSB) an initial charter for 5 years, at which point the school's performance, both academic and operational, will be reviewed. Interest Group C (IGC) opposes CSB, calling the school a threat to the local public schools. However, IGC is comforted by the knowledge that CSB only has 5 years in which to operate before they can be closed for non-performance, since their experimental methods obviously will not be able to deliver results on par with the public schools. Once in operation, CSB's founders realize that while they may have initially marketed the school based on instructional practices and curricula that differ from the surrounding public schools, significant pressure (coercive isomorphism) exists in the form of standardized performance measurement, which must be reasonably similar to the established public schools. Given the possibility of having their charter revoked, CSB's leaders are likely to do what any rational leaders would be expected to do in the interest of keeping their school open: Ensure that instructional and curriculum standards will meet the level of those at the public schools they will be measured against, which is to say that they will mimic (mimetic isomorphism) what the public schools are doing with the hope that they can meet the performance standards. No matter the outcome, there are benefits realized by one or both of the parties. If CSB fails to meet the standards and is closed, there is no longer an active threat to the public school system, and all diverted funds return to the public schools. If CSB meets the standards, they remain open, but they do so by working within the boundaries of the existing system. Perhaps CSB maintains a pocket of resistance based on school-governance model, but does not put in jeopardy the

foundations of instruction or outcomes. In this scenario, SA has effectively mediated both advocates and opponents of charter schools by allowing their operation and simultaneously implementing policies that prevent them from achieving their goals. Innovation has been stifled by requiring measurement by traditional means, which in turn dilutes any potential competitive pressures that might be brought on by innovation.

The threat of closure due to inability to meet requirements represents not only a threat to individual charter schools, but also a threat to the entire concept. To be fair, after almost 10 years of the charter experiment, “only 3 percent of charter schools... [were] closed” (Browning 2000:17) nationwide. However, more recent figures suggest that charter closings have become much more common, with 1,036 schools (of 6,700) shutting their doors since 1992 (CFER 2011). That number represents roughly a 15% closure rate among charters nationwide, with causes including financial issues, mismanagement, academic performance, and district obstacles. While the overall number and percentage of charters facing closure specifically for academic reasons is not overwhelming, this does not mean that the specter of possible denial during reaffirmation does not heavily influence the instructional course a school undertakes. Even during the Eight-Year Study conducted in the 1930s, many schools implemented “only slightly modified versions of existing curricula, with some making only minor changes to their existing, departmentalized structures” (Welch 2011:57) even though all schools in the study had the freedom to implement completely new instructional programs. Pressures associated with normative isomorphism best explain this phenomenon, as existing practices are generally preferred by practitioners of a trade, in this case the faculty. Owing to the entrenchment of the ‘grammar of schooling’, gravitation toward accepted educational norms remains, even with all accountability pressure removed.

Acceptance

Education, as an institution, has a well established reputation as the great equalizer of American society, making opportunities available for all citizens regardless of social class, gender, or race. Potential challenges to the existing paradigm have consistently faced great difficulty in moving past the phase of experimentation or gaining status as more than niche educational products. Societal acceptance of not only the charter concept but of a diverse range of educational alternatives, however, is key for improvement in public education. Unfortunately, acceptance requires a complete rethinking of the goals of public education and the recognition that these goals may not be the same for every student in every environment. Herein lies the difficulty ahead for education reform, school choice, and the charter movement. While the “diversity of founders and range of motives for creating charter schools is moving steadily toward more educational opportunities” (Browning 2000), the fact remains that charters serve a miniscule fraction of the country’s total student enrollment and most do so under restrictive oversight. As previously discussed, oversight is a necessary component of any publicly funded program but should also not function as an impediment to the ability of such a program to succeed by placing undue stress that is not present for other similar organizations. The presence of such additional oversight measures inhibits public trust and acceptance of charters by labeling such schools as ‘outsiders’ in relation to public education. This is apparent when observing public charter debates, where it is common for opponents to brand charters as private entities, “challengers to public education” (Woodard 2013), and as organizations otherwise aligned solely with corporate interests. The fact that the majority of charter schools are public schools, and frequently operate on lower levels of public funding than traditional schools, is lost in most discussion. Such an

environment is not conducive to the innovation demanded of the charter system, and instead “appears more often to encourage more conformity to consumer expectations and imitation of successful colleagues than to reward risk-taking” (Welch 2011:59). What results is an underclass of schools performing the same functions, in a similar manner, as the traditional public school system, but with diminished support in terms of operational funds as well as general public approval.

