

## Expanding Access to Liberal Education in Public Schools: The Promise and Perils of Charter Schools and In-District Choice

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Charter schooling and other choice options offer the fastest opportunity for educators and parents who want more public schools to provide a general education for children grounded in the liberal arts tradition. In fact, charter schools and other forms of public school choice offer the best hope for educators or parents in the United States who believe strongly in any robust and coherent education program for young people, whether it is traditional, progressive, multicultural, or otherwise. The reason for this is that Americans have never been able to agree on the best education for all students. Every major effort over the last 120 years to define a core curriculum for American students, from the Harvard Committee of 10 report in 1893 to the effort to define national content standards in core academic subjects in the 1990s, has provoked rancor, resistance, and sabotage. The result? Tepid, incoherent, sometimes watery, sometimes bloated offerings that are characteristic of most public school textbooks and curricula today. For all the advantages I believe a national curriculum would confer by way of system efficiency, transparency, and fairness, I see no reason to believe that any new ambitious effort to define a national core—beyond perhaps mathematics, reading, writing, and Constitutional knowledge—would yield a different result this time around. America is simply too decentralized and too diverse, and most Americans and American educators prefer it that way.

The problem is especially acute for proponents of the traditional liberal arts, however, because they compose a politically weak and I daresay generally maligned minority among educators and reformers. As I observed in my essay on page 25, the liberal arts are virtually everyone's straw man for all that is elitist, irrelevant, unjust, or just plain moldy in education. In a reform world in which everyone aspires to be American public schooling's Luther, Calvin, or Zwingli, the traditional liberal arts are the medieval Catholic Church: backward, overwrought, corrupt, and oppressive. To the extent that an effort to set a national curriculum might succeed, it would likely be at the *expense* of the traditional liberal arts—or “traditional humanism” as I defined it

on page 25-26. If traditional liberal educators want a fair shot at demonstrating their relevance and value to young people and society, their best opportunity lies in promoting a policy environment that supports pedagogical diversity among skillful, well-intentioned educators. They then need to take advantage of that climate to create new public schools, whether district or chartered, that teachers and parents can opt into.

I recognize that this position puts me at odds with most other contributors to this volume, as well as its publisher. To some degree, the divergence stems from the relative importance we attach to a national curriculum versus preservation of a certain form of liberal and pre-liberal “general” education as I describe earlier in this volume. I don’t believe it’s possible to achieve both, and I’m not willing to sacrifice the latter for the sake of the former. But as I’ve already noted, I don’t think the former is possible either, at least not in the robust, content-focused way my colleagues are advocating, for reasons ranging from the professional and cultural politics of the education intelligentsia to the fierce localism of the *hoi polloi*. I take as emblematic here the experience of E.D. Hirsch, Jr., one of the nation’s most steadfast proponents of a national core curriculum, whose Core Knowledge sequence has been adopted mostly by homeschoolers, maverick public school principals, and charter schools. It’s worth asking: What would Core Knowledge be reduced to if entered into the sausage grinder of an American-style national curriculum-setting process? And where would it be today without charter schools and homeschoolers, and the flexibility they have under current laws in many places to adopt the Core Knowledge sequence?

The charter and choice route is not without its perils, however. This movement to reinvigorate public education has suffered from its own hubris, as well as from the failure of proponents and opponents alike to grasp and exploit the unique aptness of schools of choice for accommodating the peculiarities of American educational politics. The market ideology that undergirds most charter and choice advocacy, and the specter of privatization that it gleefully invokes, roil educators and those concerned for the health of public institutions and the common ends they are designed to serve. It thereby galvanizes opposition to a reform that, more aptly theorized, might have won vigorous adherents among educators and those concerned for the revival of civic culture. The schools themselves have a spotty track record of performance. Depending on the methodology (or ideology) employed by individual analysts, charters are either a little better or a little worse than comparable conventional public schools—unimpressive no matter whose research one finds more congenial to one’s predispositions. Public policy hasn’t helped. States have yet to develop

workable policy and governance arrangements, manage the disruptions that charter schools create for existing systems and constituencies, regulate the schools sensibly, or fund them adequately. Once touted as a panacea, charter schools have proved to be no less susceptible to the ills of public education than the conventional district-run schools they were supposed to rival.

