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On Maine's First Charter Schools:

Promises and Pitfalls

by Sarah Butler Jessen

In September 2012, the landscape of education in Maine quietly shifted with the opening of the state's first two charter schools. While the Cornville Regional Charter School in Cornville and the Maine Academy of Natural Science at Good Will-Hinckley in Hinckley enrolled just 106 students in their first days, they represent the first wave of a burgeoning educational movement set into motion by Governor Paul LePage and the Maine Association for Charter Schools, whose plans outline the opening of as many as 10 charter schools in the next 10 years in Maine (Barber 2012). In the fall of 2013, three more charter schools joined the original two: Harpswell Coastal Academy in Harpswell, Baxter Academy for Technology and Science in Portland, and the Fiddlehead School of Arts and Science in Gray. Nationwide, the charter schools reform movement has been debated on numerous fronts—as part of a larger school-choice debate, as an experiment with increased autonomy within the public educational sector, and on an organization front, as small learning communities. These debates are underpinned by the question of whether charter schools produce better results in student performance. Opinions of charter schools and results of research on their performance are as varied as charter schools themselves, however. Thus, while Maine moves forward into this new educational realm, questions need to be raised about what the implementation of charter schools might mean for the state.

To understand the significance of Maine's charter schools, we must situate

the schools within their political and historical contexts. Though charter schools are new to Maine, they have been a part of the national educational policy landscape for more than two decades. The first charter schools opened in Minnesota in 1991. Since then, charters have expanded rapidly to more than 40 states. In recent years, charter schools have seen increased support at the federal and state levels. Federal competitive grants such as Race to the Top (RttT) provide incentives for states to increase educational options and enact school “turnaround” reforms through the introduction of charter schools. In part because of this increased support, more than one-quarter of charter schools nationwide have been opened in the last few years, according to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools' website (dashboard.publiccharters.org/dashboard/home). The number of charter schools varies between states, largely because state laws regulate charter schools. Twenty-six states have caps on the number of charter schools that can be in operation. Other states allow a proliferation of charter schools. For example, since Hurricane Katrina in 2005, New Orleans has developed a system of schools that consists almost entirely of charters. According to a report released from Tulane University in 2012, charter schools now make up 75 percent of the public institutions in the district, serving 78 percent of students (Cowen Institute 2012).

Despite their increasing prevalence, there is persistent confusion about the

organizational and operational structures of charter schools. According to the National Center for Education Statistics and the Institute for Education Sciences, a charter school is a publicly funded school under contract, or charter, with the state (U.S. DOE 2013). In exchange for public funding and autonomy of governance, charter schools must meet accountability benchmarks laid out in their charter. Depending on state laws, charter schools also have control over hiring of teachers and staff, which allows them to employ uncertified teachers.

Unlike traditional public schools, charter schools are schools of “choice,” which means that, with some exceptions, charters admit students who opt-in, usually on a first-come, first-served basis. When the number of applicants exceeds the number of available seats, they admit students using a lottery. Although, in general, charter schools do not screen applicants based on test scores or grades, entrance into a lottery can sometimes involve submitting paperwork, completing a school tour, or signing parent and student contracts. Yet within the specific admissions guidelines laid out by the school, any student within a catchment area can apply to a charter school, and if accepted, can attend for free, just as with a traditional public school.

Scaffolded by increased programmatic autonomy, charter schools commonly provide a curricular theme, such as science or arts. Structuring the curriculum around a theme also allows for the development of a cohesive school community, ideally increasing buy-in from students, family, and staff. While students still receive a general education, their studies often center around this theme.

According the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools' website, nearly a third of charter schools are operated by charter management organizations

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(CMOs) or educational management organizations (EMOs). CMOs and EMOs create a charter model and replicate it in variety of locations. Well-known CMOs include KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) and Achievement First.

Since charter schools have been on the policy scene for a while, a significant body of research has been conducted on their efficacy and the outcomes of their implementation. In general, research findings on charter schools are as diverse as the charter schools themselves. As far as student performance, it seems clear that there are charter schools creating unique and beneficial opportunities for students and reaching high levels of academic success in education. Yet, despite the popularity of charters, the overwhelming body of research has not conclusively shown that charter schools always outperform traditional public schools. For every study or report that finds charter schools outperform traditional schools, another can be found with neutral findings, and still another that says that they underperform traditional schools. A meta-analysis of existing research found that a summative conclusion about the performance of charter schools cannot be drawn from existing studies (Berends et al. 2006).

One reason for the lack of a comprehensive conclusion is that the results of charter studies are often critiqued in replication studies, where differences in student populations are controlled. For example, one of the most famous studies on charter schools concludes that 17 percent of charter schools nationwide outperformed traditional public schools with a similar racial and socioeconomic makeup, 37 percent performed worse, and 46 percent had the same performance outcomes as similar public schools (CREDO 2009a). Following its publication, the findings of this report were

criticized by Stanford economist, Carolyn Hoxby (2009). After several rounds of published reciprocal critiques, Hoxby's assertion was refuted by CREDO (2009b).

