

No clear picture of charter schools

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In the nearly 10 years since charter schools were initiated, California has become one of the most enthusiastic supporters of this educational reform model. Outside of Arizona, which is something of a special case, there are more charter schools in California -- about 300 -- than in any other state.

California stands out because it has relatively strong charter school laws. The legislation that set the movement in place in 1992 in California gives charter-school organizers great freedom in establishing these schools. Free of bureaucratic control, charter schools have the potential of boosting competition among schools, providing fresh examples for improved instruction, and improving student achievement.

The results of the years of innovation do not necessary bear out some of the glowing promises of the backers of the initiative, however. California provides some insights into how a nationally developed reform can play out on the local level. For example:

- The California experiment has not reduced the level of student stratification. Although the differences are declining, white students are clustered disproportionately in high-achieving schools while black and Hispanic students are clustered in lower-performing schools.
- A high number of charter schools serves home-schooled children. These are typically white children who live in non-urban areas of the state.
- Achievement rates are highest in schools that have an arts or experimental curriculum focus, while schools with an ethnocentric focus are at the bottom. Differences in the typical student bodies of these two types of schools may account for the variation.

Nationwide, the charter school movement has not lived up to some of its original expectations. Surprisingly, it does not appear that charter schools are most commonly established in communities poorly served by local districts. Nor do they flourish in communities where the climate for choice is strong, such as cities with a variety of non-public schools.

It is hard to determine if charter schools have created new approaches to teaching that will provide examples of how instruction can be improved. Researchers have been unable to determine if improvements to achievement among charter school students are the result of anything special done in their schools. Local school districts have been slow to adopt any of the innovations produced by charter schools in their communities.

Despite these limitations, charter schools remain a popular innovation. During the 2000-01 school year, 300 more schools were approved to open up nationwide and over 2,050 are expected to operate in the 2001-02 school year. These schools, which are typically small, provide parents an opportunity to be engaged in education in ways that are not possible in large, impersonal school districts.

Charter schools deserve close scrutiny, however, from both policy-makers and academics to determine how effective they are. When solid research shows that they have developed exceptional approaches to learning, they need champions to make sure that their lessons can be transmitted to other, non-charter schools.

In the meantime, people who are concerned about issues of equity need to pay close attention to these schools to make sure that their enrollment, their achievement levels and their distribution of students truly reflect the populations of the communities they serve. Charter schools should not become another way of segregating students in this country.

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