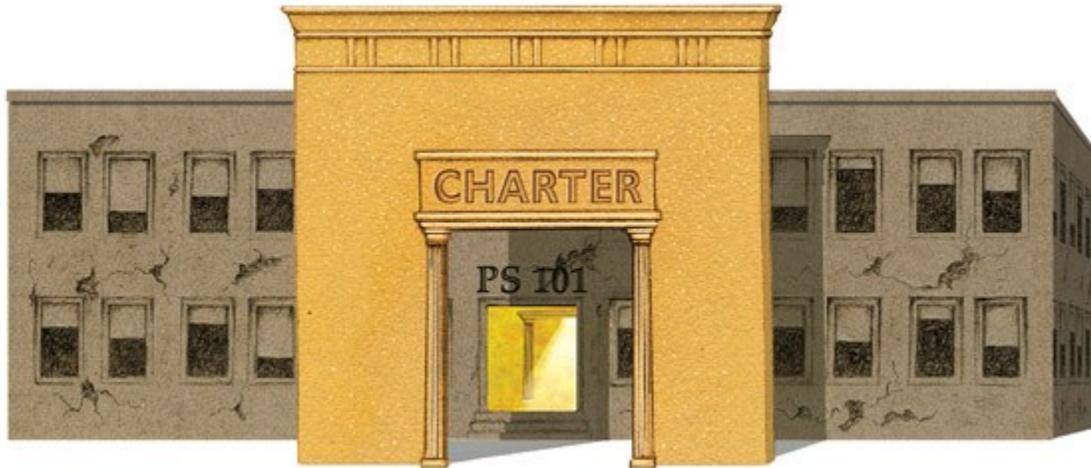


Published Online: February 26, 2013

COMMENTARY

## Rebranding Public Schools as New Charter Schools



By Jack Schneider

Charter schools are a silver bullet for urban education. But not for any of the reasons you might think. Charters, as research reveals, don't achieve particularly impressive results. In [a study conducted by the Stanford University-based Center for Research on Education Outcomes](#), or CREDO, 17 percent of charters outperformed their traditional public school counterparts. But nearly half performed no differently. And more than a third—37 percent—produced results that were worse. Other studies have produced similar results. In short, charters are on average not that different from traditional public schools: Some are high performers, some are basement dwellers, and the vast majority are someplace in between.

Yet ask Americans what works in urban education, and you're likely to hear something about charter schools. [As polling data](#) reveals, support for charters has grown nearly every year for the past two decades and now hovers around 70 percent. And with backing from the Obama administration, the movement is booming. [Roughly 2 million children in 40 states and the District of Columbia attend charter schools](#), with enrollment growing every year.

This widespread faith in charters is particularly surprising because public confidence in the nation's schools is at an all-time low. In the [most recent Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa poll](#) , only 19 percent of Americans gave the public schools an A or B grade, and 30 percent gave them a D or an F. Charter schools, of course, are public schools. Yet, somehow, they have been immune to the national panic about education, even without producing demonstrably different results.

Many supporters of the public schools are outraged at this uncritical faith placed in charters, and for good reason. Charter boosters have frequently worked to make charters look good by making traditional public schools look bad. And just as troubling, charter supporters have often gone after teachers, making the case that traditional public schools are rendered ineffective by one-sided collective bargaining agreements. Consequently, charter skeptics have tried to chip away at the public's faith in charters, believing that if they can burst the charter bubble, they will restore the place of traditional public schools. But they are wrong. And in turning their backs on charters, they are missing a tremendous opportunity.

Schools, whether or not we choose to admit it, operate on faith in their quality. Such faith is what attracts and motivates capable teachers. It is what draws the most active and concerned parents. And it is what keeps young people showing up each day. High or low test scores certainly can corroborate what we already believe about a school. But ultimately our decisions about where to teach or where to send our children are driven not by careful analysis so much as by unreasoning belief. In the second half of the 20th century, Americans gradually lost their faith in urban education. Believing city schools to be inadequate, middle-class parents moved to suburban districts or sent their children to private schools. In so doing, they left a stain on the systems they exited—marking them as the sole domain of those without better options. Without a way to inspire faith, urban schools have been unable to turn back the tide. They are a failed brand.

Charter schools, however, present an opening. Because regardless of whether people should believe in charters, they do. Capitalizing on that faith, leaders in urban districts should seize the moment and append the "charter" label to their schools. Think of it as a massive rebranding effort.

This, certainly, will not be the most substantive of recent school reform initiatives. Yet it just might be the most powerful. Why? First, because such a rechristening would collapse the divide between public school supporters and charter boosters, bringing badly needed resources and enthusiasm into traditional public schools. Second, such a move might give quality-conscious parents a new perspective on urban education. As the president of the St. Paul (Minn.) Area Association of Realtors

put it in an online news article: "It's all about reputation and word of mouth, and people see that as the truth." In the same [twincities.com story](#), she said the city's schools "just don't have a good reputation out there." But imagine if they did. Imagine what city schools would look like if teachers, parents, policymakers, and students began to believe in them again.

In considering a districtwide rebranding, leaders should establish two conditions. First, to prevent the weakest schools from sinking to the bottom, these new charters should initially operate under the aegis of the district, much as traditional public schools do. And second, to prevent the exploitation of teachers, rebranded schools should recognize current collective bargaining contracts.

Charter boosters, no doubt, will raise objections to these conditions, claiming that they undermine charter autonomy. But savvy district leaders will frame their efforts as a transition, not a ruse. Although districts would at first grant little autonomy to these new "charters," they could promise increasing independence to schools that demonstrated effectiveness. And while the district would initially control labor contracts, effective charters might begin to negotiate school-specific collective bargaining agreements. Such moves, of course, might not satisfy charter zealots, but they would appeal to the movement's moderate majority. And though refashioning schools as charters might irk defenders of traditional public schools, it just might restore the support they so badly need.

For decades, socially mobile parents otherwise happy with city living have worked to get their kids out of urban schools. In the process, they have turned perceptions of low quality into reality and delayed the pursuit of educational equity. But with a deft and simple policy move, leaders in urban districts might manage to reverse the equation. Building on faith in charters, they might begin to restore the confidence required for making city schools great again. And eventually, they might even give us reason to believe.

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