

**BUCKEYE INSTITUTE LUNCHEON**

**SPEECH ON CHARTER SCHOOLS**

**November 9, 1995**

**Thank you for inviting me, Andy, to this fine event, in this wonderful town. And thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for taking time from your busy schedules to hear about one of the most critical aspects of education reform today --**

**Charter Schools.**

**The concept of charter schools is not new, and like many efforts to help improve the lot of all schools for all children, there are many variations to this theme. Essentially, a real charter proposal is authorized explicitly by law, permits a wide array of diverse options within the public sector, and is a public school, that is governed by only the bare minimum in terms of state or local oversight -- health, safety and discrimination.**

**A charter school is what I call "the new neighborhood public school." It is essentially that because of what it strives to do, and what it in fact has done throughout the six states that are home to most of the 250 existing charter schools, many of which I will tell you about today.**

**In little more than three years, 19 states have adopted charter school laws, which vary as much as schools vary. Nine of these are very strong; the others are very weak. California just hit its 100 charter cap, with a school designed to address the needs of failing**

high school students; Massachusetts is home to 16 that are primarily targeted to at-risk children. Arizona now has 46 up and operating. This last year, Louisiana, New Hampshire and Delaware joined the stronger law states with their new laws, permitting a wide variety of organizations to start and run schools.

Chartering authorities vary. In New Hampshire, only local boards can sponsor, although private groups can start schools. In Arizona, it is the local board, or the state board, or a new chartering authority that can approve. It's the best law by far, which is why in one short year, 46 have been approved and started operating, serving more than 6,000 children. In Michigan, public universities or local districts can charter schools. In some states, only certified teachers qualify. In others, at least fifty percent of teachers must be certified. Still others have no limit. All told, over 30,000 children are in charter schools; double that amount actually applied.

To date, three major studies have been launched looking into the effectiveness of charters, and surveys have been conducted that attest to their popularity in communities nationwide. A charter brings the much needed autonomy to a school that years of research tell us is the most critical aspect of having an effective school. It also brings with it the opportunity for families to decide which learning style or type of school is best for their children, and for teachers and administrators, it brings the authority to design specialized programs that they feel most benefits their unique children.

It is that uniqueness that makes charters such an appealing and desirable change from the status quo. Just as anyone here with children or grandchildren knows, no two children are alike in every way. I myself have four children, the older two of which have just recently started their formal schooling. One is high maintenance, and needs a lot of structure. The other I've discovered would learn more by being left along to meditate on the rocks and sticks he loves so much. For him, too much structure would be damning. But

like you, in most places, there are only very limited options available to me to decide how best to educate my oldest two boys. Like you, and like our nation's teachers, I want to help them get the best setting that will spark them to great achievements.

You know I'm not alone. Whether rich or poor, black, brown or white, parents want the best for their children. They have unfortunately been left with little option, and little say, in helping to shape and mold their child's education. States like Ohio have helped significantly to open up the options available to children, both with your open enrollment law, and with many progressive educators leading successful programs in a number of your school districts.

But much, much more needs to happen before all children will have unqualified access to excellent schools. Charters are one way that has hit the national scene and is being embraced by the widest variety of people that few of us thought was ever possible in education reform.

That's why Time, Newsweek, ABC and other national news outlets have profiled charters in their coverage throughout the last year. It is also why increasing number of parents, teachers, school board member and elected officials of every political stripe are demanding that change come soon.

Some noteworthy facts to share with you, mainly from a national survey from the Education Commission of the States sample 106 schools in CA, Co, MA, MI, MN, NM and WI:

**Most are small -- average 298 students**

**2/3rds designed to satisfy a cross section of students**

**1/2 are designed to serve at-risk children**

**Most popular academic focus in an integrated curriculum  
(San Carlos Example, trees&nature, biology, genetics -- multiage  
groupings, hands-on learning)**

**Reasons most often given for chartering a school: better  
teacher and learning; running a school according to a certain  
philosophy, exploring innovative ways to run a school.**

