

Charter Schools: Raiders or Reformers?

On October 23, 1996, a forum co-sponsored by the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Pioneer Institute focused on the continuing controversy surrounding Massachusetts' charter schools.

The panelists were:

Vito Perrone (moderator), director of teacher education, Harvard Graduate School of Education

Bruce Fuller, professor, University of California, Berkeley

Crystal Galvin, student, City on a Hill Charter School

Janice Jackson, deputy superintendent, Boston Public Schools

Sarah Kass, co-founder and principal, City on a Hill Charter School

Kristen McCormack, founder, Neighborhood House Charter School

James Peyser, executive director, Pioneer Institute

David Roitfarb, student, City on a Hill Charter School

The forum employed a discussion format instead of formal presentations. In the following pages, Pioneer Institute has reproduced an edited transcript of the forum.

Perrone: The contemporary charter school movement had its beginnings in Minnesota in the mid-1980's as part of the state's efforts to expand choices. The process in Massachusetts is only one model. Charter Schools receive public funds and are public schools, but are typically governed the way private schools are often governed, by their own boards, apart from traditional public structures. Parents are often central to these boards, but not always.

Charter schools have sometimes been described as the best idea yet on how to stimulate significant education reform. They have also been seen as yet another means of increasing social and educational stratification. They have been seen as vanguards of a new system of schools, able to break down the barriers of school district lines and bring about greater social, racial, and cultural integration. They have also been seen as a prelude to large scale privatization and a further erosion of a democratic system of public education.

Are charter schools necessary? Can existing local schools create schools of choice with the qualities of charter schools? Can they become the language of an entirely new system of schools replacing the structures that exist for the better? What are the significant differences between regular public school education and charter school education? How are they a movement toward reform in this larger system, if at all?

Jackson: They have greater freedom in terms of state parameters and union guidelines. As a result, they are permitted to make some on-site decisions about issues that affect the school that we are not permitted to make. Secondly, the money is not the same. I defy anyone here to tell me that if they had the opportunity to spend more money on their own child's education, they would say "no, spend less."

Peyser: We can think about this on two levels. One is what goes on in the classroom. While others on the panel can do a much better job of discussing that, I think you would be hard pressed to say that there are things going on in charter schools that have never seen the light of day in any other school in the country. There is another level, however, at which I think charter schools are fundamentally different, and that is structure and governance. Specifically, charter schools tend to be mission driven schools, where the

stakeholders have a real ownership interest in that their names are on the line and their shared educational mission is what the school is about.

In addition, charter schools have a unique flexibility to solve problems. There is no central office or school committee to deal with. The people running the school own the problems and are therefore able to address them on a daily basis in order to maximize the educational goals of the school.

Charter schools are subject to virtually all the state laws and regulations governing public education. The only real difference has to do with the hiring and firing of staff. Other than that, laws and regulations pertaining to bilingual and special education, and the whole panoply of federal and state rules governing the way public schools are run apply to charter schools. Charter school funding is based on an average cost per pupil. Each student choosing to come to a charter school carries with her exactly the average cost per pupil in the school district where the student lives. Average cost per pupil is precisely the same as in the traditional public school system.

One other thing is that charter schools are all schools of choice, which I think is an important distinction. The only students who are there are students whose parents have chosen to send them. No one is assigned to the school. Staff and students want to be there.

McCormack: Problem solving is the most important difference. We can change course midstream if something is not working, whether it be the length of a class period, length of the school day, how a subject is taught, or how students are grouped. Teachers have the power, in fact the responsibility, to craft the best possible set of standards and procedures for making sure each student achieves the goals set forth in the individual learning plan each student has.

Fuller: I would raise the question of whether charter schools are indeed public schools. A lot of my work and thinking about school choice, in general, has raised a question as to whether school choice schemes, whether they be charter schools, voucher schools and other types of public/private choice mechanisms, lead to a greater balkanization of American society and local communities. I would also raise the question of whether charters have a responsibility to deal with broader issues beyond their own school walls. Do they get in the way of progress toward desegregation? Are they pulling money out of traditional public schools in Dorchester and Roxbury?

Kass: Charter schools are the only public schools in Massachusetts that are held accountable. We have a five year performance contract. If we are not succeeding by children, we close. That, to me, is the single most important difference between charter schools and other public schools. Charter schools are public schools, but simply operating in different ways.

One final note about flexibility. For many reasons, public schools are too often isolated institutions. Many of you in this room probably moved to Boston to get an education. Many of you come to this city because of the great resources that are here. But for too many of our young people born in the city, those resources are not part of their day-to-day education. We at City on a Hill are trying to demonstrate that a public school can incorporate those amazing resources. Right on Huntington Avenue, we work with the various museums, the symphony, and the Huntington Theater. We are located in the YMCA, so all our students have memberships they can use after school and on weekends. This is the kind of partnering we are talking about. The resources are not just institutional, they are human. There are so many amazing people in the city of Boston and around the country who could call themselves teachers, except they are not certified. At our school we had individuals from 43 community agencies who essentially became teachers by hosting our kids as interns.

