

Preface

Colleagues often refer to us as charter school researchers and evaluators. This label doesn't really sit well with us. Instead, we think of ourselves as researchers of school reforms and school reform processes, of which charter schools are only one instance. Indeed, the charter school movement is only the most recent—and perhaps best known—of a long series of attempts to restructure our public school systems.

Restructuring burst onto the educational agenda during the 1980s, largely in response to such factors as (a) a perceived linkage between educational performance and lackluster economic growth, (b) skepticism about centralized government programs, (c) a concern for preserving traditional cultural values, and (d) a more general trend toward introducing market forces into the delivery of public services. In the United States, restructuring gained prominence largely in response to such reports as the well-known *A Nation At Risk* in 1983. However, efforts to restructure public schooling took on similar faces in a whole array of countries, most noteworthy the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Sweden. These restructuring efforts, the charter school concept involves decentralization, choice, competition, and privatization.

The charter school movement has achieved a level of saliency and prevalence in this country that earlier reforms failed to achieve. This, combined with the fact that the charter concept combines a host of ideas from earlier restructuring movements, means that the charter movement provides a unique opportunity to observe these various components working in concert. Thus, while this book is ostensibly about charter schools, it should be relevant to a wide range of current school reforms, both in the United States and elsewhere.

Most of the research reported in this book comes from some four years of research on charter schools in Michigan. Much of the material has appeared in technical reports associated with these projects. Our aim in this book is twofold. First, we seek to make this research more accessible to nonexperts, including policymakers, school administrators, and parents. In doing so, we have no doubt glossed over details that our colleagues in the research community will find important. These readers are referred to our technical reports for such detailed information (Horn & Miron, 1999; 2000). In other

sections, our presentation is probably too technical for some readers. We suggest that these readers turn to the summaries at the end of each chapter before reading the more technical material.

Our second aim in writing the book is to consider some of the larger normative and conceptual issues surrounding charter schools. These issues are perhaps best summarized by the book's title, *What's Public About Charter Schools?* Charter schools, like other attempts at school restructuring, may be viewed as an attempt to create a new type of school—a hybrid that combines elements traditionally associated with both public and private schools. Throughout, we seek to evaluate the extent to which this new hybrid is serving the core purposes of public education. The public-private issue is of increasing relevance in the United States, as members of the new Bush administration seek to further privatize elements of the American education system. In the end, we hope to have not only illuminated some issues in the debate over charter schools, but also some of the larger issues associated with privatization in education.

Why a Book That Focuses on Michigan?

The book's focus on Michigan charter schools raises an important question: what can citizens and policymakers in other states and countries hope to learn from the Great Lakes State?

Michigan is not a typical case when it comes to charter schools. Indeed, it is regarded by most observers to have one of the most permissive charter laws in the country. For reasons we will detail in chapter 3, opening a charter school is easier in Michigan than in most other states. Moreover, Michigan charter schools make much more thorough use of privatized services than any other state. Thus, we are not claiming that Michigan is in any way representative of charter schools here or abroad. Instead, its value lies in the fact that it provides important lessons for those in other states who are considering either adopting strong charter laws or strengthening existing laws. Michigan, in short, may provide a tale of things to come as we continue our experiment with charter schools and privatization. Readers should bear in mind that, as an outlier, our conclusions about Michigan do not necessarily apply to all charter schools and charter school laws.

Outline of the Book

The book proceeds as follows. The first three chapters provide both a theoretical framework and the descriptive context for the charter school reform in Michigan. The first chapter explores the meaning of “public” and “private”

and also introduces and explains the formalist and functionalist views of public-ness that undergird the book. We are grateful for the contributions of Christopher Lubienski—both in thought and written word—to this chapter. Chapter 2 describes the historical and political backdrop that led to the charter school reforms. Chapter 3, in turn, describes the Michigan charter school law and describes the growth of the movement in the state. Chapter 4 concludes the group of background chapters with an analysis of charter school finance in Michigan. In particular, we seek to determine whether the financial playing field is even between charter and noncharter public schools. We thank F. Howard Nelson for contributing this chapter.

The remainder of the book seeks to evaluate the public-ness of Michigan charter schools according to the definitions introduced in the first chapter. Chapter 5 explores issues of equity and access (including service to special education students) through an analysis of who chooses Michigan charter schools and why, while Chapter 6 examines the characteristics of the schools' teachers. Chapter 7 assesses the extent to which Michigan charter schools are developing and implementing innovative practices in curriculum, instruction, and governance. Like the terms “public” and “private,” the concept of “innovation” is a conceptual minefield. Thus, we hope this chapter will help clarify the debate on innovation in charter schools, as well as provide useful evidence on the subject. Chapters 8 through 10 complete the empirical analysis through discussions of student achievement, customer satisfaction, and the role of EMOs.

Chapter 11 concludes the book with a summary of the evidence and an answer to the question, “What’s public about charter schools?” As is typical of academics, our answer is a little bit complicated. The schools appear to be doing a reasonably good job of creating communities of teachers with commonly-held educational viewpoints and of providing educational alternatives that satisfy their customers. However, the evidence suggests that many of these goals are being accomplished at the expense of equitable access to the schools and student achievement gains. Moreover, the schools are leveraging only limited changes and improvements in noncharter schools and are often not subject to effective oversight. In short, the schools are public in some senses, but not others.

We hasten to add that any criticism of charter schools must be cognizant of traditional public schools' failures on many of these same dimensions. Moreover, as yet we see no reason to believe that the faults we find in Michigan's charter school experiment inevitable. Indeed, Chapter 11 includes a number of safeguards and suggestions—many of which are drawn from other states—that we believe will better ensure that charter schools serve the public interest.

In the end, we certainly hope that readers will be convinced of our arguments and, where possible, act upon our recommendations. Failing that, we will be satisfied merely to have made a sound contribution to the charter school and school choice debate, both by clarifying some key conceptual issues and by providing new evidence.

Acknowledgments

This book was truly a collaborate effort. First, it was collaboration between the authors, each of whom brings rather different perspectives to the issue of charter schools (one from comparative education, the other from political science and policy analysis) but who are united in the search for effective ways to reform schools. We also gratefully acknowledge F. Howard Nelson, who contributed Chapter 4 on charter school finance, and Christopher Lubienski, who contributed to the first chapter and who stimulated our thinking on issues of public and private in education.

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