From 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 Preschool Establishment Strikes Back

Americans tend to feel warm, proud, and a mite smug when they hear the phrase "Head Start." Aside from Social Security, it's the most beloved of all federal domestic programs. But no complacency is warranted. Head Start is one of those swell ideas from the 1960s that urgently needs reforming for the twenty-first century. One study after another has shown that it's good at hugging little children, keeping them safe, giving them healthy snacks, even getting them to the dentist, but does nothing of lasting value to prepare them to read, write, and do arithmetic.

President Bush has proposed a Head Start makeover. He wants it to incorporate a true preschool curriculum, centering on the skills children need when they're entering kindergarten so as to have the best chance of learning there, especially learning to read there. These skills include knowing sounds, shapes, words, and colors, even letters and numbers. He would retrain Head Start staff members—many of whom never completed college—so that they would be better able to impart such skills to their 900,000 young charges. And (following the mandate of a 1999 law supported by Bill Clinton) he would evaluate the nation's thousands of Head Start centers to see how well they're fulfilling this mission.

It's a timely and needed rethinking of a familiar and popular program, meant to get more educational bang from the $6.5 billion already being spent on it—some $7,000 per young participant, equal to what's spent on schooling their older siblings. But the preschool establishment wants no part of this reform. Head Start has been around for nearly four decades—it began as part of LBJ's "War on Poverty"—and over the years it has become stubbornly set in its ways and has acquired its own army of adult interest groups that resist change.

At the head of this army is the National Head Start Association,

which swiftly attacked the Bush reform plan. It makes "little sense," intoned association president Sarah Greene. It "subjects our youngest children to standardized testing" and "wastes a great deal of money."

No "standardized testing" is involved in Mr. Bush's plan, and the "wasted" money would be spent on staff training and program evaluations. But Ms. Greene and her associates don't want those things. Like many in the early childhood field, they view Head Start's mission as fostering "child development" or, worse, providing day care, not running true preschools. They're content with hugs, snowsuits, blocks, swings, gerbils, carrot sticks, and dentist visits. They shun responsibility for advancing a child's cognitive development.

Yet that's precisely what Mr. Bush wants them to do. And what they ought to do. He accurately notes that tens of thousands of young Americans enter kindergarten each year without having developed the skills they need to succeed there. Many of the least-prepared children are poor and minority. If, as the president says, "reading is the new civil right," it's imperative to get disadvantaged youngsters ready for it.

When Bill Bennett, John Cribb, and I wrote ***The Educated Child*** a couple of years back, we decided to list essential "kindergarten readiness" skills. To our surprise, the list filled four pages. Some items are things that Head Start programs have long done. But most have serious cognitive components, such as "knows what an alphabet letter is," "places a short series of events in correct order," "recognizes common sounds," "counts aloud to ten," and "recalls basic facts about stories." Expertly parented children get most of this at home. But disadvantaged girls and boys usually need other adults to help them learn such things. That's the proper mandate of Head Start and other preschool programs.

The National Head Start Association is not the only naysayer. Its views of childhood are shared by many other groups that partake in what E. D. Hirsch terms the "naturalistic fallacy of developmentalism": the view that children ought not have their minds stretched by systematic adult efforts to fill them with skills and knowledge. This remains the dominant philosophy of early childhood educators in America. But it's contradicted by research, common sense, and the experience of other countries. It's also one of the biggest reasons that too many of our children enter school unprepared to learn and exit without having learned nearly enough. As the clamor mounts to create "universal" preschool opportunities, George W. Bush is right to insist that we stop wasting those we already have, especially those designed for the neediest children in our midst.

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The War on Charter Schools

I'm not prone to paranoia, but lately I see an awful lot of folks bent on stopping the charter school movement dead in its tracks, and I also see them making much headway. I don't think it exaggerates to say that a war is being

waged against charter schools. As with many wars, however, both sides have something to answer for. Those who want this decade-old education reform strategy to have a longer opportunity to show what it can accomplish need to recognize that their own failings aren't making its defense any easier.

Attacks are coming from many directions. State officials lead some of them (in Ohio, Indiana, New Jersey, Michigan). Local school systems spearhead others (in California, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts). Teacher unions, having failed in legislative chambers to arrest the charter movement, are turning to the courtroom (in Ohio, Pennsylvania). Governors who claim to be pro-charter (Georgia's Barnes, Texas's Perry) are going along with newly restrictive legislation. Blue-ribbon panels convened to solve charter problems end up compounding them.

