

The charter school experiment promises to be an educational eye-opener for some time to come. And with more and more states legislating charter schools, coupled with federal support for the idea, the explosion in the development of these schools has only just begun.

WHY EDUCATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS CHOOSE CHARTER SCHOOLS

In the 1980s, the development of school choice was believed to be a conservative educational reform recommendation. At that time, opinion polls consistently showed majority support for school choice. In 1986, for instance, a Gallup poll showed that 54 percent of nonwhites supported publicly funded private school choice (Brighthouse 1999, 22). As we enter the new millennium, choice has received a boost from the conviction held by individuals of all political persuasions that public education is mired in bureaucracy, particularly in the large cities, and from the hope that allowing families to choose their children's schools might be one way to undermine this educational stranglehold.

Parental Frustration

One of the biggest impetuses for the charter school movement is the frustration experienced by parents of students of all ethnic groups, cultures, and socioeconomic classes regarding the state of the country's current public schools. Although they have very different political reasons and educational priorities, they all desire the same thing: the best possible education for their children. What "the best possible education" means, however, varies.

The concern for high-quality education has united some forces that would otherwise not normally coalesce. For example, the Sequoia School in Mesa, Arizona, demonstrates the type of flexibility that the charter concept offers parents. At that school, two different educational programs coexist. On the other hand, there is a highly structured back-to-basics curriculum, and on the other, a multi-age, team-taught "progressive" curriculum is offered. Both are being offered at the same school to different students (Hudson Institute, pt. 6, 4). When the Hudson Institute, a Washington, D.C., think tank, studied charter school issues, it found that when parents were asked why they chose charter schools, the top answers were small class size, 53 percent; higher standards, 45.9 percent; educational philosophy, 44 percent; greater opportunities for parental involvement, 43 percent; and better teachers, 41.9 percent (Hudson Institute, pt. 1, 1).

Yet just because many parents have become charter school advocates does not mean that they seek to dismantle public schools; in fact, the contrary can be claimed. By looking to control the public schools through charters, many parents believe they are defending public schools, albeit in different form. One of the findings that appears to support this contention is a recent opinion poll regarding choice. Those that answered "yes" on the choice question also answered "yes" when asked whether private schools receiving public funds should be regulated by the state like public schools (Hudson Institute, pt. 1, 25).

It is significant to note some of the frustrations that parents have expressed because of the current state of the public schools. In 1988, the Education Commission of the United States released a report indicating what reform efforts might improve the scholastic performance of students in inner city high schools. Among many things, the report found that what was needed was to "establish purposive partnerships in the outside community (with parents, community organizations, private-sector business, colleges and universities, and social service deliverers) as a way to expand resources available to the school, to build a broader constituency for public education, to empower parents and community, and to create access to opportunities (jobs,