



The winds of change are blowing as it relates to education in this country. National opinion polling, focus group studies, and the proverbial word on the street suggest that everyday people are sick and tired of the growing deficits they see in the children who are being educated in our traditional public schools. Folks are no longer accepting of the status quo—nor should they be. The status quo is frightening and the statistics don't lie.

One size does not fit all

According to the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), our children just aren't doing as well as they should be doing in our schools. For example, in both math and reading, approximately 30 percent of the nation's school children test at or above the proficient level. What's worse, roughly 12 percent of African-American and 15 percent of Hispanic 8th graders are testing at or above the proficient level.

The achievement gap between white kids and most children of color is downright scary. According to *Given Half a Chance—The Schott Foundation's 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males*, only 47 percent of African-American males in high school graduate, compared to 75 percent of their white male counterparts. More alarmingly, as the Schott Report reveals, a growing number of the largest school districts are showing African-American male graduation rates of less than 40 percent. Across the country, the numbers are grim:

Minneapolis, MN	38%	New York, NY	32%
Cincinnati, OH	38%	Milwaukee, WI	32%
Orange County, CA	37%	Buffalo, NY	31%
Memphis, TN	35%	Baltimore, MD	31%
St. Louis, MO	35%	Detroit, MI	20%
Dade County, FL	34%	Indianapolis, IN	19%
Cleveland, Ohio	34%		

As shocking as these statistics are, we should find no comfort in the fact that the achievement gap has actually been closed in places like Indianapolis and Detroit. In Indianapolis, the white male graduation rate mirrors the African-American male rate of 19 percent. In Detroit, only 17 percent of white males graduate compared to 20 percent of African-American males.

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The response of policymakers to this crisis in our schools has been generally tepid—at best. While advocates rightly ask for adequate resources, increases in teacher development, and better links between social services and school districts, the real problem with America’s public schools is our nostalgic commitment to a one-size-fits-all education service delivery model, which is largely unchanged from its establishment during the Industrial Revolution of the 1800s.

Since its 19th century inception, public school administration has morphed into a bureaucratic business of its own primarily focused on self preservation at the expense of improving outcomes for children. If this were not so, how can it be that so many thousands of administrators stand idly by while our national educational results get worse? The truth is that unwieldy work rules that promote job maintenance and a dumbed-down culture that celebrates incremental progress have left us with a system that talks about reform, but is either unwilling or unable to execute from within the wholesale change required to yield the results we need.

The emergence of charter schools

Against this backdrop, charter schools have emerged as a beacon of hope for parents and students alike. Although in existence for less than 20 years and educating only 1.3 million of America’s 53 million school children, charter schools have provided a much needed shot in the arm for our nation’s public school system.

It is important to emphasize that charter schools are public schools. Although they most often receive only a fraction of the funding that goes to a local school, they are supported by the same federal, state, and local dollars. They are open to all students. Free from many of the bureaucratic shackles that constrict their traditional counterparts, charter schools are instead overseen by public agencies, called authorizers, which hold them responsible for the academic and fiscal goals laid out in their charters. Most importantly, charter schools are ultimately beholden to the public, the individual families, who may freely choose them or not.

The beauty of a charter school is that it grants authority to a handful of community members to give shape to their creative vision. For this reason, charters tend to have widely diverse missions and approaches to education, and to some extent these varying approaches have led to their success. The diverse, yet focused, curriculum designs offered by many charters also explode the one-size-fits-all paradigm by meeting kids where they are academically and according to their individual interests as opposed to force fitting kids into a system that may not meet their needs. Indeed, some of the most stunning examples of charter school success are precisely those that have figured out how to adapt to the individual needs of individual children.

At the same time, many successful charter schools have striking commonalities in the underlying principles that contribute to their overall success. These core principles, grounded in a culture of accountability and high expectations, create an environment conducive to learning and to kids fulfilling their potential. Notable examples include the 66 KIPP charter schools all across the country; the Friendship and SEED charter schools in Washington, D.C. and Baltimore; the Jumoke Academy and Amistad charter schools in Connecticut; the Harlem Village Academy charter school in New York; YES College Prep charter school in Houston, Texas;

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the Oakland charter school in Oakland, California; MATCH in Boston; Renaissance Elementary in Miami; and Gateway Charter High in Ft. Myers, Florida. The list goes on and on.

Let's be clear: not all charter schools are good schools. Indeed, quality concerns drive reformers to push for more accountability and to take direct action against those charters that don't measure up. Fortunately, it is the very essence of the "charter" relationship that allows charters to be closed if they don't deliver what they promised. Unlike the traditional school system in which a failing school can languish for decades without fear of reprisal, today bad charters are being shut down when they fail to keep their promise to our children.

