

FOREWORD

EDUCATION POLICY used to be a relatively placid arena, but that's no longer the case. The belief that American schools are among the best in the world was severely shaken by the 1983 publication *A Nation at Risk*, and since then, gnawing frustration with mediocre and unequal educational outcomes has led many to conclude that the fundamental organization of public education needs to be reshaped. As discussion shifted from the personal ("Is my Johnny's teacher the best our school has to offer?") to the systemic ("Should we shift control of education away from locally elected school boards?"), the stakes were raised. With these higher stakes, policy debates have become sharper, more partisan, and more ideologically infused.

This new tone in policy debates has very much influenced discussions of charter schools. As originally conceived, charter schools were a way to incrementally improve traditional school systems; charters would nudge urban school districts to become less rigid and less directive in their dealings with the schools they oversaw. But early on, the impetus was adopted—some would say co-opted—by those favoring a more radical shift toward market-based solutions in which competition for students among private schools, charter schools, and traditional public schools would generate the pressure to improve education. This framing of the issue around the relative merit of market-based versus government-based solutions drew the charter school issue into the vortex of larger and ongoing debates between liberals and conservatives.

Inevitably, the community of research has been affected. Elsewhere, I've written about how various interests try to spin research to convince policy makers and the public that consumer-oriented

charter schools are demonstrably better than (or a demonstrable threat to) traditional systems accountable to democratic institutions and the bureaucracies they create.¹ Done well, research provides an independent and ultimately self-correcting source of information that can help citizens and policy makers navigate tough decisions. But if research comes to be seen as nothing more than another tool for building political power, there's a risk that it will lose credibility and that increasingly cynical audiences will discount its claim to objectivity.

Beneath the noise and heat of political maneuvering, however, the core enterprise of research often plugs along just as we'd wish it to, gradually improving measurements of important phenomena, probing and replicating studies to see if findings hold up in different settings, over time, and with different methodological approaches. Charter school research has seen this steady, gradual improvement as well. Compared with the decades immediately following the birth of charters, we now have better data, guiding concepts that are more commonly defined, research designs that are more sophisticated, and more confidence about what we know and do not know.² Better research does not mean that debates about charters, markets, and democracy have been resolved by any measure. But good data can help us distinguish evidence-based claims from assertions of values and power and thus can lead to more nuanced and sophisticated, if not necessarily less contentious, public discourse.

Are Charters Different? Public Education, Teachers, and the Debate over Charter Schools makes a genuine contribution to the emerging body of illuminating research. It's the first volume in the Education Politics and Policy series, which I will be editing for Harvard Education Press. Books in the series will differ in their substantive focus, their methodological bent, and the implications of their claims. But all of them, we hope, will share with this one an earnest effort to wrestle with important questions and favor honest analysis and interpretation over political bombast.

Several attributes account for this book's value. First, its grounding in the concept of *publicness* as a continuum immediately challenges the common but simplistic tendency to pose government and

markets as either-or alternatives. Both scholars and ideologues, for different reasons, find it useful to distill what is distinct about each sector's actors, norms, and behaviors. Scholars do it because elucidating ideal types can help them focus on core attributes and their implications; ideologues because simplification makes their appeals more stirring.

In practice, though, all our collective endeavors represent mixtures of public and private incentives and behaviors. Even a classical market transaction like purchasing groceries at a market is circumscribed by government laws and regulations related to food quality, transport, and labeling and to worker hours and benefits. Similarly, a classical governmental activity like law enforcement is affected by how potential criminals calculate risks and opportunities, whether victims and witnesses decide to report crimes and testify, the costs of building and operating a prison system, and the competitive labor market for hiring police.

Framing publicness as a continuum highlights the central differences between traditional public schools, charters, and vouchers but also acknowledges important differences in how each of these sectors responds to both market and government forces. For example, there are traditional schools districts that expand parent choice and school-level decision making; charter schools that operate in a well-regulated environment and are held accountable by public authorities; and voucher schemes that are designed by legislators to promote equity and diversity.

