

# INTRODUCTION

A QUARTER CENTURY has passed since Minnesota passed America's first charter-school law in 1991. Today, forty-three states (including the District of Columbia) contain some sixty-eight hundred charter schools, serving nearly three million students, almost 6 percent of the US public school enrollment. Charter schools constitute the fastest-growing school-choice option in the land and are as close to a disruptive innovation as American K-12 education has seen in decades. They create a new market and an alternative delivery system that affords families and children access to public schools different from those they find within the traditional district structure. Together with the promulgation and strengthening of academic standards, the charter phenomenon is the most visible and substantial education reform of the modern era. At least ten other countries are also experimenting with kindred models of independent public schools, even (in England) putting them into practice on a vast scale.

How did this change come about? How is it working? What lies ahead? And what does all this mean for public education?

Up to this point, charters have performed spectacularly unevenly in many ways, sometimes succeeding wonderfully and other times faltering badly. They also remain the object of widespread misunderstanding as to what they are and how they work. They have fervent opponents as well as ardent supporters. The former tend to slight their accomplishments while the latter often turn a blind eye to their shortcomings. These persistent battles over chartering's legitimacy partly explain why such schools have only begun to fulfill their potential as an engine of change for American education.

Chartering today is pigeonholed by some (including many of its staunchest supporters) as an escape valve for low-income, inner-city, mostly minority students needing to exit poorly performing district schools and unable to afford private-school alternatives. This is an important role in American K-12 education, and the best charters—aided

and advanced by single-minded philanthropy and public policies—are doing it well. Expanding and perfecting that role is a plausible, defensible path into the future.

Yet chartering has greater potential to tackle other problems within (and beyond) K–12 schooling. It can serve additional needy clientele in more parts of the country. It can demonstrate US schools’ capacity to produce more internationally competitive graduates. Charter schools can also pioneer new approaches to education, addressing the diverse and ambitious outcomes, both cognitive and otherwise, that educators seek for children. Finally, chartering can retool and even supplant the antiquated governance structures of public schooling.

Before peering into the future, we review some ways in which the much-needed reinvention of American K–12 education has been pioneered by the charter experiments of the past quarter century. We also show that the charter sector itself needs repairs and further development before it can deliver on its promise.

This book has four parts. Part I is historical and quantitative. Chapter 1 recaps the origins of chartering in both concept and statute, recognizing the diverse visions harbored by its theorists, policy shapers, and practitioners. This subject remains contentious, even polarizing. We hope that a recap of how it began will be valuable to all parties. In chapter 2 (and the appendix), we document the growth and evolution of charter schools over the past quarter century (though data from the early years are sparse).

In part II, we turn qualitative and more analytical. Chapter 3 reviews the charter sector’s uneven track record in academic achievement. In chapter 4, we illustrate with this concrete examples of specific charter initiatives, both laudable and flawed. Chapter 5 moves beyond school performance and summarizes several noteworthy examples of charter-based accomplishments that, even when beset with imperfections of their own, are already helping to renew public education.

Part III addresses a host of troublesome, unresolved, and often unanticipated problems—some of them better described as tensions or dilemmas—that beset the charter sector in 2016. These challenges impede efforts to advance and enhance chartering, both in its own right and as a source of further educational revitalization. This part of the book discusses shortcomings in the charter marketplace (chapter 6); the precarious relationships among authorizing, governance,

and leadership (chapter 7); the fiscal challenges facing these upstart schools along with the mixed blessings of philanthropy and private investment (chapter 8); the eternal balancing and rebalancing of freedom and regulation (chapter 9); and the ever-contentious political realm (chapter 10).

In the four chapters that constitute part IV, we examine the future of chartering and its place in the larger primary-secondary arena. Chapter 11 aims to extend and improve the no-excuses model of chartering as a source of opportunities for disadvantaged children, while recognizing the limits of that strategy. In chapter 12, we widen our focus on how chartering can tackle more problems and participate in larger reforms, including alternative structures for governing and delivering education. In chapter 13, we review a number of changes that would strengthen the marketplace and address significant shortcomings that chartering has surfaced. Finally, chapter 14 places chartering and its future into the context of public education in twenty-first-century America and the major challenges that it faces.