The Value of Charter Schools in the American Education System

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Let me begin by presenting you with Charlie. Charlie is an African-American boy soon entering the fifth grade and living in a less-than-savory neighborhood in Newark, New Jersey. In his area, hardly anyone finishes high school, and it is expected for a child to grow into adulthood without having graced a college campus. Crime rates and gang prevalence are high, and care to reform local public schools is low; students hardly bother to sit in classrooms and teachers steadily lose the willpower to force lessons upon them, destroying any semblance of a healthy learning environment. No one in Charlie’s family has gone to college, but he dreams of one day standing on stage bearing his very own diploma. However, his parents know that his dream will never become a reality if he attends the neighborhood’s public school. They decide to enter Charlie’s name into the lottery of the newly opened charter middle school a few blocks away with the hopes that he will be enrolled in the fall and start a new, unimpeded, educational journey. He becomes one of that school’s 150 new students, and suddenly a future he never imagined existing is laid before him, with a support system he never had before.

Charlie is one example of many thousands of American children living in the United States today. In this essay, I will present how brighter futures and progress in American education have become more feasible with the creation of charter schools. I will begin by explaining the United States’ current social climate in terms of education, and that climate’s relation to success in life. Secondly, I will explain how charter schools differentiate themselves from other public schools and why they are the best option for educating much of America’s youth. Next, I will present the opposition to charter-style education, and why a portion of the American public remains firmly against the expansion of such alternative schooling. Finally, I will reaffirm why charter schools remain a valuable tool in the changing realm of education and
why they should be respected as one of the best methods for bringing measurably positive improvements to habitually low-performing portions of the United States.

In the past, America’s ‘land of opportunity’ motto was true for many. This country was a place where people could pull themselves up by their bootstraps, jumping from nothing to success with little more than sheer will. Sadly, this image has become muddled in the twenty-first century. For millions of Americans today, far more than dogged determination is needed to triumph in this day and age. Few opportunities exist for individuals lacking college degrees, individuals that make up a growing portion of the population. In fact, according to the most recent survey (2015) by the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, Americans without a college degree average an unemployment rate of 6-9%, higher than the 5% average of all citizens combined. Those with a bachelor’s degree, however, see only a 3.5% unemployment rate, and when maintaining a job, these degree-holders earn about $1,101 per week. Those holding master’s degrees see even more success, with an unemployment rate of only about 2.8% and an average weekly income of $1,326 (United States Department of Labor, 2015).

A related survey conducted in 2014 by the United States Census Bureau presents the number of educational degrees attained by specific portions of the American population (Educational Attainment, 2014). The census found that 36,392 white Americans received their bachelor’s degree, while blacks and hispanics, respectively, numbered 3,835 and 3,417 degrees. The higher the level of degree, the further the gap widens, with 2,977 white Americans earning doctorates compared to the 206 and 193 of blacks and hispanics. The numerical chasm is staggering. It becomes truly frightening once reviewed in conjunction with current unemployment rates and low-income levels.
The sobering truth is that the majority of those lacking college educations come from some of the worst areas in the country—places from Miami to Tulsa to Los Angeles, where violent crime and poverty run rampant, and where poorly structured schools remain purposefully unattended by their students. For those born and raised in such neighborhoods, there exists little hope of conquering the multitude of adversities without assistance—educational assistance in particular. Even for jobs paying minimum wage there exists a deep-seated bias that managers should hire those presenting some type of degree. This bias further destroys the willpower of the unemployed, whose confidence and personality are damaged by the stigma that they will never achieve a successful future.

If Americans hope to re-establish the successful work ethic of days gone by, then repair of the educational system is vital. The first step is acknowledging that basic uniformity of public schools is no longer the best way to educate America’s children. From state to state, even town to town, children grow and mature at varying speeds and fashions depending on their cultural environment and home influences. With this in mind, educational systems should focus on malleability rather than conformity when catering to the variety of students walking through their doors. I present one of the best options for an improved American education system, one that puts student needs above all else: the charter school.

