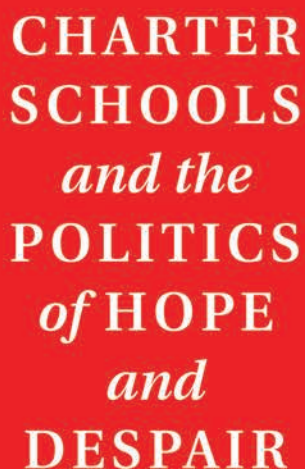




Expect Miracles



CHARTER
SCHOOLS
and the
POLITICS
of HOPE
and
DESPAIR



PETER W. COOKSON, JR. and KRISTINA BERGER

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and

Kristina Berger



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For
Kai and Teah Wilson, and
Muriel and Robert Berger.

With Love and Gratitude.



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PROLOGUE:

Faith Versus Reason in Educational Reform

The idea of the charter school—the inspiration of a handful of educational visionaries—has, in less than fifteen years, become a reform movement of educational and political importance. Classically American, the charter idea emphasizes individualism and promotes a maverick sensibility that suggests that a handful of pioneers can create an imaginative, effective educational system through small-scale local reform. This idea has inspired efforts to redefine accountability, enabled the creation of thousands of new schools, created entirely new private industries (and possibly new fortunes), and catalyzed the passion of thousands of people who had previously been frustrated and dissatisfied with public schools. It is a movement that has many faces and has attracted an eclectic group of proponents and propagandists—justifying a wide range of seemingly contradictory strategies. Laws that support the creation of charter schools have been passed by thirty-seven states and the District of Columbia—and as of September 2001, charter schools were operating in all but three states with charter laws. Despite the charter movement’s national reach, however, the geographic distribution of charter schools remains somewhat localized, with just under half of all charter schools currently in operation located in just four states: Arizona, California, Texas, and Michigan. Yet the idea of charter schools—and the promise that they will transform American public education—has captured the nation’s imagination.

The charter school movement is not only about school reform; it also represents one aspect of a larger social movement that has been significant in American life at least since the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980.¹ In the past two decades there has been a growing consensus, especially among politicians and policymakers, that big government is part of the problem and not part of the solution. Within that context, some have argued strongly that public schools should be deregulated. That is, families should be able to send their child to the public school of their choice—regardless of traditional school zoning regulations. Some deregulators argue that public funds should be used for private schools, and others argue that the public system itself needs to become more flexible, more accountable, and more responsive to families.²

The latter position appeals to a wide variety of Americans, as we will discuss throughout this book, for complex and multifaceted reasons. The appeal of charter schools is partly based on the fact that the charter school option plays into some of the major currents that have been shaping American politics for some time. Moreover, charter schools are big-time politics. In 1999 President Bill Clinton addressed the nation about charter schools as follows:

Charter schools are innovative public schools started by educators, parents and communities, open to students of every background or ability. But they're freer of red tape and top-down management than most of our schools are, and in return for greater flexibility, charter schools must set and meet the highest standards, and stay open only as long as they do. Also, charter schools don't divert taxpayer dollars from our public school system; instead, they use those dollars to promote excellence and competition within the system and in doing so, they spur all our public schools to improve.

Unlike many school reforms, the charter school movement is an intrinsic part of the educational politics of our era and has become a lightning rod in the struggle for the future of public education. This book examines both charter schools and this struggle, because we believe that to understand the rise and possible decline

of the charter school movement it is essential to see charter schools in their social, educational, and political contexts.

A charter school is a public school that comes into existence through a contract (charter) with either a state agency or a local school board. The charter establishes the framework within which the school operates and provides public funding for the school for a specified period of time, after which the charter is reviewed and considered for renewal. The charter gives the school's leadership autonomy over its operation and frees the school from many of the regulations that other public schools must follow. In exchange for the flexibility and freedom afforded by the charter, schools are held strictly accountable for helping their students achieve the academic and other performance goals set out in their charter.