I nonetheless continue to believe that charter schools and other forms of public school choice present the most viable option available for improving public education in general and for reinvigorating liberal arts education, specifically. In my earlier chapter, I named some unconventional programs—such as Civitas Schools in Chicago and the Clemente Course in the Humanities—that embody the best of the liberal arts tradition, often with students from impoverished urban backgrounds. And I could name others, including Bard Early College in New York City and Withrow University Prep in Cincinnati, Ohio, which are *district*-managed schools of choice. Such examples demonstrate what’s possible when passionate, like-minded educators are buffered from the cultural politics of education and allowed to create a school with a clear philosophy, coherent curriculum, and shared understanding of good pedagogy. Such scattered existence proofs give me hope that the failure of imagination that has thus far impeded the development of successful *systems* of publicly supported choice can be overcome through the missionary efforts of entrepreneurial educators and enlightened policymakers.

A charter and school choice strategy offers at least three advantages for liberal arts education proponents. First, it allows them to sidestep intractable conflicts over the most suitable form of schooling for *all* children, citizens, or American industries. They need not engage in endless state and federal policy debates over what knowledge is of the greatest worth. They need only secure their charter and demonstrate that enough families want a traditional liberal arts education for their children to justify opening schools. Then, through successful recruitment and standards-referenced performance over time, they need only demonstrate that they are *good* schools for the families and communities they serve, rather than the ultimate form of education for everyone.

Second, schools of choice offer the benefits of voluntary association that independent schools have always enjoyed. A big part of what makes reform of conventional public schools such a prodigious undertaking is that diverse family, community, and professional constituencies have to be persuaded to adopt a certain vision of reform. This has proved virtually impossible to achieve and sustain nearly everywhere it’s been tried. Any robust reform vision is eventually sabotaged outright or

emasculated through compromise and half-hearted implementation by resistant teachers, community activists, or rival reformers. In contrast, a new school of choice offers the luxury of hiring teachers and recruiting families who subscribe to the curricular and pedagogical vision of a particular school. They are thus the fastest route available to those who want to see traditional liberal arts education made available to more families more quickly.

Third, as more such schools are created, the opportunities to form new professional networks and associations increase. The benefits of such associations are well known: a professional identity, “brand” identity, economies of scale in the production or procurement of materials, refinement of practices, political influence, and enhanced recruiting power. One can also imagine the creation of new, more appropriate forms of professional training, certification, and induction as the charter movement more generally begins to work out new institutional arrangements better suited to different models’ distinctive needs. For educators in the liberal arts tradition, such opportunities would also pose a challenge. These educators have displayed less vigor in recent decades than champions of rival education models in developing and promoting their vision and in taking advantage of existing opportunities to create programs, start schools, and otherwise demonstrate their vitality.

The foregoing advantages presume a policy environment that is friendly to the creation and sustenance of such schools. It also presumes an environment friendly to legitimate rivals to the traditional liberal arts, because those rivals will strive sedulously to sabotage any regime that threatens them. Chief among the critical policy questions then is how to calibrate the standards, accountability, and assessment regime so that it is neither so tight that it defines legitimate schooling options out of existence nor so loose that it opens the door to new forms of social stratification or outright malpractice.

Fortunately, for all the discord that has marked American public education over the last century and a half, a serviceably robust consensus exists among sensible policy makers, professionals, and other constituencies about what public schools ought to do: (1) teach literacy, “numeracy,” and other basic skills; (2) cultivate sound reasoning and thinking skills; (3) foster mental and physical health; (4) promote cooperative behaviors and good citizenship; and (5) prepare students for further education in pursuit of a productive and prosperous life for themselves and their families while contributing to a competitive national economy. Where educators and others disagree is in how best to organize an education program to support those

common aims. I explored some of these divergences within consensus at greater length on pages 26-31.<sup>1</sup> Here, I want to unpack the “tight-loose” accountability framework I mentioned briefly in that chapter as a way to think about how to calibrate the autonomy-in-return-for-accountability bargain at the heart of charter schooling. By adopting this framework, a variety of good schools may be allowed to flourish while ensuring that they all contribute to those broadly shared aims.

