

From Promising to Proven

The charter school boom ahead

BY KARL ZINSMEISTER

For years, philanthropists large and small have labored to improve student outcomes at ineffective public schools. From the Ford Foundation's decades of interventions, to hordes of concerned corporate donors hoping to encourage excellence, to the more than \$1 billion spent in Walter Annenberg's "challenge," these donors ended up with shockingly little to show for their large efforts.

Then in 1991, Minnesota pioneered the concept of public, open-admission schools operated by nonprofits or other independent parties, without heavy regulation. Teachers and leaders in these schools were given great autonomy, but faced closure if the school didn't show good student results. California passed a similar law the next year.

The nation's first charter school opened in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1992. It was designed for students who had dropped out of school, and most of the charters that followed were likewise focused on children let down by conventional schools. About two thirds of charter school students today are minority or low-income.

While they are funded by taxpayers, typical charter schools receive less than 80 percent of the support given to conventional public schools. Philanthropy has thus played a very large role in financing charters, as well as in establishing their mission and operating strategies. And charter schools have evolved to have many distinctive features.

They generally have longer school days and longer school years. Many place high expectations on students (resulting in 100 percent college acceptance at many leading inner-city charters). They often have strict discipline, and many require parents and students to sign contracts that commit them to serious duties. Many recruit teachers and principals outside of traditional credential channels, seeking particularly creative and dedicated individuals. Charters have been

extremely innovative in shaping teacher pay, creating curricula, experimenting with class structures, and adapting technology. They often share a commitment to rigorous testing and sharing student results with parents and the public.

Having begun from nothing, the charter school movement spread slowly. Not until year ten did the total number of American children in charters pass 500,000. Then donors began to notice some startling patterns.

Bill Gates explains that after his foundation decided in the mid-1990s to focus on U.S. schooling, it poured about \$2 billion into various education experiments. During the first decade, he reports, "many of the schools that we invested in did not improve students' achievement in any significant way." There was, however, one fascinating exception. "A few of the schools that we funded achieved something amazing. They replaced schools with low expectations and low results with ones that have high expectations and high results." And there was a common variable: "Almost all of these schools were charter schools."

Other philanthropists had the same experience. Eli Broad, one of the biggest givers to education in the U.S., observed that "charter school systems are delivering the best student outcomes, particularly for poor and minority students." Ted Mitchell of the NewSchools Venture Fund drew some bold bottom lines: "Good charter schools have pretty much eliminated the high-school dropout rate. And they've doubled the college-going rate of underserved kids."

Today, the number, variety, and quality of charter schools are soaring. In 2014, 2.6 million children are attending 6,500 charter schools in the U.S. Every year now, more than 600 new charters open their doors for

the first time, and an additional 300,000 children enroll (while a million kids remain on waiting lists). Charter school attendance really began to accelerate around 2009, and as this is written it looks like there may be 5 million children in charters before the end of the current decade.

Expanding charter networks

Many funders have concluded that the surest and fastest way to add excellent school seats is to take existing charter schools with well-tested features and launch them in bulk. In essence, donors are extending the reach of charter school "brands" by creating franchises. Today, nonprofits operating multi-campus networks of schools are adding students at ten times the rate of single-campus charter schools or for-profit operators.

The national brand that has received support from more funders than any other is KIPP Schools. All KIPP leaders undergo a common training program, and every school subscribes to a set of principles called the "five pillars," with a no-excuses focus on student performance, as demonstrated on standardized tests. KIPP's headquarters provides individual schools with regular support and guidance, and closely monitors results. But each school operates independently or as part of a city-level network, which leads some researchers to describe KIPP as employing the "franchise" model.



Karl Zinsmeister is author of From Promising to Proven: A Wise Giver's Guide to Expanding on the Success of Charter Schools, the new handbook on charter school philanthropy just published by The Philanthropy Roundtable. Go to www.PhilanthropyRoundtable.org/guidebook to get a copy.

The most impressive fact about KIPP is its consistent, superior student performance. KIPP students, 86 percent of whom are low-income and 95 percent African-American or Latino, perform better than their local district counterparts in more than nine cases out of ten, on both reading and math. More than 93 percent of children who complete eighth grade at a KIPP school graduate from high school, and more than 83 percent go on to college. In conventional public schools with similar demographics, the college matriculation rate is 20 percent. KIPPsters complete bachelor's degrees at rates higher than the general U.S. population, and at four times the rate of other students from poor communities.

Another very successful charter operator, Achievement First, is expanding to meet rippling public demand in New York, Connecticut, and Rhode Island. Starting in 2003 with one school, by 2013 Achievement First had expanded (with philanthropic help) to 25 elementary, middle, and high schools, with more to come. The Achievement First network currently serves some 8,100 children, many of them poor and minority students.