In viewing the different avenues available to push for acceptance of charters, appealing to parents signifies the most promising course of action. Research has consistently shown that charters are more heavily influenced by the coercive pressures imposed by parental desire for classical education and college admission over other concerns (Buckley and Schneider 2007; Teske and Schneider 2001). Proper identification of a starting point, however, is not as simple as it may seem. While parents, as secondary but controlling educational consumers, represent a powerful force in local educational policy implementation, the idea of public education as an ultimately egalitarian institution must be successfully challenged. Available information indicates that parents, along with students in most cases, show a tendency to prefer traditional education, both in terms of instruction and outcomes (Lubienski 2003; Welch 2011). Rather than view this as a preference based on careful consideration of differing schooling philosophies, pedagogy, and immediate importance of curricula, I assert that it is the result of prolonged and consistent inculcation by educational and economic institutions. Because the public education system is still largely based on a system instituted in the early 20th century, which was driven by reformers influenced by the changing demands of a newly industrial economy, the first step in gaining acceptance for alternative models involves illumination of the foundations of curricula, classroom design, instructional methods, etc. The intentions of early reformers favored equal access to

equal educational opportunities, but the execution, similar to the contemporary environment, was influenced and carried out primarily by those groups in society with appropriately high levels of power, status, and wealth. Akin to early and ongoing civil rights struggles, the educational system provided, and arguable still provides, a small measure of equality while covertly harboring alternative intentions that require confrontation before change is possible.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

Charter schools are premised on individual (or family) choices where such choices are thought to best reflect the diverse preferences of the choosers rather than the dictates of monolithic bureaucracies (Lubienski 2003:398).

Charter schools embody the perpetual spirit of improvement that is so prevalent in American society. Rather than judging charter schools based on their perceived success against an existing system, a more productive exercise entails seeing charters as an experiment to increase educational opportunity using unconventional methods. Where this exercise has failed to date is in the previously discussed areas of measurement, accountability, and acceptance, as well as in the firmly established expectation of identical content and delivery in all educational endeavors. This failure extends to nearly every serious educational reform that originates outside the traditional public system, which is why charters alone are not the answer to 'fixing', or significantly improving, public education for all. Exceptions to the contrary should be lauded for their success, but should also not be misunderstood as anything other than insignificant outliers on an institutional level²⁴. The improved outcomes achieved by students in these programs is commendable and should continue to be aggressively pursued, but only in light of the fact that such successes are likely to have the dual purpose of feeding the idea of meritocracy under the ideals of EFC.

While the High Tech High (HTH) example discussed previously is one of great interest to reform-minded individuals, it should also serve as a cautionary tale. The ability

²⁴ Crossing the boundary of institution/organization here is considered only in the sense of the ability of singular organizations (or groups, in the case of EMOs or programs such as KIPP) to challenge education on an institutional level.

for HTH to implement the educational program it has relies on many favorable environmental factors. Support of the local school district (which also served as the charter authorizer in this instance), a faculty committed to an interdisciplinary, inquiry-based approach, and a business environment which helped to facilitate internships for juniors and seniors all play large parts in the success of HTH. Obviously, many communities do not have such a confluence of fortunate circumstances that appear to be a requirement for sustained operation. Rural communities, extremely densely populated areas, and many inner city areas might find difficulty in gaining adequate support for creation of a new charter with similar principles, let alone securing facilities and funding for such an undertaking. This is precisely the problem with using individual schools or school programs as direct models for implantation into other environments. The goal of education reform cannot be to create another one-size-fits-all framework that can then be codified and executed. Using such a form of Taylorism would only result in exactly the same situation the nation currently finds itself in. HTH, KIPP Academy, etc. work so well because they have identified what works for their target audiences and their local environments.

