

Checker's Desk

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Recent and lasting columns on education by the president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation in Washington, D.C.

The state of the charter movement, 2005

The President reported last evening on the state of the union. Allow me to appraise the state of America's charter-school movement in early 2005.

Now fourteen years old, it strikes me as a typical adolescent, full of promise and with some accomplishments to its credit, but also the source of exasperation and frustration to those who want it to be more and better than it is. It's headstrong, ornery, disorganized, and insistent on its independence and its rights even when not quite ready to exercise them wisely.

Like every teenager I've known, the charter movement deserves a mixed report. But it's only fourteen, for Pete's sake, and nobody should pass final judgment at this stage of its development any more than one would a boy or girl at this age. So much remains to be determined, to be developed, to be tried—and so many more mistakes are waiting to be made en route to maturity.

Six things are especially worth knowing about the charter movement in 2005.

First, the man in the street still knows next to nothing about it, maybe hasn't yet even heard of charter schools and, if he has, is unsure what they are. ("Some sort of private school, maybe?" "A school for kids with problems?") Recent polling, nationally and in California, shows that participants in the charter movement naturally have a fair notion what it is, as do many other educators and policy makers, but this entire approach to schooling is not even on most Americans' radar screen. That obliviousness creates, on the one hand, a terrific opportunity for this movement to make itself known in positive ways; but also an environment in which bad news on TV or hostile comments by public figures can easily foster negative opinions—precisely because the audience has no independent base of knowledge or experience.

Second, despite its faint public profile, the charter movement has grown large enough to threaten various established interests, hence to have developed real enemies. With 3,300 schools enrolling nearly a million kids; with a handful of cities finding upwards of ten, even 20 percent of their K-12 student in these schools; with "virtual" charter schooling spreading fast (80 or so of them today, with 28,000 pupils, says the Center for Education Reform); and with some systems (e.g., Detroit, Cleveland, Dayton, sundry Massachusetts towns) finding their budgets shrinking fast due to families exiting for charter schools, the charter challenge to traditional models of

schooling has gotten beyond theory and ideology and become a bread-and-butter issue for establishment educators.

Third, in fact, the charter movement today may have more enemies than friends in high places, especially since its first generation of political backers has largely vanished from office. Nobody expects the teacher unions to vanish, nor the school board associations, nor the ed schools, and for the most part they're doing their damndest to rein in and discredit charter schools, which they see as eating their lunch, threatening their monopoly, and challenging their assumptions. On the pro-charter side, one doesn't see lots of governors or legislative leaders any more. For the most part, the business community is sitting on its hands. And the White House is mute.

Fourth, the charter movement's spotty academic performance record to date, though readily explained by and to its friends, empowers its enemies. So do its occasional financial screw-ups, melt-downs and signs of unbridled greed, not to mention its slipshod self-policing. (Teenagers don't pick up their dirty clothes, either.)

Fifth, like an adolescent, the charter movement needs to mature, which includes, above all, getting beyond some favorite myths from its childhood. Foremost among these:

- That just about anyone can run a good school and should be allowed to try.
- That authorizers (a.k.a. sponsors) and authorizing aren't very important.
- That academic results aren't too important, either, so long as people are eager to attend the school.
That great schools can make it on a financial shoestring.
- That the charter movement can succeed in decentralized fashion, without coherent leadership, common agendas, and structured organizations.
- Sixth, the No Child Left Behind act poses new challenges to charter schools and their movement, including its single-minded emphasis on academic achievement; its impatience with school autonomy and diversity (and tendency to wrap all schools in uniform rules and measures); and the mixed blessing of its threat to "reconstitute" failing district schools as involuntary charter schools.

There's good news, too. The re-energized Charter School Leadership Council introduced itself to the world this week at the National Press Club, along with an important and encouraging synthesis by Bryan Hassel of numerous studies of charter-school performance. (See below for more.) The California Charter School Association held an awesome conference last week in Pasadena. Florida's attorney general recently held that the state must fund charter schools the same as district schools. The massive Gates Foundation is taking charter schools seriously as a reform strategy. And more.

Will the good news trump the bad? I'm not sure. It's a teenager, remember. It's neither predictable nor well-disciplined. For it to mature successfully, I submit, the facts outlined above need to be faced and the challenges addressed.

Why bother? Because this kid matters a lot. He points the way to a brighter and very different

future for American public education itself, a "tight-loose" structure in which results count hugely but schools can produce them through the structures and means they see fit, in which "systems of schools" replace "school systems," in which flexibility triumphs over bureaucracy, competition supersedes monopoly, and consumers wield at least as much influence over their children's education as do providers.

