

Making the Case for More Charter Schools

On November 20, 1996, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Education, The Center for Innovation in Urban Education at Northeastern University, and Pioneer Institute's Charter School Resource Center sponsored a day-long conference on charter school accountability. The keynote address was delivered by former U.S. Secretary of Education and Tennessee Governor Lamar Alexander. Alexander outlined his vision for a public school system in which parents and children would have the opportunity to choose among a variety of safe, autonomous, academically rigorous public schools, and then fielded questions from the audience. While Massachusetts' charter schools represent an important step in the right direction, he argued that more than 25 schools will be necessary to continue the momentum toward achieving this goal. In the following pages, Pioneer Institute has reproduced an edited transcript of the speech.

This morning, I had a chance to spend about an hour at the City On A Hill Charter School. It does not make me an expert on that school, but it does give me one more taste of what a charter school can be. I went to a math class. Nobody said much to start with, which is the teacher's technique for getting the kids to talk. After a while they actually began to talk about mathematics, which for a ninth or tenth grader is pretty impressive. I am not about to stand here and say that in its second year City On A Hill Charter School is one of the best schools in the world. But I am glad to say that it fulfills a dream for 100 students that should be fulfilled for every student in Massachusetts and in this country. That is simply to attend a school that is or can be one of the best in the world. I think for most parents that means a safe school where children are learning to a high academic standard.

I have three purposes in coming here today. First, I want to salute all of you in Massachusetts for showing other states how to achieve this important dream. Second, I urge you to do everything you can to increase the number of charter schools. It will take more than 25 charter schools to show America how to create schools that will bring the opportunity for a great education to every child. Third, I predict that if charter schools are successful in pioneering states like Massachusetts, within ten years every school in this country will be a charter school. Every school will be an independent public school and every child will be able to choose among some of the best schools in the world. If you take a step back, it is difficult to imagine why there is any argument around this issue in our country today.

We know the importance of education. David Kerns, the former chairman of Xerox with whom I had the privilege of working at the U.S. Department of Education, used to say, "Education is at the bottom of every problem and every opportunity that we have." Education is the way we balance the budget, grow the economy, understand our democracy, it is the way you go from the back to the front of the line. When I was appointed Education Secretary, some big newspaper wrote, "Mr. Alexander grew up in a lower-middle class family in the mountains of Tennessee." This was true and all right with me, but not, I discovered when I called home the next week, all right with my mother. She was literally reading Thessalonians to gather strength for how to deal with this slur on the family. She said, "We never thought of ourselves that way. You had a library card from the time you were three and music lessons at four. You had everything that was important."

There are many reasons why education is changing. It has always been the subject of much reform, but there is something different in the air today. Part of the reason is the disjunction between family and school. In 1960, 22 percent of the women in America worked outside the home. Today, about 60 percent of mothers with children six and under work outside the home and 70 percent of college age women with a child one year old or younger are in the workforce. Families are changing.

If the purpose of a school is to do what families cannot do as well, then as families change, schools must change. Generally, schools have not. Most schools close by three o'clock. We worry about drug use, teenage sex, television, and crime on the streets. But what do we expect if schools empty at three o'clock and parents do not get home from work until six? Children have always gotten in trouble if they could. By slamming the school doors at three o'clock we just give them that many more opportunities. This is just one example, but the point is that schools have not adjusted to changes in the family.

What we need to know has changed. When my grandfather went to school in the mountains of Tennessee, schools were open three months a year and went up to the fourth grade. That provided him with what he

needed to do his farm work. Ten years ago, the Saturn automobile plant arrived in Tennessee. To get a job there, you had to pass the Headlight Assembly Test and make a defect-free headlight. This required a knowledge of mathematics, statistics, knowing how to speak and write English well, and teamwork. If we could not make defect-free headlights, those Saturns would be built in Japan. Now they are selling Saturns in Japan.

When I became Education Secretary, my first thought was that the only way we could have the kinds of schools I envisioned was to start from scratch. Trying to remodel a school while it is operating is like remodeling an airplane while it is flying. Everybody is busy and there is always inertia to overcome. In 1991, a Republican administration recommended funding for thousands of break-the-mold, start-from-scratch schools. The schools then raised \$100 million of private money to create design teams and get started. People given the freedom to do complicated things often need a little help. The Pioneer Institute is giving that kind of help to charter schools in Massachusetts. We now have a Democratic administration and President Clinton endorses charter schools. A recent federal grant is being used to help launch the schools here. Increasing the number of charter schools should not be an issue because there is a consensus that this is what we need to do.