By definition, a charter school is “an independently run public school granted greater flexibility in its operations, in return for greater accountability for performance” (uncommonschools.org). Teachers, parents, or community groups can open a charter as long as the institution follows the mission, programs, and academic goals set forth by the locally or nationally established authority. Unlike public education, which is defined by “compulsory attendance at neighborhood schools determined by a family’s home address and enforced by a
district bureaucracy” (Finn and Manno, 1), charter schools are chosen voluntarily by parents as tuition-free alternatives. Minnesota led this educational revolution by enacting the first charter school law in the nation in 1991, followed by California a year later. Since then, over 42 states and the District of Columbia have passed charter school laws, bringing the most recent total to 6,700 public charter schools serving nearly 2.9 million students across the country (National Education Association).

Two themes stand out when defining a charter school: autonomy and accountability. Charter schools have the flexibility to create curriculums that are utterly unlike those in public schools, including additions like extended school days, Saturday sessions, and building fundamentals of good character rather than good academics alone. In tandem with this freedom, however, is higher accountability. No matter a public school’s success rate, the federal government continues funding its functioning. Comparatively, charter schools are held to strict levels of accountability by their authorizing body, which varies by state. For example, New York State has three possible charter authorities: the New York State Board of Regents, the State University of New York Board of Trustees, and local boards of education. Each authority is tasked with monitoring the progress, or lack thereof, of charter schools falling under their supervision, and each wields the power to shut down any schools failing to meet the laws of their charter (uncommonschools.org).

Charter schools are tuition-free organizations, funded on a per-pupil basis, and can accept additional donations from outside philanthropies. Celebrities like Sandra Bullock and Oprah Winfrey are some of the many who lead the charge in these types of donations. Most schools are stand-alone, “one off” institutions, 11% are “conversions” of previous public schools, and one third belongs to “charter management organizations,” or CMOs (Finn and Manno 3). Admission
to charter schools is unique and specific to their design. Potential new students are placed on a lottery list from which names are drawn at random, preventing any chance of discriminating against students on grounds of demographics, parent income, or learning capacity. Based on their geographic locations, charters tend to serve a greater number of minority and low-income students. With their inherent differences in infrastructure, particularly in terms of freedom and accountability, charter schools have more room for positive growth and a better chance of producing results in groups of students that normally lack educational guidance.

There are many examples of flourishing charters that have massively improved their students’ reading, math, and standardized testing skills until they match, and more frequently surpass, levels at local public-school counterparts. One of the most renowned CMOs is KIPP Schools, which was first founded in 1994 by Mark Feinberg and Dave Levin, following their time as Teach for America instructors. Since its inception, KIPP has expanded from its two original schools in Houston and South Bronx to 183 schools in 20 states, catering to nearly 70,000 students. Their pupils are almost entirely registered as minorities, with 96% registered as African-American or Latino, and over 87% eligible for free meals (kipp.org). Despite the steadily growing student population and extraneous expenses public schools do not have—such as extended after-school programs, free breakfasts, and the “KIPP Through College Program”—fewer than half of the KIPP schools spent more than non-charter public schools in 2014. And, though they pursue a deeper involvement with the students’ lives, they still receive far less state funding.

