



## **Lessons from state's charter schools**

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### **Abstract:**

*Nationwide, however, the charter school movement has not lived up to some of its original expectations. 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, because researchers have been unable to determine if improvements to achievement among charter school students are the result of anything special done in their schools.*

*Charter schools deserve close scrutiny, however, from both policy makers and academics to determine how effective they are. When they have developed exceptional approaches to learning, they need champions to make sure that their lessons can be transmitted to other, non-charter schools. At the same time, parents and citizens in Michigan should pay close attention to charter schools to see if they are using their legal autonomy to generate new educational innovations.*

### **Full Text:**

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Michigan also stands out because it has relatively strong charter school laws. The legislation that set the movement in place in 1993 in Michigan gives the organizers great freedom in establishing these schools, which, the argument goes, being free of bureaucratic control have the potential of boosting competition among schools, providing fresh examples for improved instruction, and accordingly improving student achievement.

On the national level, the results of the years of innovation that began in 1992 in Minnesota do not bear out some of the glowing promises of the backers of the initiative. Michigan has provided some lessons to the contrary, however. For example:

-- Michigan has demonstrated that charter schools can be a means of expanding opportunities for all students. In the highest achieving schools, enrollment reflects the ethnic make up of the state and accordingly charter schools have not become just another means of reinforcing stratification, as they have in some other states.

-- Michigan has become a leader in the involvement of higher education institutions in the development of charter schools. Nearly 85 percent of the charter schools in the state are affiliated with a university.

-- Achievement rates are highest in schools that have a "back to basics" approach, the most popular model in Michigan. Those schools with an ethnocentric focus provide the least promising results. It could be that differences in the typical student bodies of these two different types of schools account for the variation.

Nationwide, however, the charter school movement has not lived up to some of its original expectations. 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, because 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 2000-2001 school year, 300 more schools were approved to open nationwide and more than 2,050 are expected to operate in the 2001-2002 school year.

Charter schools deserve close scrutiny, however, from both policy makers and academics to determine how effective they are. When they have developed exceptional approaches to learning, they need champions to make sure that their lessons can be transmitted to other, non-charter schools. At the same time, parents and citizens in Michigan should pay close attention to charter schools to see if they are using their legal autonomy to generate new educational innovations.

One reason charter schools have been created are to serve as "laboratories" in which a school district can learn from new innovations in teaching and learning. If Michigan's charter school classrooms are to serve as laboratories, they must strive to further differentiate themselves from traditional public schools.

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Wong and Shen recently completed a national study of charter schools. Wong, an associate professor at the University of Chicago, will be professor in public policy and education at Vanderbilt University in the fall. Shen will be a graduate student this fall at Harvard University.

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**Sub Title:** [All Editions]  
**Start Page:** A7