In addition, research has examined the introduction of markets in the public educational sector and enrollment patterns in charter schools. In the last decades it has been increasingly popular in educational policy to introduce outputs-driven, private-sector ideals in public education. Introducing charter schools as a way to invite market competition in education is one outcome of this trend. Yet, research has raised concerns about the efficacy of such reforms in the public sector. While supporters of market theory would argue that competition is a positive side effect of choice, the introduction of competitive markets in conjunction with standard accountability measures has had problematic effects on equity. Instead of incentivizing improved performance, research has shown that, despite their lottery-based admissions processes, charter schools sometimes “compete” by encouraging the best-performing students—and most engaged parents—to apply, often at the exclusion of students most “at risk” or those with special needs or students with limited English proficiency (Jessen 2013; Lubienski 2007; Aness and Allen 2006; Adnett and Davies 2005; Gewirtz 2002). Techniques such as marketing and branding, or requirements for students and parents to interview, sign contracts, or take tours of the facilities can be intentionally deterring to less advantaged families (Jessen and DiMartino 2011; Lopez, Wells and Holmes, 2002). An offshoot of this concern is the finding that charter schools are more racially and economically segregated than traditional public schools (Civil Rights Project 2010). Miron, Urschel and Mathis (2010) found that, compared to their sending districts,

charter schools were much more segregated along socioeconomic lines. Clearly, research has raised concerns about student equity in market-driven reforms.

Like charters throughout the country, the charter schools in Maine are widely varied in purpose, challenges, and opportunities. Though Baxter Academy, Harpswell Coastal Academy, and the Maine Academy of Natural Sciences all happen to have nature- or science-based educational themes, they each employ a different curricular approach. The Maine Academy of Natural Sciences offers an alternative education program, particularly for students who have not thrived in traditional public settings. Harpswell Coastal Academy offers innovative assessment models with standards-based grading as a foundation. Fiddlehead School for Arts and Science follows a Reggio Emilia curricular program, a self-guided curriculum based on the interests of the children and founded on the principles of respect, responsibility, and community. Many of these schools use project-based learning models. Baxter Academy offers long-term science and technology project opportunities.

...research findings on charter schools are as diverse as the schools themselves.

The geographic locations of Maine's charter schools may play an important role in the school's outcomes and impact on both the students and the surrounding community. In part because of their location, those serving more rural areas of the state do not necessarily fall into a category

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of “increasing market competition.” While the enrollment and financial impacts of these schools may still be felt by a few local-area public schools, many more rural-area charter schools may face challenges different from their more urban counterparts, including sustaining enrollment while simultaneously maintaining the focus of their mission.

Baxter School for Technology and Science offers a good example of the challenges faced by a non-rural charter school. With a focused science and technology curriculum, the approval of this school opens up an additional set of questions as it participates wholly within the educational landscape in the highly populated Portland area. Due to its location, this school cannot help but alter the educational market in area schools. Already, Portland-area schools are considering what effects the introduction of Baxter School for Technology and Science will have on them (Graff 2012), and Baxter has publicly positioned itself in contrast to local public schools (Amory 2013).

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Of course, it is not always the founding educators who set the intention of feeding market competition. It is often the political support behind the introduction of charter policy that is motivated, in part, by an interest in creating market competition. However, conflicts can arise between the broader interests of policymakers and

the intentions of the educators involved in starting a charter school. With pressures from a variety of political actors, charters schools can unwittingly become part of a larger political movement.

For example, conservative think tanks such as the Maine Heritage Policy Center base their educational policy ideals on the economic freedom principles of Milton Friedman. Market advocates espouse that providing choice to public school students creates competition, which incentivizes traditional local-area public schools to improve performance. While Baxter Academy denies a direct alignment between the Maine Heritage Policy Center and the school, a recent luncheon hosted at the school for the center sparked speculation that one underlying political purpose of this charter school is to increase market competition in Maine’s largest public school district (Cousins 2013).

The differences in policy foundation and the intentions behind the formation of a charter school are seemingly slight, but can have significant effects. Charter schools have the opportunity to work in either a complimentary or competitive way with traditional public schools in their community. They can focus on providing niche educational programs offering unique and innovative opportunities within a local area. They can use their schools to provide models to inspire rebirth within the traditional public schools. The opportunity to create a charter school provides the autonomy and capacity to experiment with new models and foster innovation for education in general. Ideally, traditional public schools can gain insights into their own educational possibilities from the experiments that charter schools are conducting.

Alternatively, charter schools can be part of a larger drive to implement private-sector principles of markets in public

education. This is where the problem lies, given the concerns raised in the body of research about equity for students and the unintended outcomes of markets in the public sector. For Maine’s charter schools, as in other areas of the country, it will likely be a delicate balance to match intentions with practices.

Research on a national level has identified a number of questions regarding charters that need to be raised. Do charter schools outperform, or at least perform as well as, traditional public schools? What impact does the introduction of markets and choice have on the charters and local-area public schools and students?

If anything is clear from the research and experience with charter schools across the country, it is that having charter school status does not, in and of itself, result in better performance. Those involved in charter movement at all levels would do well to recall what Bill Gates admitted in a speech in 2008 after spending close to \$2 billion supporting the development of hundreds of small public charter-like schools across the country in the early part of this century: “It’s clear that you can’t dramatically increase college readiness by changing only the size and structure of a school. The schools that made dramatic gains in achievement did the changes in design and also emphasized changes inside the classroom” (www.gatesfoundation.org). Clearly, much more depends upon what happens inside a charter school than on the charter status itself.

Considering the range of unique needs of schools and communities, the effect of each charter school in Maine must be evaluated individually. Before pushing forward with the development of new charter schools, Maine should examine how each of the schools in this first set performs and their impact on public education in the state and in their

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communities. By taking this opportunity to learn from the few charter schools we have, not only do we stand to ensure continued equity for students, we can gain insights into those “changes in design” and “changes inside the classroom” that might serve as models elsewhere. 🐟

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