The Charter School Solution: Distinguishing Fact from Rhetoric

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The Charter School Solution: Distinguishing Fact from Rhetoric

Jamel K. Donnor and Tara L. Affolter

While publicly elected officials, education entrepreneurs, and business leaders assert that charter schools are best equipped to address the persistent underachievement of students of color and other traditionally underserved populations, this book argues to the contrary, that many of the purported attributes assigned to charter schools are unsubstantiated. Indeed, a paradox of charter schools is the policy assumption that competition and the free market can ameliorate inequality and boost student achievement. Schirmer and Apple (this volume) assert that charter schools have “become embedded within the ideological matrix of neoliberalism,” whereby the “one best” (Tyack, 1974) model for schooling is no longer sufficient. Instead, the privatization of public goods, such as education, will improve instruction, efficiency, and learning outcomes.

This book challenges neoliberal policy assumptions by explaining how charter schools, under the auspices of choice, innovation, and efficiency, do not improve the overall educational well-being and advancement of students. In fact, charter schools as a whole do not outperform their traditional counterparts. As Chapman and Donnor (2015) point out:

only 25% of U.S. charter schools exceeded their TPS counterparts in reading, and only 29% of the charter schools surpassed their TPS counterparts in math (CREDO, 2013). Moreover, 56% of charter schools have no difference in students’ reading growth, and 40% of charter schools have no difference in students’ math growth (CREDO, 2013). Disappointedly, 19% of charter schools perform worse than their TPS partners in reading, and 31% perform worse in math.

(CREDO, 2013, p. 138)

Further, as the authors in this volume demonstrate, charter schools and their subsequent “way(s) of doing business” erode school-community ties (Montano), limit pedagogical innovation while dehumanizing both students and teachers (Steilzen and Smith), exclude the most vulnerable students (i.e., students with disabilities and English language learners), displace and marginalize teachers of color (Lawrence), increase racial segregation
(Harper et al.), divide families and neighborhoods (Boselvic), and generally threaten the democratic precepts underwriting the American public education system (Au; Schirmer and Apple).

Despite all of this, in September of 2015, the outgoing Education Secretary, Arne Duncan, pledged $157 million dollars to create and expand charters schools. Charter school expansion was also the cornerstone of Duncan’s signature grant program, “Race to the Top,” in which federal grant dollars were primarily awarded on the basis of lifting caps on the number of charter schools allowed under state law. Laws and policies surrounding charter schools seem to switch and morph to accommodate their continued proliferation. As Wayne Au asserts in this volume:

Charter school reform in Washington State has been like a zombie: It is never quite dead, and just when you think you have killed it, charter school law somehow continues to move forward.

Indeed, as charter school expansion continues to lurch forward and consume the public’s imagination regarding the purpose of education in the United States, the contributors to this volume expose some of the overlooked consequences resulting from the continued promotion of the “charter school solution.”

Charter school advocates vigorously assert that the educational fortunes of students will improve because teachers and principals are free from the “monopolistic political control” of the state and teacher unions, respectively. In particular, proponents of charter schools argue that students from traditionally underserved populations will benefit directly and indirectly, because charter schools have the autonomy to create a learning atmosphere in which low-performing students can achieve. Lastly, charter school supporters posit that such environments are more conducive and responsive to student and familial preferences, interests, and values.

This book decouples the positivistic rhetoric surrounding charter schools by examining the broader political, economic, and social contexts of the American public education system by linking it to broader issues and exogenous factors, such as globalization, race, class, gender, and dis/ability. This includes highlighting how society’s existing political economic and social institutions continue to marginalize low-income students and students of color by discussing how America’s founding narratives (e.g., freedom, choice, and equality of opportunity) reproduce inequality according to race and class. Further, by debunking how the free market perpetuates a specific set of assumptions about human nature, including the idea of a “rational” actor, this book illustrates the complexity and enduring power of inequality.