If our actions followed our words, there would be plenty of charter schools in Massachusetts. If everybody who goes on television and says they support charter schools would show up in the Legislature and encourage people to vote for them, we could spend more time teaching children and less in political debate.

There were no charter schools when I became U.S. Education Secretary in 1991. Now there are over 400 in 26 states. All this has happened in about five years. Charter schools may be the most vibrant movement in American education today.

Chester Finn and Bruno Manno of the Hudson Institute recently completed a national study of charter schools. They found all the characteristics of successful schools, like innovation and high standards. They also found that the schools are serving a disproportionately high number of at-risk children.

Parents have simple aims. They want safe schools. They want to choose the school that their child attends. They want schools with high standards where children can learn what they need to know to succeed in the modern world.

Educators need to remember the three principles that will bring these schools about. One is autonomy. The real difference between a private school and a public school is that public schools are buried under court orders, government regulations, and union rules. They are well intentioned, but they get in the way of a teacher trying to help a child.

As Governor of Tennessee in 1986, I went with a delegation of governors to see William Bennett, then Secretary of Education. We asked him to reduce federal education regulations. He suggested that we each do a survey of our own states' regulations. It turned out that the number of state regulations far outweighed the federal mandates. So we each went back to our individual states to address the regulatory burdens placed on education.

The second principle is high standards. The third is giving parents and students as many options as possible. If we follow these principles, we can achieve parents' goals.

I see three dangers. The first is that charter schools continue in name only, not as free as possible from court orders, union rules, and state regulations. The favorite tactic of our opponents is to agree with us in public and cut us off at the knees in private.

People like City On A Hill Principal Sarah Kass must have a chance to do what needs to be done. This morning we spoke about all the well meaning rules about drug abuse that come down from the federal government. She is certainly not for using drugs and she knows more about what students at City On A Hill need than someone in Washington does.

The second danger is that there might not be enough charter schools. There needs to be a critical mass. It is a big mistake to think of charter schools as model schools. In my opinion, schools do not replicate.

Every school is different. The country is filled with people who try to expand a successful program until it no longer works. A good school is one that helps its children and that is enough. We need a critical mass of these autonomous schools so that all students and parents have choices.

The final principle is accountability. Charter schools are a new movement that seeks a different kind of authority. They should be even more accountable than other public schools.

We have already discovered that it takes more time than we thought and there are more failures than we would like. We have not quite figured out how to do it yet, but we are still working at it, because there is

no other choice. It would be much easier if we could hire somebody else, like the government, to do for us what we should be doing ourselves.

Massachusetts had a university 250 years before my state was even founded. It is a state that may have more good colleges and universities than any other place in the world. It is also a state that has children who need help and one that has already begun what is perhaps the most promising experiment in American education.

My challenge to you is to ratchet up your level of interest, even those of you who are the most involved. You have something that may move America toward its most important goal: helping every child have a chance to go to one of the best schools in the world. I challenge you to make sure that you succeed.

Question: There are many who support charter schools as long as they do not take money away from other public schools. This, of course, precludes the introduction of competition into public education. What do you think of this position?

Every school should be a charter school. A charter school is simply a safe school in which children are learning to a high academic standard and teachers have the freedom to create whatever it takes to meet the needs of their students. These schools should be part of a public education system. I define public education as schools that accept anybody who applies and are accountable to some public authority. In public education, government money should follow the child to the school.

Experience has shown us that the best way to develop these kinds of schools is to start from scratch. To hobble them by insisting that they be created with new money is unrealistic and leaves in place schools that are not performing.

Question: What steps might we take to overcome the opposition to charter schools in Massachusetts by other public school teachers?

The more public school teachers who have the experience of teaching in a school where they have the freedom to help children succeed, the easier it will be to persuade other teachers that it is the way to go. That is why the critical mass of schools is so important. What teacher would not be enthusiastic about a school where he or she could help devise the curriculum, use his or her own good judgment about how to allocate resources in order to help each child succeed, and where every student who attends has chosen to be there?

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