

Public Charter Schools Compliment Traditional Education

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The US Senate recently passed a resolution recognizing National Charter Schools Week to be celebrated annually in May. This year marks the 30th anniversary of the first charter school law passed in Minnesota. Now one of the fastest growing education reform movements in the United States, it serves almost 3.3 million students in about 7,500 public charter school campuses across the country. Charter schools are publicly funded schools which, in exchange for strict accountability, receive a few more freedoms to innovate, and a little less regulatory red tape to deal with than traditional public schools. Charter schools operate under a contract, called a charter, with a government agency. There is no tuition to attend a charter school, and enrollment is open to those in the charters defined geographical boundary who choose to attend, if seats are available.

The motivation behind the national charter school movement that began in the early 1990's, came from the belief that academic achievement of U.S. students had fallen so far behind several other countries we once led, that something radical had to be done to restore the U.S. public education system to its past leadership. The idea was to create a new type of public school sector just outside the traditional system that many believed was too big and therefore too slow to change. Traditional schools were seen as this big cruise ship that was heading toward an ice berg of low expectations. Public charter schools were created to resemble a small coast guard rescue boat that could quickly maneuver, and try new teaching approaches to save, or at least improve, part of public educational system in America.

According to The Texas Education Code (Section 12.001), the Texas legislature created charter schools in 1995 to "to improve student learning; increase the choice of learning opportunities within the public school system; create professional opportunities that will attract new teachers to the public school system; establish a new form of accountability for public schools; encourage different and innovative learning methods."

The key distinctions between a charter school and a traditional school are in how they are owned, governed, funded, and the specific educational laws they must follow. These differences may give charter schools some advantages, but they also face some disadvantages. For example, because charter schools are owned and operated by private not-for-profit corporations, and are governed by appointed board members, they may enjoy more consistency of purpose, mission and direction. They also may be able to change and adapt more quickly to trends that can impact

academic achievement. Charter schools can cap how many students they will enroll. On the other hand, they don't receive quite as much public funding as traditional schools (as they have no taxing authority), so they must be more efficient.

What actually goes on in a charter school classroom may or may not be much different than your local traditional school. While some charter schools have embraced instructional technology faster, and to a greater degree than many traditional schools, others have thrown out any resemblance of the teacher led classroom with a look and feel more like a high-performance workplace. Some traditional schools also have embraced these innovations. The federal "No Child Left Behind" laws, and the State's increasingly more rigorous accountability system force all public schools, both traditional and charter schools, to reach the same standardized achievement measures of academic progress. These new regulations have forced every public school to get better, or face the consequence of poor school ratings, or even school closure. Therefore, the actual differences now between charter schools and traditional public schools are more subtle than people think.

The overall effectiveness of the charter school movement on the US education system is debatable. As with any new innovation it can be messy with missteps and failures along the way. Indeed, some charter schools have failed while others have made measurable improvements in the academic achievement of their students. This is also true of traditional public schools. Some claim charter schools are making significant strides in improving the achievement of lower socio-economical groups that had been stuck in poor performing traditional schools. In the wealthier neighborhoods, many families choose a charter school because it may offer a special educational niche or learning environment that is a better fit for their child. Others claim charter schools are taking finite resources away from traditional public school system.

Charter schools do not appear to be a panacea for what ails the U.S. public education system, but they have had some modest success, and they have reached and successfully taught a large number of US students that probably would have failed or dropped out of the traditional education system. To return U.S. students to the top in academic achievement requires excellent instruction by well trained and supported teachers, and lots of determination by motivated students, whether it occurs in a traditional setting or a charter school. At this point, very few people are advocating for charter schools to replace the traditional public school system, but modest growth of charter school choices should continue into the foreseeable future.