Roitfarb: As a student, City on a Hill gives me a sense of community. The school days are longer and the classes are shorter and smaller. We have about 17 students in each class, so I am not lost in a big crowd of students. I have teachers who recognize me and understand the level I am at in that class. I also think that my school gives me a chance to explore what's out there for me, because of our internships. In my internship I got a chance to learn about computers, which helped me look at my future.

Galvin: In addition to an internship working for Senator Kerry, I also had a wonderful summer experience. I worked at a soup kitchen serving lunch.

But, back to the school room. Do you know what it's like to have a teacher's phone number and just call her whenever you want? It might sound cheesy, but they treat us like individuals, not just another seat in the room that they have to worry about. This school is always open. If you have a problem, you can go talk to somebody. It's a very comfortable setting.

I've been in Boston public schools my whole life. And I was lucky enough to go to the good ones, but now I just can't believe how different everything is. I really like this place.

Perrone: One of the criticisms that has been leveled is that the charter schools have not brought into their populations some of the really difficult students that continue to be in the public school system, special needs, bilingual and a number of other areas.

Jackson: The access issue is not just one of entry, but of who stays. I came to Boston from the Milwaukee Public Schools, one of the first districts to have a voucher system. I was familiar with voucher or choice schools, which are not exactly the same as charters, but somewhat of a hybrid. The kids get in, but who gets out? And with what credentials? Over time that is going to be an issue that charter schools will have to deal with. I would be very interested to see if charter schools are serving the same kind of severe special education population that we are. When kids have problems, they should not be weeded out in those informal ways all of us recognize. We have a responsibility to tackle difficult problems head on. The test is what happens to these kids over time.

I do not view charter schools as the enemy. Whatever kids the Boston Public Schools (BPS) get on Monday are the children we will educate. We consider them to be Boston's best and brightest and we will treat them as such. It is going to take a lot of work to change some minds about what it means to be the best and brightest, but that is our obligation as public servants. We continue to say bravo to charter schools, but we still have a critical job to do with the children of this city.

Kass: This is not a select group of people who are different from people you would find in any other public schools. Admission is strictly by lottery. Who ends up there is the luck of the draw. There is no creaming going on, just random selection.

Fuller: It is naive to argue that the students from inner city areas who attending charter or voucher schools are a randomly selected group. If you look at choice schools from around the country, there have been about five solid empirical studies. They all show that the kids who are going into schools of choice, be they charters, magnets, or voucher schools, tend to be kids whose parents already invest heavily in their education; parents who make sure the kids do their homework. They tend to be parents who are part of a two parent household. While the wage earner is at work, the mother or the father can hit the market, so to speak, and shop around.

Even within low income and working class communities, none of the empirical studies show that the kids entering choice schools are representative of the families in the local community. To say that people are selected by lottery ignores the fact that to shop around for choice schools in Boston or Milwaukee or San Antonio, you have to be out there for a few days to sign up for schools and to get into the lottery.

McCormack: I disagree strongly with that. Not only at our own charter school in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city in Dorchester, but throughout the commonwealth my experience has been that the children in charter schools do, in fact, reflect their communities. In Boston it is actually easier to apply to a charter school than to fill out all the paperwork for school choice within BPS. As a current Boston public school parent, a charter school parent, and someone who has helped my neighbors work through the BPS choice system, that system is much more difficult to figure out than the charter school system. I must also question the studies that have been cited. I do not know anything about studies, but I do know I have six Neighborhood House Charter School teachers in the room who are crawling out of their seats because they are working in classrooms where we have a higher percentage of special needs children than the Boston district schools have. We are able to meet those needs with the same per pupil cost because of some of the flexibility I cited earlier. Fifty-four percent of our parents are low income by federal standards.

Charter schools can provide a mixture of students from different socio-economic backgrounds. Over the past two decades, Boston has lost that diversity for a variety of reasons. We have achieved it in our school because we have created something every parent wants, whether they are poor working parents who do not have the time to shop for schools, or a parent who has the time and resources to send their children to private school. It is that mixture that makes our school strong. I also know parents in our school who were ready to move out of the city, but now feel they cannot possibly leave because their child is going to the best school they have ever attended.

Roitfarb: I first heard about City on a Hill through my teachers. My mother never heard of the school before. I chose to go to an open house and see what the school was about. When I went there, they said that there were smaller classes. I wanted to get a better education. It was my choice to go to the school, because I had to sign my name to a paper saying that I agreed. My mother also came to that meeting and got a chance to see what the school was about, but it was my decision, or at least a joint decision. It was not solely a parent's decision.

Perrone: Can we not build smaller schools with smaller classes and greater autonomy within traditional public school systems?

Jackson: Yes. That is what Tom Payzant and I are trying to do as we lead the Boston public schools through reform. We are asking all of our schools to talk about mission and focus, which they have never been asked to do before.

Governance is a very big issue. School-based management came into Boston many years ago, but people were not trained to make collective decisions. It was not taken seriously in terms of how the principal relates to the governance structure of the school. We have worked very hard to provide the training necessary to successfully implement school-based management.