The basic idea behind “tight-loose” accountability is to tightly prescribe those core skills that are most easily defined and measured while also requiring, but more flexibly, those skills, knowledges, and dispositions that are more difficult to define uncontroversially or measure directly. Here, we could do worse than to start with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act’s focus on reading and math as measured through standardized tests. No one denies the importance of these skills, and while ideologues exist who will brook no compromise with standardized testing of any kind, most discerning critics of NCLB and standardized tests object less to the tests than to the sole reliance on those tests as a means of judging schools, teachers, and students. This is where the “loose” elements come into play. Beyond math and reading—and perhaps writing, Constitutional knowledge, and basic science—the things we want students to know and be able to do become either more contentious to specify (e.g., U.S. history) or more difficult to assess directly, validly, or reliably (e.g., “good citizenship”). We don’t, however, want schools to give short shrift to these important subjects. And so we mandate, but mandate loosely. Federal or state governments can mandate that all schools *will* address citizenship and workforce competence, cultivate higher-order thinking, teach history and culture, and so on. But those things can be left deliberately broad in definition. Fleshing out that definition would be the responsibility of the local education agency, charter management organization, reform advocacy group, or other curriculum developer, subject to approval by an oversight body authorized by the state. The applicant would propose a curriculum, explain its underlying rationale and how it conforms to the state framework, and outline how it would assess students’ progress toward articulated goals and objectives. Assessment formats could vary—papers, portfolios, problem-based assignments, or paper-and-pencil tests—but guidelines could be developed to ensure that some measure of rigor be upheld. To mitigate the risk of laxity in implementation or outright chicanery, the state authority or designee could annually review samples of locally developed assessments as well as perform random on-site inspections.

Take citizenship education as an example. National or state standards might

stipulate that citizenship education at the K–12 level must include knowledge of American government and the principles undergirding it, facility with rhetoric and argument, and a disposition toward informed participation. A standardized test could be developed for the knowledge requirement and defined rather extensively. For the rest, however, a local developer or provider might propose any number of curricula and assessments. Some schools might certify that a certain number of community service hours be completed and documented. Others might require students to compose an extended analytical essay comparing, contrasting, and evaluating ancient and modern theories of justice. Yet others might require a problem-based community action project or prepared participation in a public debate. The state could tighten up the requirement with both a written analytic form of assessment and some demonstration of engagement. Either way this system would permit a diversity of means to fulfill common core requirements.

Similar frameworks and procedures would govern core academic domains such as history, social sciences, arts, and humanities, for which most observers believe that students should have some measure of exposure but can't agree on what, why, or how much—let alone how to assess learning, appraise performance, and gauge success. It's areas like these for which I think charters and choice are most promising. Many individuals and organizations have invested tremendous energy in developing a wide variety of curricular philosophies, rationales, model curricula, textbooks, syllabi, and other materials. Most are reasonable and defensible, and many are excellent and exciting, reflecting the proliferation of approaches in their respective fields, especially in the humanities and social sciences. All an accountability system need do is mandate that a provider adopt, adapt, or create a curriculum based on some defensible rationale within the guidelines proposed above.

Those who pay attention to the various disputes that rage among educators and reformers over curriculum, instruction, and assessment may recognize some cross-breeding in this proposal. The framework mandates a parsimonious battery of standardized national or state tests while sanctioning and incorporating various forms of alternative assessments for which those wary of standardized tests lobby. It likewise integrates state- and test-based accountability with the “professional” accountability models preferred by educators, where accountability is really a form of responsibility and reciprocity within a tight-knit community of practice. It also mediates between the modern impulse to nationalize and standardize curriculum and instruction in the name of national unity, equal opportunity, or international competitiveness, and the

values of diversity, entrepreneurship, and local control that Americans continue to hold sacred. Finally, and most important for the proponent of traditional liberal learning, it enforces the provision of a broad-gauge curriculum in arts, sciences, and humanities without either privileging a single model and inviting rancor, or forcing lowest-common-denominator compromises that result in a thin curricular gruel.

Note, too, that this model is *regulated* and governed by *standards*. It is not relativistic or laissez-faire. It allows for a variety of approaches to teaching “democratic citizenship,” but mandates that some recognizable conception of democratic citizenship will be taught. No such system need tolerate Ku Klux Klan schools or *madrasas*. It might remain agnostic on bilingual versus immersion models for English language learners, but would require that they demonstrate proficiency in English. It might accommodate a range of approaches to teaching the biological sciences, from those that are discipline-based to those that are project-based, but could exclude “Intelligent Design.” As these examples suggest, arguments about where to draw the line between legitimate and illegitimate practice will not magically disappear. But while authorities wrangle with fringe groups over where to draw those boundaries, a whole range of legitimate and exciting schools could be buffered and nurtured.