An official definition of charter schools, as rendered by the U.S. Department of Education on the www.uscharterschools.org Web site, is as follows:

Charter schools are nonsectarian public schools of choice that operate with freedom from many of the regulations that apply to traditional public schools. The "charter" establishing each such school is a performance contract detailing the school's mission, program, goals, students served, methods of assessment, and ways to measure success. The length of time for which charters are granted varies, but most are granted for 3–5 years. At the end of the term, the entity granting the charter may renew the school's contract. Charter schools are accountable to their sponsor—usually a state or local school board—to produce positive academic results and adhere to the charter contract. The basic concept of charter schools is that they exercise increased autonomy in return for this accountability. They are accountable for both academic results and fiscal practices to several groups: the sponsor that grants them, the parents that choose them, and the public that funds them.³

In theory, charter schools could be a perfect reform strategy, in that they have the potential to transcend the accountability problem (perhaps the most dangerous Achilles heel of the current public

school system) and to inspire innovation and reform from within, while empowering teachers and providing parents and children with new and innovative choices. Charter schools, however, have one dangerous loophole. Although they have the potential to renew American public education by providing all children with an equitable and excellent education, charter schools also can be a political wedge that separates public education from the public by creating small schools that cater to a special clientele and thereby further destabilize and deregulate public education.⁴

From our perspective, charter schools, and the movement that supports them, are neither good nor bad. How they are used, by whom, and to what end is what concerns us. Americans tend to see education in evangelical and often moralistic terms. As a nation, we expect schools to provide a level playing field for all children, yet at the same time we have created an educational system that ruthlessly sorts and selects students in theory by merit but in reality most often by class, race, and gender. We expect miracles from our school system, and yet we often avoid the hard policy decisions and the tough political decisions that would make public education truly productive and just.

Another concern we have: those who would use the charter school movement to privatize and monetize a public good. In previous work, Cookson⁵ has argued strongly that public education is a public good and that there is a danger in privatizing public education because it removes this public good from democratic accountability. We will touch on this issue throughout this book, but for now suffice it to say that in the long term, we must be careful that both the manifest and latent effects of privatization do not go without discussion or analysis. The spirit of our times is market-oriented. We do not question that markets are efficient at producing goods; we do question whether markets are efficient in the equitable distribution of goods. We also question the long-term political wisdom of privatizing public services in the name of efficiency because, as we will argue later, we believe that social markets are quite different than commodities markets.

Throughout this book, which chronicles the birth and first decade of the charter school movement and an exploration of the political, social, and philosophical ideas that inform and reflect the movement, we will come back to the ideas outlined above. Before we can begin this exploration, however, we want to illustrate the charter school movement in its variety and fullness—its leaders, its schools, its politics, and its business—and characterize its themes, ideas, and philosophies. Subsequently, we will fully discuss charter schools—and the movement’s politics of hope and despair.

CHARTER SCHOOLS: CREATED IN THE IMAGE OF THEIR FOUNDERS

The process of creating and opening a charter school is a time-intensive undertaking that requires vision, planning, coalition-building, politicking, perseverance, human and financial resources, and the ability to complete an application and contracting process that can often be daunting.⁶

As an introduction to the charter school phenomena, here are four brief examples of charter schools and one example of an education management organization (EMO) that have all been launched in recent years.

Bronx, New York: Bronx Preparatory Charter School

Founded by a young woman with an Ivy League education, a knack for fundraising, and a libertarian turn-of-mind, Bronx Prep (as it is called in short) opened in September 2000 with one hundred students in grades five and six—and has plans to eventually serve students through grade twelve. The school aims to be a traditional college preparatory school, preparing its students for college and beyond. It draws much of its inspiration from Phillips Exeter

Academy, the well-known New Hampshire boarding school. The school's motto? "Preparation + Focus = Success."

Located, for now, in a former Catholic school in the predominantly African-American and Latino Morrisania section of the South Bronx (though it plans to move into a building of its own design and construction), Bronx Prep offers a curriculum inspired by Mortimer Adler's "Paideia Proposal," which aims to weave the educational philosophies of Horace Mann, John Dewey, and Robert Hutchins into a blueprint for a new American education. The school has received much media attention—*The New York Times* covered the school's first year through an in-depth series and put on its Web site an archive of all the articles in the series, as well as school-related documents, parts of the school's original charter application, and general information about the charter movement nationwide.

