

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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29 March 2014

Charter Schools and the Hypocrisy of Political Liberalism

According to the US Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics, "a public charter school is a publicly funded school that is typically governed by a group or organization under a legislative contract or charter with the state or jurisdiction. The charter exempts the school from selected state or local rules and regulations. In return for funding and autonomy, the charter school must meet the accountability standards articulated in its charter. A school's charter is reviewed periodically (typically every 3 to 5 years) by the group or jurisdiction that granted its charter and can be revoked if guidelines on curriculum and management are not followed or if the standards are not met (U.S. Department of Education 2000)." The first law allowing the establishment of charter schools was passed in Minnesota in 1991. In school year 2010-11, charter schools legislation had been passed in 41 states and the District of Columbia. Charter school legislation has not been passed in Alabama, Kentucky, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, Washington, and West Virginia. From 1999-2000 to 2010-11, the number of students enrolled in public charter schools increased from 0.3 million to 1.8 million students. During this period, the percentage of all public schools that were public charter schools, based on schools that reported enrollment, increased from 2 to 5 percent, comprising 5,300 schools in 2010-11. In addition to the increase in the number of charter schools, the enrollment size of charter schools has grown over time. The percentage of charter schools with enrollments of 300-499 students increased from 12 to 22 percent during this period; the percentage with 500-999 students increased from 9 to 15 percent; and the percentage with 1,000 students or more increased from 2 to 4 percent.

In 2010-11, California enrolled the most students in charter schools (364,000), and the District of Columbia enrolled the highest percentage of public school students in charter schools (38 percent), representing 27,000 students. In that same year, more than 10 percent of public school students in Arizona were enrolled in charter schools. In 15 additional states, between 4 and 9.9 percent of public school students were enrolled in charter schools.

Everything I have read about charter schools indicate that this creative, innovative approach to public education is part of the solution to the educational crisis facing America. As columnist David Brooks observes, "We live in a society in which moral standards are already fuzzy, in which people are already encouraged to do their own thing. We live in a society with advanced social decay—with teens dropping out of high school, financiers plundering companies and kids being raised without fathers. . . [we need] more rule-following, more social discipline and more accountability, not less." So how do charter schools help to address the issues Brooks raises? They are free public schools open to any student, normally by a lottery system. Many, especially those in New York City (NYC), are supported as well by wealthy individuals. As columnist Richard Cohen reports, the financier and corporate giant Carl Icahn created and supports seven charter schools in NYC, all of them in the Bronx with student bodies reflective of the city's poorest borough. Another example is the Harlem Village Academies with Katie Couric sitting on

the Board and supported by Hugh Jackman, John Legend and Rupert Murdoch. Charter schools have high standards for their teachers and generally are not open to teachers unions, which seek to protect even the poorest and most incompetent of teachers. Charter schools are not for rich children, but normally benefit the poorest students, especially those in New York City.

So, why is New York Mayor Bill de Blasio making war on the charter school movement in New York City? He has announced that he will end three planned Success Academy schools, schools that the disadvantaged children and their parents are desperate to get into. He has also cut and redirected the entire allotment for charter school funding from the city's capital budget. Columnist Peggy Noonan reports that some 70,000 of the city's one million students, most black and Hispanic, attend charter schools, most in poorer neighborhoods. Noonan reports also that charter school students usually outscore their counterparts at conventional public schools on state tests. For example, Success Academy schools boasted 82% of its students passed citywide math exams, where, in the city schools, the figure was 30%. Arguably, charter schools help the poor and give options to kids who have floundered elsewhere. But, as Noonan so poignantly argues, "the people who run the public-school system that doesn't work—the one where you can't fire teachers who sexually prey on students and principals who don't even show up for work, which is to say the public schools run by the city's huge and powerful teachers union—don't like charter schools. And they are the mayor's supporters, a significant part of his base." That charter schools are an implicit rebuke of public schools is self-evident. They are failing and something else must be tried. Charter schools are that "something else." Thankfully, New York State's governor, Andrew Cuomo, is standing with charter schools. He is adamant that they serve the public good, something Mayor de Blasio rejects.

Noonan even goes so far to make the claim, quite convincingly I might add, that de Blasio is an "ideologue." She demonstrates that de Blasio "shows signs he is what his critics warned he would be—a destructive force in the City of New York. When a man says he will raise taxes to achieve a program like pre-K education, and is quickly informed that that program can be achieved without raising taxes, and his answer is that he wants to raise taxes anyway, that man is an ideologue. And ideologues will sacrifice anything to their ideology. Even children." Richard Cohen adds that charter schools to de Blasio are emblematic of his "two cities" mantra—one really rich, the other disproportionately poor. For that reason, "the rich are characterized as having their way with the [charter] school system for their own benefit. Th[at] hostility is so illogical it has to be based on raw resentment. Pardon me [he suggests] for suspecting that some charter school critics would rather hurt the rich than help the poor. New York is witnessing progressivism run amok."

Progressivism, the new term for political liberalism, has always maintained that it represents the interests of the poor and disadvantaged. They are not doing so in this case. In fact, they manifest a despicable hypocrisy when it comes to charter schools. The kids and the parents in charter schools, the vast majority of whom are poor and disadvantaged, love them, support them, and are vehement in their criticism of de Blasio. But de Blasio owes his election to a great extent to the powerful teachers union of New York City. He is paying off a political debt to the unions at the expense of the City's children. He should be ashamed of himself.

See Peggy Noonan in the *Wall Street Journal* (8-9 March 2014); Richard Cohen in www.washingtonpost.com (18 March 2014); and David Brooks in the *New York Times* (18 February 2014).