Many other difficult design challenges are involved in fleshing this out into a viable system. One challenge that I’ve sidestepped is how to weigh different state versus local assessments for purposes of school and student accountability. If a school or student does poorly on state-tested reading, math, and Constitutional knowledge, but has verified success in other locally assessed areas, does that school or student “pass”? Would the system be designed to permit the creation of vocational education schools or career academies with no pretense to college preparation? Even thornier, would schools whose proposed curricular models seem designed to appeal to single gender or ethnic groups—for example, a school with an explicitly Afrocentric curriculum—be permitted? Is there a robust federal role in this system—that is, should it be incorporated into a reauthorized NCLB? How broadly can standards for history or critical thinking be drawn before they become meaningless? Conversely, how tightly can they be drawn before they covertly exclude legitimate alternatives? And just as difficult, who will draw them and how will the processes be designed to avoid the debacles that characterized standards-setting efforts of the early 1990s? These and other similarly contentious questions need to be addressed and somehow resolved more satisfactorily than they have been thus far.<sup>2</sup>

The liberal arts entrepreneur needn’t wait for the perfect policy regimen to be

constructed, however, to start taking advantage of the opportunities already afforded by existing charter laws and innovative school district policies. In fact, they can take advantage of the current thinness and incoherence of most state standards to create more existence proofs like those I've named. Withrow University Prep was developed at a time when Ohio's standards and assessments were among the weakest in the country. In Illinois, where Civitas Charter Schools operate, subject-matter exams are weak and ill-defined. Civitas anchors its curriculum to the American College Test, the skills-based college admissions test that the state now requires of all its eleventh graders. It may in fact benefit from the content weakness of the state's standards because any more robust set would likely hamstring what I've termed elsewhere as the "innovative traditionalism" of its curriculum.<sup>3</sup> My point is this: The people who created and staff those schools don't need to be goaded by the threat of accountability sanctions. They espouse a vision of liberal education and a comprehensive set of aspirations for their students that include both intellect and character that are dependent on, but not limited by, those skills defined and tested by their respective states.

Therein lies both the strength and limitations of the charter school and choice route under current circumstances as means to advance liberal learning and the education of the young people it benefits. The very weakness of most states' standards and accountability systems has allowed these educators to avoid intractable debates about the best curriculum for all students and completely sidestep the gridlock that paralyzes traditional school districts. Instead, these educators simply start schools from scratch based on a coherent vision of liberal education implemented by hand-picked teachers who recruit parents who themselves believe in this kind of education for *their* children. Charter schools and public school choice systems have therefore proven to be a relatively quick way to enroll more students in such schools. Yet entrepreneurial opportunism by itself is not a *system* solution. The students enrolled in such schools number in the mere tens of thousands nationally. Too many of the rest remain consigned to dysfunctional systems that find it difficult to educate students to the relatively low standards that have been set for them. And so we need a set of system reforms that embraces and integrates the full range of proposals set forth in this book, perhaps including national standards and examinations—provided such standards don't overreach and provoke self-defeating backlash. In the meantime, those of us who believe in and understand the power of a strong liberal education need to take advantage of every opportunity that currently exists to reach as many children and communities as we can.



## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> I have explored elsewhere this phenomenon of divergence within consensus, discussed the mischief it causes, and proposed ways of coping with it. See, for example, “Does ‘Research-Based’ Mean ‘Value Neutral?’” *Phi Delta Kappan* 86, no. 6 (February 2005): 424-32; “Pathways to Reform: Start with Values,” *Educational Leadership* 62, no. 5 (February 2005): 8-14; and “Embracing Pedagogical Pluralism: An Educator’s Case for (at Least Public) School Choice,” *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 11, no. 30 (August 25, 2003): <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v11n30/>.
- <sup>2</sup> For reasons of focus, I have bracketed out a number of other critical design issues on the choice side pertaining to fair access, civic impacts, racial segregation, and consequences of choice for existing school systems. For a fuller exploration of these and other design issues see “School Choice: Doing It the Right Way Makes a Difference,” a report from the Brookings National Working Commission on Choice in K–12 Education, 2003.
- <sup>3</sup> For more on Civitas Schools’ innovations in classical curriculum see David J. Ferrero, “Having it All,” *Educational Leadership* 63, no. 8 (May 2006): 8-14.