Port Huron, Michigan:

Academy for Plastics Manufacturing Technology

The Academy for Plastics Manufacturing Technology is one of more than one hundred charter schools that identify itself as "employer-linked." This term is defined by the U.S. Department of Education's Employer-Linked Charter School Web site as "*a special type of public charter school in which an employer organization or network joins with educational entrepreneurs in a collaborative partnership to develop and operate a workworld-informed educational program.*"⁷ The Port Huron area is home to a number of plastic and mold-making companies—companies that had long found it difficult to identify and attract qualified employees and had previously tried (to no avail) to work with local public schools to create viable training programs. With the passing of Michigan's expansive charter law in 1993, which included financial incentives for the creation of trade academies, a group of businesspeople felt that the time was right for a creating a new approach to a plastics manufacturing vocational program.

And so the Academy for Plastics Manufacturing was born, with the full support of the local school district. The academy opened in fall 1998 with 127 eleventh- and twelfth-grade students and has continued to grow since then. It sees itself as the vanguard of a new model of vocational education, and has the curriculum and focus—and new approach to staffing—to support its claim. Students choose to attend the academy—which operates on a half-day schedule—as they would any district vocational program and continue to take core academic subjects at their “home” school. In addition, many students round out their day with a paid internship at a local plastics manufacturer. One of the most striking results the school reports is that its graduates who go on to jobs in the plastics manufacturing industry average entry-level salaries that are nearly twice the minimum wage—evidence for the school’s success, its backers say, that is without question.⁸

Southern California: Choice 2000 Charter School

The Choice 2000 Charter School—a school that conducts its classes entirely online using an interactive platform—serves more than 140 students in grades seven to twelve and is also open to adult students who do not have a high-school diploma. Though Choice 2000 is a virtual school, it is not without structure. Students attend “classes” (with a maximum class size of twenty students) and virtually interact with their teacher and fellow students via the Internet. Teachers present information visually; students ask and answer questions and engage in online discussions. Founded in 1994, Choice 2000 is one of the oldest charter schools in California—and in the entire country. It positions itself as a unique alternative for a wide range of students; according to the school’s extensive Web site, Choice 2000 students include those who are ill, those who have not done well in regular classrooms because of learning disabilities or hyperactivity, those who are fearful of the conditions in large public schools, and those who have “gotten in trouble” at regular public schools.

Choice 2000's mission is to "enable students to become self-motivated, competent, lifelong learners equipped with the reading, writing, mathematical, technological and problem solving skills necessary to become contributing members of society in the twenty-first century. Choice 2000 On-Line School will provide the opportunity to achieve a high school diploma through the technologies supporting distance learning."⁹ Students are measured in a variety of ways, including teacher assessments and grading, standardized tests, communication with parents, and student portfolios that include their projects and test results. The school is free to any student who lives in one of five Southern California counties—Riverside, San Bernadino, San Diego, Imperial, or Orange—but is closed to students in other California counties. Interestingly, students from out-of-state who wish to enroll may do so, at a cost of \$175 per nine-week class, plus any mailing costs associated with getting class materials to and from students. Students must log on to the school's site each day and participate in classes—students who don't are considered truant and subject to disciplinary action, as they would be in any school. In order to promote interaction among students, Choice 2000 sponsors in-person social activities and encourages students to connect with one another.

Arizona: Excel Education Centers, Inc.

"Excel in School. Excel in life." With that slogan, and with a charter issued by the State of Arizona authorizing them to educate up to 1,500 middle and high school students, Excel Education Centers opened seven schools in rural communities across central Arizona between 1995 and 2001. Excel Education Centers offer morning, afternoon, and evening classes on a year-round basis—providing maximum flexibility for students, many of whom hold jobs outside of school and whose average age is fifteen. Excel schools bill themselves as an alternative education experience, and they most certainly are: All coursework is delivered using a computer-based