A second strength of the book is its use of multiple datasets. Every survey that has strengths also has limits. Surveys with national coverage often lack the precision to provide state-specific estimates. Surveys that compile extensive data about respondents' backgrounds often lack information about the institutions in which the participants operate or their attitudes and actions in specific areas of interest. Zachary Oberfield brings to bear three separate surveys offering different geographic coverage, a different balance of questions, and various periods. With these multiple datasets, he can distinguish general, national patterns from narrower ones, which may be particular to the policy and educational markets in particular

places, and can provide contemporary information that is so important in the context of rapid change.

A third contribution of the book is the attention to changes over time. In their rush to decide whether this or that policy initiative is working as promised, both scholars and policy makers typically fail to take seriously the maturation of policy regimes. By *policy regime*, I mean the full array of institutions, expectations, political interests, and framing ideologies that determine the capacity and commitment with which the policy is imbued. The maturation of a policy regime refers to how policies develop over time, whether the development is positive (e.g., marked by growing knowledge and capacity) or negative (e.g., marked by waning enthusiasm or growing routinization and rigidity).

Both the charter and the traditional public school sectors have changed substantially over the past twenty-five years. A charter sector that initially comprised small, locally based, stand-alone charters has matured into one marked increasingly by large networks operating multiple schools, in multiple cities, and often in multiple states. A traditional sector dominated by the model of neighborhood-based schools and assigned attendance zones has increasingly adopted various forms of public school choice, allowing and sometimes forcing parents to shop around for the school that they believe best fits their children's needs. Both charter and traditional public school sectors have experienced intense No Child Left Behind pressure to improve student outcomes. Schools within both sectors have responded with an array of curriculum, teaching, and accountability strategies that have altered—perhaps differentially—what it means to be a teacher. Only a longitudinal perspective, such as the one that Professor Oberfield develops here, has a chance to capture such dynamics and begin to unearth their implications.

Precisely because the charter sector has been changing, the book's attention to intrasector differences—between stand-alone and networked charters, between the for-profit and nonprofit operators—constitutes a fourth valuable attribute. Almost from its beginning, the charter school movement has been animated by two contrasting visions. One was a vision of small, nonprofit, community-based

providers injecting variety into an overly homogenous and bureaucratic system. The other was a vision of customer-pursuing businesses responding to demand by honing products and reducing costs in a competitive environment that would reward success with expansion and growth. Today's charter world includes both types of providers and is sustained by supporters loyal to both visions. The sector might be stronger and better by virtue of this internal diversity, but such diversity might also hide the fact that one model performs better than the other or that the competing visions are ultimately inconsistent. By considering differences in the teaching climate in both independent charters and franchised ones, and in both for-profit and nonprofit schools, *Are Charters Different?* offers a more thorough analysis of the ultimate benefits of various school approaches.

A final benefit of the book has to do with Professor Oberfield's modesty in making claims. In the higher-profile and higher-stakes environment that now characterizes education policy debates, there are seductive pressures to make overly confident assertions. The media, advocacy groups, and policy makers often signal that they have little tolerance for scholars who recommend further research. These critics paint the need-more-research stance as a timid one that lacks usefulness to those who have to make real and hard decisions and who cannot sit on their hands until all the facts are in. I understand their impatience but am inclined to throw the charge of timidity back at the critics. In asking researchers to stoke their assertions of certainty and to draw overly bold policy implications, the media, advocacy groups, and politicians are often looking for cover. They want to sidestep or deflect the pressure on them to do what their positions demand: to be discerning and to make tough decisions even though information is always incomplete, causal inferences always tentative, and consequences never ensured.

The strengths of a book, of course, largely reflect the author's own strengths. Zach Oberfield is thoughtful and deliberate, a modest scholar himself who wrestles with the evidence and presents it to readers fairly and clearly, despite the winds of political controversy that still rage around the charter school issue.

Are Charters Different? is not the last word in the long debate over charter schools. The debate, fueled by much more than the need for better information, will keep burning for quite some time even as better information is brought to bear. Nevertheless, we must still strive to sharpen our understanding of not only charter schools per se but also the broader nature of government, markets, and the public-private mash-ups that increasingly characterize the policy terrain. It's no easy task, but this book confirms that we are making progress.

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