An emphasis on localized education, in both delivery and curricula, is not a new idea, but is one that has fallen short of widespread adoption in the educational community. Returning to the philosophy of John Dewey, reformers can trace the concept of education as primarily a social activity that should be undertaken by schools “that [constitute] small communities” (Harms and DePencier 1996:2) to more than a century ago. Rather than large-scale operations that set identical expectations for millions of students regardless of background, aspirations, interests, and talents, Dewey supported a model which did not eschew the expectations created by the new industrial and economic order but instead used the experiences of students to guide learning through

what we would refer to as project- or inquiry-based instruction. Dewey's Laboratory School, established within The University of Chicago as a way to generate educational research, represents a strikingly relevant early example of what many successful charters are modeling in today's educational marketplace. Students are placed at the forefront of all decision-making efforts, rather than administrative concerns or even specific instructional content. The focus of the school, which is still in operation today, on experiential learning and learning through social communities perfectly illustrates the sentiment needed to break free from the restrictions present in the current educational system. Dewey's thoughts on traditional education, which "subordinate[s] children to the curriculum" (Hildebrand 2008:127), would not be out of place in current educational debates, especially with the renewed focus on standardized testing and common curricula for all schools. Extending these ideas into contemporary dialogue offers even greater opportunity for educational impact than was possible during Dewey's time. Implementing educational change through localized and social schooling environments would no doubt look very different now than in the early 20th century, which is attributable to advancements in technology and subsequent increases in occupational opportunity. A school system utilizing a Laboratory School model of inquiry-based learning represents an infinitely more flexible approach to education than requiring a common curricula and factory model of instruction as witnessed in today's schools.

A multitude of choices would allow parents and students the ability to select the model that they believe most appropriately meets their educational goals. Education has been established over time as the sole province of the government, not only in terms of regulation but also delivery, which represents a major problem to overcome. States have the sole responsibility for ensuring that citizens have access to educational opportunities, with the Fourteenth Amendment, via the Equal Protection Clause, requiring all states to

protect against discrimination generally, which extends to educational availability. This system has become so entrenched over time that the introduction of alternatives is considered heresy. Making education available equally across the socioeconomic spectrum, and suited to meet the needs of diverse communities, cannot be accomplished by a single group with a singular focus. Varied interest groups providing localized instruction, which are properly regulated and held accountable to public interests, are the only way to meet the goal of educational equality. Options are the key, as even in a narrow geographic area, some parents may seek disparate opportunities and outcomes for their children. Some children may aspire to attend Harvard Medical School, while other would prefer to operate an art studio. There exists a great assortment of reform-minded individuals and groups who think that highly innovative measures are needed to achieve educational equality, but there are also reformers who instead believe that a traditional education is the highest and best goal. The distinction lies in the belief that the institution of education has failed to offer the most effective and efficient form of education for all students in the current configuration.

There remain those who will argue that “curricular conformity and instructional standardization may in fact be caused by the very market mechanisms that were unleashed to address those ills” (Lubienski 2003:397), but I would counter that this is simply a misidentification of the root issue. The openness made possible by true school choice is more likely to resemble a consumer-driven economic model where educational concepts may work well in some communities but not others. In the absence of strict regulation on outcomes, and instead a concentration on regulation of school management and equality, schools of choice would have no reason to become homogenized to a central “standard”. Measurement and accountability driven by educational consumers and schools held to a high standard of equality and availability

have a better chance to succeed based on responsiveness to local demand first and not to outside interest group influence. Recognition of the source of the 'grammar of schooling', along with the methods through which education reproduces the economic order, is critical in the process of lifting the shroud of educational false consciousness and creating an environment in which not only charter schools, but all possible educational paradigms have an equal chance to stake a claim in the landscape of American education.