Truly astounding is the level of positive change KIPP schools have created with their charters and curriculum designs. Though they bear the same standards as other federally funded schools, KIPP acts autonomously by catering to their students’ needs on a case-by-case basis.
With extended school days, even school terms, KIPP students receive far more personal attention and have the chance to erase the academic gaps they arrived with. According to the 2014 KIPP Report Card, KIPP students enter at fifth grade with math and reading levels far below the national average. After three years in the KIPP program, test scores revealed growth equivalent to 1.2 extra years of math and .9 extra years of reading (kipp.org). Measures of Academic Progress tests are administered frequently to monitor KIPP’s charter adherence. Nationally, students’ academic achievements were impressive. Tracking the growth of the class of 2018 from their fifth-grade Fall to eighth-grade Spring, only 35% and 42% of students were at or above grade level in math and reading, respectively. Four years later, the numbers leapt to 62% for math and 57% for reading proficiency, with 9-17% in the nation’s top quartile. In fact, by the eighth grade, KIPP students outperformed students at local public schools. In KIPP college preparatory programs, over 65% of students took one or more AP tests, and 98% of students took either the SAT or ACT (scoring an average of 1372 and 19, respectively). These impressive statistics are credited to more than the schools’ simply building grades, but to their development of positive character traits such as “grit” and “kindness” (kipp.org). The belief is that such lessons will continue student success beyond KIPP’s four walls, in collegiate institutions and in the professional world. KIPP schools are a prime example of a successful charter school curriculum, where flexibility for student needs and molding genuinely good human character are primary concerns, held to strict accountability (kipp.org).

Another CMO finding great success is Uncommon Schools, located in areas of Massachusetts, New York, and New Jersey. Uncommon began in 1997 with the North Star Academy Charter School in Newark, New Jersey, was finalized as a mission-driven CMO in 2005, and now totals 44 college preparatory schools throughout the Northeast. Much like the
KIPP school curriculum, Uncommon Schools does not believe in a one-style-fits-all way of educating. Horace Mann, a founder of the American public education system, stated, “building common schools for the nation’s young people is the single most powerful way to bring about a society of equals” (uncommonschools.org), a claim Uncommon Schools’ creators disprove with their practices. They acknowledge that their students, like most charter schools are from traditionally low-performing urban areas, are faced with greater tests of determination and mental strength than the average suburban student. Much like the KIPP core curriculum, the Uncommon Schools CMO is founded on consistent testing for academic results, high levels of accountability, and student-specific flexibility. Similar to KIPP and other charter successes, results show that the Uncommon methodology is working. By sixth grade, 75% of the Uncommon Schools outperform the local public schools in the same region. The 2014 Uncommon School survey comparing the Rochester (New York) city schools to Uncommon Schools located in the same area saw vast variances in test results, with the numbers favoring the Uncommon approach. For example, in the 2014 NY State Math Exam, only 1% of the Rochester City Public District eighth graders scored at the advanced or proficient level, while 55% of the Uncommon School students of the same grade received such scores (uncommonschools.org).

But, it’s the small touches within the school walls that show genuine nonconformity to public education. For example, classrooms are named after colleges and universities, to show students that attending such institutions in the future is a viable possibility for every student. Every morning, students shake hands with the head administrator upon walking into the building, an example of learning how to respect others and earn respect in return. School uniforms are mandatory, erasing any essence of street gangs or unprofessional styles of appearance, and making sure there is value in each student’s personal presence. Charter schools around the
country usually have the added challenge of erasing previous teaching failures, within and without classrooms, that students were previously exposed to. The value of a charter school education is in changing not only the grades on students’ report cards, but also in improving their quality of life and future prospects.

Despite the clear evidence behind charter schools’ educational quality, a portion of the public remains against their expansion. Teachers unions in particular dislike that charter schools are non-unionized; the unions claim that charter schools are given more money than they deserve. Public school teachers, angered by the associated inference that the local educators are inadequate and necessitate an alternative, rarely support charter schools opening in their neighborhoods. Despite charter schools accepting students by randomized lottery, anti-charter organizations proclaim that charters “cream off the brighter children and leave sink schools deprived of resources behind” (The Economist). This debate has trickled into the political sphere. While charter schools have traditionally gathered bipartisan support by figures ranging from Barack Obama to George W. Bush, politicians backed by teachers unions are attempting to curb charter school growth. For example, New York City charter schools are academically surpassing public schools, yet Mayor Bill de Blasio persists in forcing charter schools to close by increasing their rental fees and diverting their funding allocations (The Economist).