The specifics take many forms, and sometimes those behind them are actually trying to help. For instance, Ohio auditor Jim Petro thought he was improving the Buckeye State's charter program with his scathing report on the Ohio Department of Education's sloppy stewardship of that program. But Ohio's teacher unions had blood in their eyes when they brought ever-widening lawsuits against the program itself. The Georgia legislature (and Governor Barnes) strengthened that state's limp charter law in certain respects but sorely weakened it in others. Indiana's state superintendent may simply have received bad legal advice when she decided not to give her state's new charters any money during their first semester. And Texas and New Jersey claimed to be correcting "abuses" when they imposed reams of red tape on their states' relatively free-wheeling charter programs.

But one only needs to be a little bit paranoid to see big trouble brewing for charters, whether the troublemakers mean them well or ill.

What accounts for this changing climate? Three problems seem fundamental.

First, much as it also resists standards-based accountability, our deeply conservative public education system is fighting back against this disruptive innovation, one that shifts power, changes control of resources, introduces new forms of accountability, upsets long-standing practices, and brings new uncertainties. This does not have as much to do with charters in particular as with change in general.

Second, the "charter movement" is leaderless and rudderless, less an army than a motley array of individualistic schools, self-absorbed educators and parents, overeager entrepreneurs, detached analysts and theorists, and advocacy groups that focus intently on their immediate issues but aren't good at helping the broader public understand what charter schools are and why they're a good idea, especially for poor kids. It's not unlike Afghanistan: plenty of warlords, rival parties, and local chieftains, but nothing akin to an effective national government.

Third, as presently constituted, the charter machinery simply isn't working very well in many places. Thus the widespread impulse to tinker and fiddle

with it. The biggest issues aren't, as many suppose, weak academic achievement by the schools themselves. (In fact, careful research is finding in a growing number of states that charters add greater academic value to disadvantaged youngsters than conventional public schools do.) Rather, the core malfunctions are (a) too many feckless, inept authorizers (a.k.a. sponsors) that casually issue charters to groups unprepared to run successful schools, are sloppy about results-based accountability, are too eager to revert to regulation as the antidote for charter ills, and are clueless about what to require before renewing a school's contract; (b) a small but visible group of greedy charter operators more interested in making a few bucks at state expense than running good schools for needy kids; and (c) ill-conceived state laws that starve charters of needed resources while not freeing them from enough of the red tape that binds conventional schools.

The charter phenomenon in America is now a decade old, and in many ways it's made remarkable strides: huge growth in schools, surging demand for them, widespread customer (and educator) satisfaction, much organizational innovation, signs of rebirth in local control and civil society, some swell specimens of successful schools, a number of interesting people and groups entering the field, and promising signs that charter-led competition is prompting overdue change in the traditional system. The essential concept—freedom in return for results—has seeped into the larger education debate, and mainstream organizations (such as the Education Commission of the States) can now visualize entire school systems run on the charter model. We can actually see schools shutting down because they do a lousy job. We also find charterlike schools in England, Canada, and Singapore, and hear talk of them even in Japan. At the fast-changing intersection of charters and technology we see some tantalizing creations—"virtual charter schools," for example—that are so different from 1950s-style public education that nobody yet knows quite how to deal with them.

At another level, however, the charter movement is losing its edge. Problems such as those noted here are growing more prominent than the promise of the charter idea itself. Political leaders who were much taken with that early promise have ridden off into the sunset. Their successors tend to view charters as somebody else's idea, to be more aware of malfunctions than successes, and to be skillfully manipulated by establishment interests that are now wide awake to the fact that charters aren't willingly going away and can be kept in check only by strong-arming politicians.

Last week's commission report in Michigan illustrated many of these dynamics. Because Michigan lawmakers were stalemated over a bunch of charter issues (especially lifting the "cap" on how many of these "public school academies" are permitted), the legislature called for a special panel "to conduct a complete and objective review of all aspects of public school academies in Michigan." Like most

such carefully balanced groups, it was destined to make compromises, and that's what it did, recommending a modest easing of the cap but also more red tape for charter schools and their sponsors (all in the name of "stronger accountability," of course). On the sticky but vital issue of finances, the commission simply punted.

If its recommendations are followed, Michigan will have more charter schools but they'll have less freedom to run themselves and will look a lot more like conventional public schools. The charter advocates on the panel acknowledge this but say it was the best deal they could strike.

With other states headed in the same direction, it's time to pause and ask: if the essence of the charter idea is slowly drained from the reality of charter schools, why bother creating more of them? Charter schools become a faux reform, a label affixed to an institution that has scant opportunity to do anything differently. This is as much a sham as claiming to be engaged in standards-based reform but doing so with crummy standards, shoddy tests, and no real consequences.

We may begin to say of the charter phenomenon, as T. S. Eliot famously wrote in "The Hollow Men," "This is the way the world ends, not with a bang but a whimper."

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