The fate of the charter movement is thus enormously important to the future of American K-12 education. But this teenager could end up in jail or out on the streets instead of college. He and those who care about him have some heavy lifting ahead.

February 3, 2005

Budget pigs

A year ago, responding to an outrageous piece by People for the American Way (as they pretentiously and falsely style themselves), I wrote in this space that a little "pork" in federal appropriations wasn't such a bad thing (see here). These Congressionally earmarked projects, I argued, may or may not "succeed" but their prospects cannot be dimmer than those of Title I and other "formula" programs that . . . shovel out billions every year with no discernible impact on student achievement. At least the "pork" is going to places that want it for activities that they're keen to undertake, rather than being sent unbidden from Washington according to arcane formulae and intricate regulations.

I'm not recanting. But respectful of the principle that all things are best done in moderation, let me suggest that the Congressional pork shoppe has grown immoderately large and the Administration's response is strangely incomplete.

One can define "pork" as federal dollars directed by Congress to specific places, organizations, or institutions in ways that effectively block others from accessing those funds. The executive branch has its own version: "discretionary" grants that an agency awards to one recipient rather than another without conducting an open, merit-based competition.

Whether such a Treasury check arrives thanks to Congress or to the executive, it can generally be distinguished from "formula" programs (which distribute dollars based on objective factors such as population, poverty, age, etc.) and from "competitive grants" for which a wide array of institutions (e.g. universities, cities, hospitals, bio-medical researchers, aircraft manufacturers) can apply, with winners chosen according to more or less objective criteria.

Much can be said about the tilting of formulas to benefit particular places or outfits, and about the subjectivity and favoritism that creep into the "competitive" awards process. I don't contend that either is pure, only that they wear the garb of openness and uniform treatment rather than exclusiveness and pre-selection.

Back to pork. It comes in three forms.

First, as noted, federal agencies sometimes have "discretionary" dollars to award to programs or projects that they want to launch or sustain.

Second is the now-ubiquitous Congressional "earmark," about which more later.

Third is the authorized-and-appropriated "program" that's so narrowly crafted that its funds can go only to a handful of places or entities. Consider the "Alaska Native Education Equity" program (\$34 million in FY05) and the "Education for Native Hawaiians" program (also \$34 million).

Under this third heading come many of the 150-odd programs that President Bush has proposed for elimination in FY06, of which 48 are housed at the Education Department. Candidates for slaughter include the "Underground Railroad Program" (\$2.2 million in 2005), which benefits a single museum in Cincinnati and the semi-notorious "Exchanges With Historic Whaling and Trading Partners" program (\$8.5 million), for which only a handful of institutions in Alaska, Hawaii, and Massachusetts are eligible (See here). Others are larger, broader-based programs such as vocational/technical education (\$1.3 billion) and "Safe and Drug-free Schools" (\$437 million). (A list of Education Department programs targeted for elimination can be found here.)

Nobody really expects all, or even most, of these programs to bite the dust even though, as Secretary Spellings has noted, many of them are tiny and few can display evidence of effectiveness. Still, they have constituencies, lobbyists, and Congressional patrons—and that's usually all they need to stay alive and funded.

Now, back to the "earmarks." The President's budget never contains money for Congressional "earmarks." These get added during the appropriations process and are the best known form of pork. And they've been steadily growing, in FY05 to their highest level ever. At the Education Department alone, there are 1,182 of them, totaling \$426 million.

True, it's a small fraction of the agency's total budget. True, some projects have merit. True, some have been around nearly forever. But this is no way to run a government. I have three major beefs, so to speak, with the pork.

First, they are the consequence of Washington's infatuation with lobbyists—the ever-growing army of highly paid influence peddlers who haunt the halls of Congress, who sponsor campaign fund raisers, and who recruit clients, promising them (along with much else) that "I can get you an earmark." It's squalid, it rewards the well-connected, and for the most part it wastes the taxpayer's money. As the list of earmarks lengthens, so does the size and allure of the lobbying industry.

Second, they overburden the executive branch while drying up its own "discretionary" dollars, thus discouraging able people from wanting to serve in government because there's so little they can accomplish there aside from managing earmarks—and, perhaps, prepping to become lobbyists themselves. This year's earmarks for the "Fund for Innovation in Education" total more than the entire appropriation for that program—Congress, too, is mathematically handicapped—and leave Secretary Spellings with virtually no say over any of those dollars. (She may have a couple million left for "new projects.") Yet while the White House is keen to explain why dozens of authorized programs should be scrapped, it's largely silent about earmarks. I know not why.