**Some examples of how this plays out in practice: Five charter  
schools use Core Knowledge; the boys and girls club runs one in  
Arizona, with itnerest growing fromt heir membership around the  
country; New Country Day School in MN has almost no textbooks,  
but uses selected books for reading, math and offers hands-on  
instruction in science and history via field trips, labs, etc.**

**(SEE ANECDOTES PAPER CITE OTHERS)**

**And the impact on neighboring traditional public schools,  
and the educators there, is astounding.**

**In Minnesota -- Montessori example.**

**Bowling Green-- Paper feels**

**Boston and the teachers union -- 6 pilot schools started.**

**COL. Ed. Assoc. looking at starting a charter there.**

**Connect. -- motivated local university to start its own**

**The picture would not be complete without conveying to you  
what my visit to two separate charters was like, and how the  
schools nearly brought me to tears. Both are charters, but they are  
as different as night and day, but are separated only by miles in  
their distance, while they share a similar philosophy towards  
children.**

**Boston Renaissance -- enrollment numbers, etc.**

**Jingletown, one of the first. barrios, etc.**

### **The Negatives**

**Many officials and reporters ask me where the down sides are. There are many, many concerns about charters that have led many a legislator to be wary, and many an educator to grow concerned. Like most aspects of life, many of our fears cannot be eradicated until we see it through. However, many of the most common objections one hears about charter schools have little or no basis for caution.**

**Money be siphoned off...**

**Creaming....**

**Not publicly accountable... performance contract... often espoused by school boards, who are naturally concerned. Let's not confuse public accountability with the mere oversight of programs.**

**As Howard Fuller says: "rules still rule." No matter how much innovation one would like to do in a school, their hands are tied by a myriad of state rules and regulations that automatically prohibit them from being bold, creative or unique in their programming.**

**There is no one size fits all child -- so I ask you, why do we allow ourselves to think that there can be a school that addresses all of the needs of our children in the same place, based on where they live? Public education success stories do exist. But they are in the minority -- they are found in little pockets all of the country, where administrators have permitted themselves the art of creative non-compliance, and dare to be bold.**

I am reminded of Marva Collins, whose famed Westside Preparatory School, was the subject of a sixty minutes piece in late September. The original reporter who visited the school ten years earlier went back to track her students, and found much success in this unique school.

I went there three weeks ago, and everything that is said is true. Here is a woman -- and her children now -- who strive to instill some of the most impoverished children with a curriculum that is matched by few public or even many private schools. Marva Collins was a Chicago public school teacher who left in disgust at not being able to provide the kind of curriculum she was convinced these children needed. Had there been a charter law at the time, she wouldn't have had to leave.

Today, her children are still reciting and learning the classics. Let me read a small excerpt of the sixty minutes piece:

**Other examples of bold teachers;**

**Woman in Hartford, No fame or glory.**

The teacher in California who would prefer to teach phonics based reading, or the one who would prefer the whole language approach -- let's let the people decide which is best for their children.

Why not let the Marva Collins in the schools free to start their own schools -- if they so choose? And what of all of the parents who are concerned that their children's needs aren't being met?

There is enormous consensus in this country that public education as it exists today is not meeting the needs of a majority of its students. One answer is the charter school concept. It is a way to

reinvigorate the schools, to create more and diverse schools, to allow 1,000 flowers to bloom.

You in Ohio have an enormous opportunity ahead of you. You are so close to making this a reality. To those of you that have honest concerns, I say to you, allow this experiment to play itself out. It is not a fad, and I think you'll come to be a believer. But given the sheer opportunity, and not mandate, for those who wish to participate, don't we owe it to our children to help provide them with the opportunities to gain the education that best meets their needs today? TO those of you who already are believers, know that the political process is a difficult one, and you must be ready to help build support for this concept if it is to become reality.

The legislation that has passed the House and is pending in the Senate would be the strongest law to date on the books. It provides for....

*(Discussion of bill)*

No charter law has gotten through a legislature without a fight. Many have been so watered down that they're not worth having at all. Do something bold -- do it now. Your children will not be disappointed.