In Chapter 1, “Chartering Charade in Washington State: The Anti-Democratic Politics of the Charter School Movement and the Removal of the Public from Public Education,” Wayne Au interrogates the notion that charter schools are more democratic for families and communities. This chapter draws on a
wide range of policy analysis and research, including the role of philanthropies like the Gates Foundation in policy development, the influence of conservative organizations like the American Legislative Exchange Council in shaping state-level policy development, the selective student enrollment exhibited by charters, the role of charter schools in subverting the power of teachers’ unions, and the rise of charters in the midst of large-scale public school closings. Using this evidence, this chapter analyzes the multiple ways that the charter school movement expresses these fundamentally anti-democratic impulses.

Similarly in Chapter 2, “Democracy, Charter Schools, and the Politics of Choice,” Eleni Schirmer and Michael W. Apple link charter schools to the increasing influence of neoliberal agendas and corporate interests. The authors use Kenosha, Wisconsin—where large amounts of funding and electoral pressure from national rightist organizations enabled the Right to take control of a local school system that has had a history of strong teachers unions and strong support of public education—to explore these tensions.

Sarah M. Stitzelein and Barrett A. Smith take a theoretical approach to exploring the dissonance between the key approaches of major education reform organizations and the employment practices that they endorse or embody, particularly within their affiliated charter schools, in Chapter 3, “Turning Over Teachers: Charter School Employment Practices, Teacher Pipelines, and Social Justice.” The authors employ philosophical and interpretive methodologies and use the work of Karl Marx and the critical theorists who followed him.

Chapter 4, “Charter School Teachers and the Consequences of Unionization,” by Elizabeth Montaño, reveals the tensions of unionization in a charter school founded by local community leaders, teachers, and funders. The charter school was deemed a success, yet the success they reached came at a great cost to the teachers, who expressed difficult working conditions and high turnover year to year. These conditions eventually led teachers to seek unionization. The chapter explores the consequences of such unionization on the teachers.

In Chapter 5, “Discursive Violence and Economic Retrenchment: Chartering the Sacrifice of Black Educators in New Orleans Post-Katrina,” Kevin Lawrence Henry, Jr. examines the cost of the production and proliferation of charter schools in New Orleans on Black educators. This proliferation of charters coincides with the discursive marginalization of Black educators and the retrenchment of Black labor rights via White profit accumulation and power solidification. This chapter highlights how seemingly neutral, apolitical charter reform initiatives in New Orleans are shaped by White dominance that intersects with and is multiplied by other forms of oppression.

Joseph L. Boselovic also raises questions of community and various stakeholders in New Orleans in Chapter 6, “Struggling for Community and Equity in New Orleans Public Schools: Lessons from a First-Year Charter
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School.” He explores the transformation of school governance and operations in New Orleans from the vantage point of a charter school founded upon a community-based model. This analysis presents the limits to achieving progressive educational goals through the neoliberal framework of charter schooling.

Finally, authors Erling E. Boe, Shaun R. Harper, and Katherine M. Barghaus reflect on the (perhaps) unintended consequences of choice in Chapter 7, “Segregated by Choice? Urban Charter Schools and Education Choices for Black Students and Disadvantaged Families in the U.S.” Using national data from the U.S. Department of Education’s School and Staffing Survey, the authors found that urban charter schools, compared with urban regular schools, enrolled a much higher percentage of Black students, a lower percentage of Hispanic students, and equivalent percentages of White students.

When we, the editors, conceived of this book, we jokingly proposed the title, The Charter School Hustle. Our mentors dissuaded us from pursuing this title, suggesting that both contributors and future readers might be put off by the bias the title broadcasted. The essays in this collected volume suggest that our original impulse of calling out the hustle of charter school “reform” was on target. The empirical, theoretical, and case studies presented here should give politicians, “reformers,” parents, educators, and community members pause and consider the damaging impact of charter school expansion in this country.