As for the money, the average BPS regular education per pupil cost is roughly \$5,100 per year. Our pilot schools, which are schools that we hope will supply us with innovative ideas, average \$6,310. The average dollar amount for the charter schools is \$7,441. Can you tell me that \$2,000 per pupil does not make a difference?

Peyser: To deal with the last part first, \$5,100 is the regular education budget. Charter schools are not just a collection of regular education students. If we are going to apply the laws of special and bilingual education, among others, to charter schools, they should get the money that goes along with those students as well. We could develop many interesting funding formulas. Average per pupil funding is a fairly simple one and one that communicates equity.

On the larger question of whether it would be possible for the traditional district schools and district systems to produce schools like charter and pilot schools, I think it is possible. But the fact is they do not exist. I am convinced that this is because public school districts are bureaucratic, highly political, centrally managed monopolies. That is not to say that superintendents with an abundance of promise, energy, and good ideas like Tom Payzant cannot make a difference. But the fundamental problem that makes lasting public school reform impossible is structural.

Perrone: Should charter schools be insulated from local political processes?

Peyser: Yes. I do not think education should fundamentally be a political issue. Nothing is apolitical, but I think we have to move from being all political to being as free of politics as possible.

Kass: The result of Boston's highly democratic process is that if 120 people select a particular high school as one of their seven choices, but there are 200 spots to be filled in that high school, 200 kids are put there regardless of the choice each of those families has made about where their child goes to school. We have to evaluate which part of democracy we care about in education. If parents are told they have choice, but their choices are not honored, where is the democracy in that?

Jackson: What about scale? We have 62,000 kids. How do you ensure they get where they want in a system of choice schools like charters that have no connectedness?

McCormack: One way to do it right is what was promised when choice came to the Boston district schools. We were promised unequivocally by the last set of policymakers at BPS that parents would have choice. Schools that were over-subscribed would be allowed to expand and be replicated. The schools no one chose would be closed. That is what was promised and we, as BPS parents, were lied to.

The Thompson Middle School had an advanced work class with 52 seats in it; only eight students chose that school. But the Timilty School had 152 applications for seven seats. Why? Why, after years of promises, can we not replicate a Timilty and close the schools no one is choosing?

Perrone: One reason for charter school legislation is to put pressure on the traditional public systems to change.

Kass: I am a public school teacher. I started a public charter school because I believe in public education. As a young person going into teaching, I wanted to go to a school where I had some ownership over what we did, and what the results might be. One of the contributions charter schools can make, quite apart from the models we create for kids, is the opportunities we open up for young people going into teaching. We want teachers to be viewed as professionals who have the power to manage a school, plan a curriculum, implement it, publish it; to open her or his own school. I think that is a crucial thing we can contribute to the future of public education.

We have a parent-driven revolution on our hands. I think the most powerful proponents of this revolution will be those parents whose kids are on the waiting list, those parents who viewed charter schools as their one shot, but their child ended up in a place where they feel unsafe or they are not learning. If that parent revolution is unleashed, the possibilities both here and around the country are infinite.

McCormack: Charter schools in Boston have already changed the traditional public schools. The proposal for pilot schools in Boston lay in the Boston Teachers Union contract for two years with no action. When

charter schools were approved and slated to open, it was suddenly announced in a flurry of activity that the Boston public schools would, in fact, be accepting applications for pilot schools to begin the following fall.

Peyser: Boston is not alone. Where charter schools have opened across the commonwealth, there have been reactions from local school districts. For instance, on Cape Cod the Nauset Regional School District started a school-within-a-school program to compete with the Lighthouse Charter School. In Chelmsford, the new charter school held an open house for the public, an unheard of event in the town. The Chelmsford public school system immediately decided to hold an open house for the first time. In Lawrence a charter school began a literacy and citizenship program last year. Lo and behold this year the Lawrence public schools have started a literacy and citizenship program. The point is that competition works.

Jackson: We can learn something from charter schools, but they are not a panacea. My fear is that the focus on the controversy over charter schools diverts attention from improving education for all our children, because charter schools are not going to go to scale. Chris Whittle started out talking about 2,000 schools, but what was he able to do to scale?

We will learn more about classroom practice from charter schools. I am open to an information exchange between district and charter schools. But there will still be children who will attend traditional public schools and it is incumbent upon those of us who serve in those schools to ensure that they receive a quality education and that we are held accountable. I do not hold charter schools out as the competition that is going to compel systems to change. What will change systems is changing what happens in the classroom. So, my energy goes into the classrooms.

Galvin: If we're not evidence that charter schools are beginning to work, then I don't know what is.

Pioneer Institute Dialogues are a series of publications that offer perspectives on specific policy issues. Dialogues are the reproduced remarks of speakers and participants at Pioneer conferences, forums, and roundtables, and are published with their permission. Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of Pioneer Institute or as an attempt on its behalf to aid or hinder the passage of any legislation.

Pioneer Institute Policy Dialogues are a series of publications that offer perspectives on specific policy issues. Dialogues are the reproduced remarks of speakers and participants at Pioneer conferences, forums, and roundtables, and are published with their permission. Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of Pioneer Institute or as an attempt on its behalf to aid or hinder the passage of any legislation.