Achievement First has made remarkable progress with its children. On the 2012 New York state math assessment, 88 percent of its pupils achieved proficiency, compared to 60 percent of all students in New York City, and 65 percent of all students statewide. In language arts, 58 percent of Achievement First students achieved proficiency, versus 47 percent of all New York City students and 55 percent of all students in New York. In Connecticut, 61 percent of Achievement First high-schoolers who took the U.S. History Advanced Placement exam scored a 4 or 5 (out of 5), compared to only 33 percent of students across the U.S. More than 75 percent of Achievement First high-school graduates earn a bachelor's degree within six years. (The overall college graduation rates for African-American and Latino adults are 18 percent and 11 percent respectively.)

A third impressive charter network, Uncommon Schools, is now replicating itself on additional campuses. At pres-

ent, the organization serves about 9,000 students at 38 charter schools across Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York. Eight out of ten are low-income, and 98 percent are African-American or Hispanic.

Like other fast-growing high-quality charter operators, Uncommon Schools gets remarkable results with its underprivileged children. In recent years, Uncommon closed 56 percent of the achievement gap between its African-American students and white students in the same state. In 2012, 100 percent of the network's high school seniors took the SAT exam, achieving an average score 72 points above the national average.

Netflix founder and entrepreneur par excellence Reed Hastings helped found Aspire Public Schools, one of the very first charter management organizations, by supplying its original funding and many of its animating ideas. The program immediately caught on, and within 15 years of its 1998 startup it was educating 13,500 students annually in 37 schools.

As a group, Aspire's students significantly outperform the average score on California's statewide achievement exams, and they come out head and shoulders above comparable students in conventional schools. Two thirds of Aspire schools, with

Some large nonprofit charter school operators

Some large nonprofit charter school operators	
KIPP Schools	141 schools and 51,000 students in 21 states, and counting
Aspire Schools	37 schools and 14,000 students in California and Tennessee
Uncommon Schools	38 schools in New York, New Jersey, and Massachusetts, serving about 9,000 students
Achievement First	25 schools enrolling 8,100 in three states
YES Prep	13 campuses and 8,000 students in Houston, with 10 more schools on the way in Texas, Tennessee, and Louisiana
Success Academy Charter Schools	22 New York City schools enrolling 6,700 students, on a path to 40 campuses
Alliance College-Ready Public Schools	22 L.A. schools with more than 10,000 students
Lighthouse Academies	21 schools in eight states
Green Dot Schools	20 schools, most in L.A.; more than 10,000 students
Great Hearts Academies	16 schools in metropolitan Phoenix, to become 22, and one in Texas
Mastery Schools	15 Philadelphia academies, mostly "turnarounds" of failed conventional public schools
BASIS Schools	12, soon to be 15, schools in Arizona, Texas, and D.C.
IDEA Public Schools	30 schools in Texas, on a path to 56 schools by 2017
Noble Network	15 Chicago campuses with 9,000 students
Uplift Education	13 schools in the Dallas-Fort Worth area
PUC Schools	13 campuses in southern California
High Tech High	12 schools and 5,200 pupils in San Diego, with a special focus on math, engineering, and technical careers
Rocketship Education	10 schools in California and Wisconsin, with others on the way for Tennessee, Indiana, Louisiana, Texas, and D.C.

ideas

student bodies composed mostly of minority and low-income children, have already exceeded the state target for “academic excellence.” Indeed, if you treat Aspire as its own school district, it ranks in the top 5 percent for performance and achievement, when compared to similar-size districts across California. And the schools get better every year: On California’s Academic Performance Index, Aspire’s total score has increased, without fail, each year since the network was founded.

Silicon Valley birthed another charter network in Rocketship Education, the brainchild of philanthropist and CEO John Danner. Rocketship is well known as a pioneer in the field of blended learning—mixing computerized instruction and face-to-face tutoring to create personalized instruction for each student. Though 90 percent of its students are low-income, and 75 percent come from non-English-speaking homes, fully 80 percent of Rocketeers score at the “proficient” or “advanced” level for math on the California Standards Test. That’s nearly the same as the 83 percent rate achieved in California’s ten most affluent districts.

Rocketship’s blended learning model, which requires fewer teachers, also offers economic advantages that have made it easier to expand. The organization’s first school opened in San Jose, California, in 2007. Its success soon led to a total of eight Rocketship schools in the city, serving 4,500 pupils. Despite this rapid growth, the organization still has 2,500 families on its waiting list. In 2013, Rocketship opened its first school in Milwaukee, a city where only 46 percent of elementary-age children are expected to graduate from high school. With strong philanthropic support, Rocketship will open eight schools in Milwaukee during the next four years and another eight in Nashville, where its first school opens in 2014. The organization has also won charters to oper-

ate in New Orleans, Indianapolis, Memphis, and Washington, D.C. Its goal is to operate in 50 cities and serve 1 million children.