Third, finally, and most importantly, the runaway earmarking process teaches a wretched civics lesson at the very time we say we're concerned about forging better citizens. It reveals government itself to be a hypocrite, Constitutional processes free to be circumvented, and Washington to be a place where greed and cynicism reign and influence and connections matter more than merit. Is that what we want our kids to learn?

March 3, 2005

Teacher can't teach

Over the past half-century, the number of pupils in U.S. schools grew by about 50 percent while the number of teachers nearly tripled. Spending per student rose threefold, too. If the teaching force had simply kept pace with enrollments, school budgets had risen as they did, and nothing else changed, today's average teacher would earn nearly \$100,000, plus generous benefits. We'd have a radically different view of the job and it would attract different sorts of people.

Yes, classes would be larger—about what they were when I was in school. True, there'd be fewer specialists and supervisors. And we wouldn't have as many instructors for youngsters with "special needs." But teachers would earn twice what they do today (less than \$50,000, on average) and talented college graduates would vie for the relatively few openings in those ranks. What America has done, these past 50 years, is invest in more teachers rather than better ones, even as countless appealing and lucrative options have opened up for the able women who once poured into public schooling. No wonder teaching salaries have just kept pace with inflation, despite huge increases in education budgets. No wonder the teaching occupation, with blessed exceptions, draws people from the lower ranks of our lesser universities. No wonder there are shortages in key branches of this sprawling profession. When you employ three million people and you don't pay very well, it's hard to keep a field fully staffed, especially in locales (rural communities, tough urban schools) that aren't too enticing and in subjects such as math and science where well-qualified individuals can earn big bucks doing something else. Why did we triple the size of the teaching work force instead of paying more to a smaller number of stronger people? Three reasons. First, the seductiveness of smaller classes. Teachers want fewer kids in their classrooms and parents think their children will be better off, despite scant evidence that students learn more in smaller classes, particularly from less able instructors. Second, the institutional interests that benefit from a larger teaching force, above all dues-collecting (and influence-seeking) unions, and colleges of education whose revenues (tuition, state subsidies) and size (all those faculty slots) depend on their enrollments. Third, the social forces pushing schools to treat children differently from one another, creating one set of classes for the gifted, others for children with handicaps, those who want to learn Japanese, who seek full-day kindergarten or who crave more community-service opportunities. Nobody has resisted. It was not in anyone's interest to keep the teaching ranks sparse, while many interests were served by helping them to swell. Today, we pay the price: lots of money spent on schooling, nearly all of it for salaries, but schooling that, at the end of the day, depends on the knowledge, skills and commitment of teachers who don't earn much and cannot see that they ever will. Compounding that problem, we make multiple policy blunders. We restrict entry to people "certified" by state bureaucracies, normally after passing through quasi-monopolistic training programs that add little value. Thus an ill-paid vocation also has daunting, yet pointless, barriers to entry. We pay

mediocre instructors the same as super-teachers. Though tiny cracks are appearing in the "uniform salary schedule," in general an energized and highly effective classroom practitioner earns no more than a feckless time-server. We pay no more to high-school physics or math teachers than middle-school gym teachers, though the latter are easy to find while people capable of the former posts are scarce and have plentiful options. We pay no more to those who take on daunting assignments in tough schools than to those who work with easy kids in leafy suburbs. In fact, we often pay them less. Instead of recognizing that today's 20-somethings commonly try multiple occupations before settling down (if they ever do), then making imaginative use of those who are game to teach for a few years, we still assume that teaching is a lifelong vocation and lament anyone who exits the classroom for other pursuits. Instead of deploying technology so that gifted teachers reach hundreds of kids while others function more like tutors or aides, we assume that every classroom needs its own Socrates. Despite all that, and to their great credit, most teachers are decent folks who care about kids and want to help them learn. But turning around U.S. schools and "leaving no child behind" calls for more. It also requires passion, brains, knowledge and technique. Federal law now demands subject-matter mastery. Such qualities are hard to find in vast numbers, however, especially when the job doesn't pay very well. Yet fat across-the-board raises for three million people are a pipe dream. (Adding \$10,000 plus benefits to their pay would add some \$40 billion to school budgets.) Maybe we can't turn back the clock on the numbers, but surely we can reverse the policy errors. With hundreds of thousands of teaching jobs now turning over each year, at minimum we should insist that new entrants play by different rules that reward effectiveness, deploy smart incentives and suitable technology, compensate them sensibly, and make skillful use of short-termers instead of just wishing they'd stay longer. And this time let's watch what we're doing.

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