
When he was struggling to open and build the Boston Collegiate Charter School in the 1990s, Brett Peiser, fresh out of Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, wondered, in a bit of gallows humor, whether some future graduate student would be writing a thesis on the noble but failed experiment known as charter schools with a title something like “Charter Schools in Massachusetts, 1993–2001.” His pessimism about the future of schools like his was borne as much from the buzz saw of political opposition that charters faced as from the herculean task of creating and running a public school serving low-income urban students without facilities financing and with less money per child than the public school down the road run by the city.

Close to 20 years later, charter schools serve more than a million and a half students in 42 states. They enjoy the active support of a Democratic president and his education secretary. Brett Peiser? He is the chief executive officer of the Uncommon network of charter schools, which was recognized in 2013 by the Broad Foundation for the excellence of its schools, including the one he founded, Boston Collegiate. It turns out that we do not have that graduate thesis on the demise of charter schools to read, but instead, we have a comprehensive survey of where a mature and established charter school movement stands in a new book by Priscilla Wohlstetter, Joanna Smith, and Caitlin C. Farrell, Choices and Challenges: Charter School Performance in Perspective.

This is a balanced volume that scrupulously includes the perspectives of charter critics and advocates alike. These perspectives are laid out in the penultimate chapter of the book and provide the most thought-provoking commentary in the volume. The authors interviewed five prominent education thinkers, and they fastidiously note that each was interviewed individually for 45 minutes to an hour. Their answers to the same four questions were recorded:

1. In what ways if any have charter schools challenged the definition and boundaries of public education?
2. Across the levels of the system—classroom, school, district—where have charters succeeded and where have they fallen short?
3. How is the relationship between charter and non-charter public schools changing? How is the role of charters in the education sector as a whole evolving?
4. Most policies last 10 to 20 years before being eclipsed by “the next big thing.” What does the charter sector have to do in the next 5 years to assure its future?

Columbia University professor Jeff Henig makes that critical observation that “[c]harters have become concentrated in a small number of places—they don’t go everywhere in large numbers . . . partly because the CMO’s don’t want to go where the per pupil funding isn’t high enough, where buildings/facilities are difficult.” This struck me as an accurate observation, but is it really an indictment of charters, as it is a call to state lawmakers around the country to rewrite unfair charter laws that provide fewer dollars to charters than their district-run counterparts?

There is also charter godfather Bruno Manno’s view of the connection between the organizations that grant the authority to open new charter schools—called authorizers—and the quality of charter schools that come from them: “Authorizers have not been fully responsible at closing schools down or improving them.” Perhaps authorizers have not moved as quickly to close poorly performing charters as they should, but a charter school authorizer is no better positioned to improve the quality of a school than...
conventional wisdom, backed by substantial data, and charters such as KIPP lead the way.

The ultimate question of whether charter schools increase student achievement is a fraught one, and those looking for an easy answer in this book will be disappointed. What readers will find is an excellent survey of the best research available, some of which supports the argument that charters boost achievement and some research that does not. At one end of the spectrum is Stanford University economist Caroline Hoxby’s research comparing the academic outcomes of those who won a spot in a charter school through an entrance lottery with those who did not—the ultimate “gold standard” research. Her findings: students in charters surpassed their non-charter counterparts. At the other end of the spectrum is Macke Raymond, also at Stanford, and her regression analysis, which created virtual “twins” to correspond with the students enrolled in charters. She concluded that in many states, students in charters do no better than their counterparts in other public schools and, in most instances, do worse. For the record, I am a charter advocate, but I have met with Raymond to review her findings, and I find her research methods and her conclusions both compelling and sobering.

So much of what is written elsewhere about charter schools is tendentious and filled with the rhetoric of zealous advocates on both sides of the charter debate. Wohlstetter, Smith, and Farrell have written a book that evenhandedly summarizes the studies done over the last two decades. In doing so, they have provided a handy companion to policy makers and students of education alike that points the way toward the research that needs to be done to help us answer some of the questions that remain about charters and the degree to which they have fulfilled their promise.