Educational False Consciousness as a Framework

Creating a comprehensive framework capable of addressing the myriad educational forms, inclusive of their benefits and limitations, present in contemporary society is a daunting task. Primarily, this is a problem of misidentification of the majority of educational "forms", which are merely differing administrative structures shrouding the almost-identical foundation that each form relies on for validity. Moreover, there always exists the likelihood that any framework will not apply perfectly to every potential situation and will therefore be labeled a failed effort by detractors. Perhaps most critically, the idea of creating a singular prescriptive framework through which to evaluate educational programs appears to belie the spirit of true school choice, which would not narrow educational options to anything measurable by a single standard. These concerns notwithstanding, it remains a useful exercise to consider a broad approach through which to appraise the existing institution of education and all those organizations operating under, and further propagating, EFC. Devising such an approach represents the only plausible avenue through which future reform can be channeled. Failing to at least attempt such an ambitious undertaking virtually ensures not only the continuation, but

also the continued strengthening of the existing system. Utilizing the concepts already discussed in this paper, the remainder of this section aims to detail a framework intended to combatatively evaluate existing structures as well as future reforms.

First and foremost, any evaluative framework must consider the wider environment in which it is applied, an idea that is required for acceptance of any new educational paradigms. This means that divorcing the specifics of educational practice from the school setting is not only advantageous, but required. For example, it is impossible to comprehensively appraise the utility of certain physical classroom configurations without exploring what societal values are overtly or covertly supported by their presence. The traditional classroom model, which is typically observed as neat and orderly rows of desks, many times with assigned seats, is generally considered to reinforce uniformity; individual workstations, as witnessed in schools such as High Tech High in San Deigo, appear largely to encourage a greater degree of individuality. There are many such examples, and not all contain clearly-observable underlying values. However, identification of such values, where possible, is of primary importance. With each assessment of curricula, instruction, governance model, and measurement practice, one must ask: *Cui bono?* Given the assumption that the institution of education traces its current structure back to the early industrialization of America, evaluation of both traditional practice and theory require consideration of the massive social changes taking place at the time, which were by and large located in the economic system. Bowles and Gintis, perhaps the most ardent proponents of this idea, recognized clearly that the “character of reform depends, not only on the content of the reform itself, but on the programatic context in which the reform is advocated and the process by which it is won as well” (1976:246). Assuming that all practices, particularly within traditional schools, are somehow driven solely by economic concerns, however, should not derail the application

of this framework. Rather, an acute sense of perspective regarding the genesis of educational practices and recognition of special interests involved in reform and resistance efforts is not only needed, but required.

Once the foundation of value-identification is accepted, we can then move on to specific evaluative actions. As stated previously, we will consider the concepts discussed in the preceding chapter as initial “umbrellas” under which more specific efforts reside. The first umbrella, measurement of student achievement, necessitates an approach that contemplates not only the direct measurement tool, or even its immediate purpose, but also the implications of the content and motives for delivery method. Using the nearly universal example of statewide standardized testing, we first need to contemplate the stated goal of such testing, which is usually to determine student achievement. The natural questions that should follow must address the source of the questions, content, expected levels of achievement, and baseline against which to determine improvement. As a popular argument among early standardized testing opponents reflects, what exactly does testing one’s awareness of Yale’s location tell us about intelligence? Now, just as then, relevancy of content cannot take a secondary role in determining validity of measurement. This also illustrates the pitfall in attempting to enforce a singular approach across the entire educational spectrum. EFC can only gain support through such a system where merit has but one path and one destination. All those failing to meet the standard of excellence defined by the dominant cultural arbitrary, to borrow again from Bourdieu, have no alternate route to success within the system²⁵. The issue of