Some formal studies have been pursued in the hopes of addressing this long-standing educational debate. The National Charter School Research Project, published by Julian Betts and Emily Tang (2011) performed statistical surveys to measure the levels of growth and achievement in charter schools around the nation, following up their first publication in 2008. The results were mixed overall, finding some schools with improved test scores, some failing to meet adequate levels of achievement, and some “simply replicating quite closely the standard
fare in traditional public schools” (Betts and Tang, 12). Academic gains are nearly always in urban locations with a high minority population, while suburban locations show little to no advantages in charter school achievement. Many charter school opponents use the lack of academic advancement, and in some cases its regression, to back claims that funding charter schools is a waste. The CREDO study, an ongoing investigation of charter school progress, found similar results to those of Betts and Tang in its most recent 2015 publication. The CREDO study focused on 41 regions in 22 states across the country, and found that “the pattern of charter school performance across the urban regions is positive on balance” (CREDO 2015). This finding contradicts their previous report, which argued that charter schools were not highly effectual in terms of student advancement.

Anti-charter activists’ final argument is that the accountability boasted by charter schools is not as authentically pursued as mandated. Some feel that schools not meeting the terms of their charter are left open for too long, damaging the system’s integrity. This claim too is unfounded. Since the charter movement began in the early 1990’s, “a substantial percentage of charter schools are closed from year to year for reasons that any school should be closed” (Consoletti, 5), historically averaging a closure rate of about 15%. This is not to say that schools are closing due to failed missions. Rather, 41.7% close because of financial complications resulting from low enrollment or inadequate state funding. The majority of charter schools already begin with a 68% deficit compared to new public schools and are effectively ‘in the hole’ before getting a chance to work. This is a stark contrast to public schools that should close for academic failure and do not, since they receive continuous district funding and so remain open (Consoletti 8).

This is certainly not to say that all charter schools are perfectly run. In fact, 24% of charter school closures were due to mismanagement, particularly in states with weak authorizing
bodies and sponsors. For example, Survivors Charter School in West Palm Beach, Florida, opened in 2001 and was terminated in 2006, when strange credit card charges and unusual audits were discovered as having been completed by the school’s administrator (Consoletti, 9). Overall, only 18.6% of charters are shut down due to poor academic performance, though these closures are often made early in the school’s inception and before positive changes can take place. Though public schools may not record as large a number of closures, they are held less accountable for unsuccessful academics, whereas charter schools have higher pressures to attain results soon after inception. Despite the lack of evidence among anti-charter forces, some stand firm in their belief. Diane Ravitch, previously of the Bush Administration’s Education Department, refuses to succumb to what she calls a “faddish trend” (Dillon) of education and believes charter schools’ level of accountability is “not raising standards but dumbing down schools” (Dillon). She feels that charter schools are deconstructing rather than supporting the sense of community in urban neighborhoods, and that increasing their presence would drain resources and devalue the public education system. Instead she, and those like her, are pushing a “voluntary national curriculum” (Wolfé) for public schools across the nation to collectively follow.

Though numbers may not reflect growth in every one of the nation’s charter schools, there is no arguing that this form of alternative education has been invaluable to millions of American children, particularly minorities from urban areas. I argue that educational value does not rest solely in children having viable chances of graduating from college, though that certainly is an important concern. Rather, there is even greater value in charter schools’ abilities to mold and improve children’s lives as people, rather than just as students. Kids are taken off the street and away from dangerous situations for longer periods thanks to extended school-day length and
specialized after-school programs. In classrooms, ‘street behavior’ is left at the door so all can share a healthy and safe environment. Students gain confidence when surrounded by teachers believing in their abilities and catering to their needs, not from those following a nonmalleable curriculum that leaves some pupils in the dust. All young children deserve the opportunity to grow into the best version of themselves, something easier said than done for large portions of the United States’ population. The expansion of charter schools offers a greater promise of lifelong success for America’s youngest generation.

Works Cited