One of the leading causes of bad charter schools is a bad charter school law. A strong charter school bill leads to the likelihood of better charter schools; a weak charter school law only invites weak charter schools. What are the ingredients of a strong charter school law? First, these schools must have legal, operational, and fiscal autonomy. Charter schools must be able to operate free of bureaucratic interference, a problem that still plagues many charter schools—especially when they are not supported by strong laws. Many school districts try to treat charters as one of their own and impose on them stifling regulations and reporting requirements. Ultimately, however, charters are accountable to the public by way of the authorizers they must satisfy and the families they must serve well. Legislators and school administrators should resist the urge to impose invasive regulations on charter schools. Respect should be accorded to the charter and to the contractual relationship between the school and the authorizer which, by law, is the proper mechanism to ensure that quality outcomes are enforced.

Second, successful charters are more likely to emerge when they receive guaranteed full funding. Nationwide, on average, charter schools are funded at 61 percent of their district counterparts, averaging \$6,585 per pupil compared to \$10,771 per pupil at conventional district public schools. While many charters do more with less, it is important that all public school students be funded at the same level.

Finally, states that have multiple charter authorizers have more robust and diverse charter schools. In many states, the only charter school authorizer is the local school district or the state education board. Many of these entities work hard not to grant charters because they view charters as the competition, or even worse, the enemy. Allowing for universities, mayors, or a separately appointed charter authorizing board to sponsor charter schools and to enforce the law's accountability requirements creates a more level playing field for charter schools to grow and to improve the state's public school offerings as a whole.

The future is now

We are entering a brave new world in how we evaluate and ultimately fix our schools. While there is some disagreement on the type and pace of reforms needed, most reform advocates agree that charter schools are part of the solution. So does the public, as evidenced by the fact that nearly every charter school in America has waiting lists of families seeking to place their children in a better school. Newly elected President Barack Obama has both recognized that demand and the utility of charter schools by committing to doubling the amount of federal dollars available to start more charters.

For many, however, the question becomes: where will this all lead? The reality is that our traditional public education system alone is utterly unfit to address the new realities of our society or to provide the dynamic, diversified, technology-driven approach to learning that children need to thrive in this age. We must leave the Industrial Revolution behind and embrace a new model of public education. One single approach no longer works with all children. Just as diversity of population is one of the greatest strengths of this country, so too diversity of educational options, approaches, and experiences will help catalyze meaningful change in public education.

The partisan debates often hold that the charter school experiment is an either/or proposition: either you favor charters or you prefer traditional public schools. The preferred proposition, however, suggests that we

embrace those learning environments—no matter what they are called—that help a child to learn.

The key is in recognizing that we must change our approach to educating our children in this country. Change is difficult, but in this case, it is essential and the right thing to do. In an ideal world and years from now, perhaps charters, traditional public schools, and other learning environments will converge to form a unitary system where they are largely reform-driven, kid-centered, and indistinguishable in their overall quality. For the moment, however, charter schools are serving an important purpose. The best of them are allowing for the coordination in one central location of desperately needed services for students, parents, and community members. They are gaining access to children at an early age and identifying their unique interests. They are providing a system that is malleable enough to respond to children’s needs. They are, in reality, filling a void left by the traditional public school system.

Until that void is completely filled, local and national policy makers must continue to be open-minded toward charter schools, as well as toward other reform measures that ensure creativity, innovation, and real accountability for results. Our children deserve nothing less.

About the author

Kevin P. Chavous is a partner at the law firm Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal LLP and is the author of *Serving Our Children: Charter Schools and the Reform of American Public Education*. He is a Distinguished Fellow with the Center for Education Reform and serves on the board of the Black Alliance for Educational Options. He also is a co-founder and Chair of Democrats for Education Reform and a founding member of the Education Equality Project.

As a former member of the Council of the District of Columbia and Chair of the Council’s Education Committee, Chavous was at the forefront of promoting change within the District public school system.

Under his education committee chairmanship, the District of Columbia became the most prolific charter school jurisdiction in the country, with over 30 percent of D.C.'s public school children now attending charter schools. In addition, Chavous assisted in shaping the District's three sector education partnership with the federal government. That partnership led to 50 million new federal dollars for D.C. public schools and D.C. charter schools. It also funded the first federal scholarship program to allow 2,000 low income children to attend private schools.

More recently, Chavous led the team working with Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal that advocated for the recently passed scholarship program in New Orleans. As a result of that legislation, nearly 1,000 students are now attending private schools of their choice in the New Orleans parish. An early supporter of Barack Obama, Chavous served as a member on the Education Policy Committee of the Obama Presidential Campaign.

Chavous was born and raised in Indianapolis, Indiana, and graduated from Wabash College, where he was an NCAA All-American in basketball. He also graduated from the Howard University School of Law. He lives in Washington, D.C.