²⁵ There are, of course, innumerable examples of success attained by high school and college drop-outs, as well as references to “self-made men” throughout history. However, these are merely the exceptions used to perpetuate the idea of education as the ultimate equalizer in society. Too much evidence exists to the contrary to believe that it provides a pathway to success for any significant number of deserving and capable students.

accountability also deserves attention, as within the present environment alternative schooling proposals face almost insurmountable challenges when attempting to implement their preferred educational programs. As with measurement, there are many factors that warrant examination in a comprehensive evaluation. Primarily, however, accountability is an issue of fairness, or equality, of application across all organizations. This includes not only charters, but also traditional public schools, private schools, magnet schools, etc. While the argument of imbalance to the benefit of charters is prevalent, commonly enunciated as the 'freedom from oversight', it fails to consider exactly what sort of accountability is most important. In determining fairness from this perspective, one must maintain awareness of the following accountability issues charters face: they are subject to standardized testing in almost all states, they have finite terms of operation which must be renewed, and they must manage these concerns while operating on less government support (financially) and higher consumer (and legislative) expectations. I would not argue that the answer here is to increase accountability requirements across the board, making them identical for all models, but instead to ensure that no accountability measure is so restrictive as to inhibit the core purpose of schooling, which is to educate students to the ability and desire of the local community. This may entail regular reviews of public schools, private schools, charters, etc. to determine success within their specific scope and propose a course of action to either improve, restructure, or eliminate the school altogether. I understand this is a seemingly radical idea, but we already witness this with charters and private schools. Expecting the same level of responsiveness of all schools is hardly heretical, but the simple fact that this must be stated is indicative of the state of the system. Traditional public schools are shielded from the most important forms of accountability, I would argue, mainly due to their reproductive functions. The resistance to equality of accountability mirrors the resistance to

diversity of measurement in this way. A predetermined marker of success is present and supports a particular definition, its validity long ago solidified institutionally. Again, this must consume the majority of any evaluation based in an EFC framework.

Where this framework moves beyond the application of institutional isomorphism to charters as outlined by Welch (2011), the recognition of schooling as driven by capitalist concerns as defined by Bowles and Gintis (1976), and the plethora of reform proposals advocating alternative models of educational delivery, is in the combination of approaches and the observation that multiple paradigms are required to provide equality of educational opportunity to all. This approach also demands the acknowledgement that the impact made by factors immediately external to the educational system, such as the prevailing economic order, must hold the highest priority among reformers both within the traditional system as well as those proposing new models.

Future Research

Considering the implications for future research, the current examination of EFC as a prohibitive factor in effective reform implementation can be widely applied to both traditional and alternative educational paradigms. There already exists a body of literature, much of it discussed throughout this paper, indicating varying explanations behind the success²⁶ of reform efforts, which is a useful place to start. As in the High Tech High study (Neumann 2008), an examination of the factors present in the community and school environments, as well as the makeup of the school both in terms of educational philosophy and governance model, will do much to further the cause. Adding explorations of value systems of existing and new school operators, compared

²⁶ Success, however, being defined by conventional methods in most cases.

directly with the values of the areas served also has promise. True to the spirit of the EFC framework, however, we cannot expect such straightforward methods as self-reported survey results to provide adequate and accurate information. Detailed epidemiologic studies are more appropriate, with observation of actual practice over a wide range of situations and involving a diversity (as appropriate) of subjects. Ultimately, future research remains a difficulty, as there are few examples of highly successful alternative schooling environments that exemplify rejection of EFC, whether implicitly or explicitly. An ideal study would mirror the efforts of the Eight Year Study, referenced previously in connection with Welch (2011). Such an effort would relieve both schools of all current restraints on daily operation and students of traditional college entry requirements. Schools would then be free to pursue such innovative programs as intended during the initial legislative and grassroots origins of the charter movement.

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During his time at UTA, and with great support from the outstanding faculty, Rich has honed his sociological perspective, outlook, and research interests to include critical social theory, social reproduction, social stratification, social institutions, legal theory, and various issues related to inequality within the fields of education and law.