After starting as an experiment in trailers on a deserted parking lot in Houston, the school network known as YES Prep now has 8,000 students on 13 campuses. Donors impressed by its ability to get some of the top results in the U.S. are supporting a massive expansion that will make the network twice as big in a matter of years, including new campuses in Louisiana, Tennessee, and probably other states. The standardized test scores of YES Prep’s overwhelmingly low-income and minority students are consistently higher in every subject than the average score across Texas. Its dropout rate of 1 percent compares to 16 percent in the wider Houston public school district.

The BASIS charter school network, yet another high-performing group now undergoing expansion with help from givers, operates a dozen schools in Arizona, Texas, and D.C., with more in the works. BASIS administers a rigorous, A.P.-based curriculum to students across the board. “We have been severely underestimating all kids,” argues co-founder Michael Block.

BASIS negotiates an initial salary individually with each teacher. It also offers performance-based financial incentives. Teachers of A.P. courses, for instance, earn an additional \$100 for every student who makes a grade of 4 on the exam, and an additional \$200 for every student who earns a 5. Rather than traditional sick days, BASIS gives teachers a “wellness bonus” of \$1,500. They then lose a pre-determined amount for each sick day taken.

The results of all of this are outstanding. The typical student at this open-admission public school takes ten A.P. exams, and the average score is 3.6. In 2012, BASIS students outscored national averages on A.P. exams in 23 different subjects. In 2012, more than 25

percent of all BASIS seniors were National Merit Scholarship Finalists, an honor earned by about 1 percent of all U.S. high school seniors. International tests like the PISA exam show that BASIS students are competitive with the best scholars anywhere in the world. The network’s major goal is to maintain its extremely high and consistent level of quality as it continues to grow with philanthropic support. “All cities should have a BASIS,” say the network’s leaders.

A very different charter school operator now in expansion mode is Great Hearts Academies. Built on an academically rigorous, classical liberal arts education with an emphasis on the great books, Great Hearts has 16 schools in Arizona and more on the way, including one in Texas. Currently more than 9,000 students sit on waiting lists.

Great Hearts has no electives. All students take the same challenging sequence in math, science, foreign language, fine arts, and humanities. Students learn Algebra I in seventh grade, putting them on a path to complete calculus in eleventh and twelfth grade. Three years of Latin begin in sixth grade. Medieval history is required in eighth grade, music and poetry in ninth and tenth. The “core reading list” for elementary students includes *Don Quixote*, *Gulliver’s Travels*, *Treasure Island*, and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. For middle and high school, the list includes the *Aeneid*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Federalist #10*, *Henry V*, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, and *Plato’s Republic*.

Great Hearts also forms its students morally, seeking to “graduate thoughtful leaders of character who will contribute to a more philosophical, humane, and just society.” Students wear uniforms and adhere to an honor code. The schools try to instill nine core virtues in students: humility, integrity, friendship, perseverance, wisdom, courage, responsibility, honesty, and citizenship. One “philosophical pillar” of the network’s culture is that “sarcasm, bad will, and apathy are toxic to the work of teaching and learning.” Great Hearts vigorously recruits instructors it believes will be exceptional classroom leaders, regardless of their backgrounds or state certifications. “We place stock in content expertise and pedagogy, which don’t neces-

The charter school movement spread slowly. Not until year ten did the total number of American children in charters pass 500,000. Then donors began to notice some startling patterns.

sarily track with teacher credentialing,” says donor and co-founder Jay Heiler.

On 2012 statewide assessments, Great Hearts students outperformed the average Arizona student in every tested subject and every grade level. Of the five schools with 2012 graduating classes, between 83 and 97 percent of graduating seniors were headed to four-year colleges. Thirteen percent of all seniors at Chandler Prep, one of the network’s high schools, were named National Merit Scholarship Finalists.

What does research say?

In the 2013 *U.S. News and World Report* rankings of public high schools, 41 charters made it into the top 200. Since charter schools represent about 5 percent of the high school market, that finding means 21 percent of our best institutions are charters—an impressive over-representation.

Yet there are poor and mediocre charters as well as excellent ones. How does the overall mix stack up? Stanford’s Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) offers the definitive research on this subject. It zeroes in on hard measures of achievement (primarily test scores), makes adjustments for demographic and economic status of the students being compared, and provides comprehensive results over time. Its initial study of charter school quality began in 2009; the latest was released in 2013.

CREDO has found that charters are more likely than conventional schools to be great. They are also more likely to be crummy. Yet the greats outnumber the crummies. Overall, charters are already as good as or better than conventional schools, and they are accelerating steadily, as weak schools get closed down and many strong ones get founded—especially replications by the top nonprofit chains such as those mentioned above.

One of the crispest findings is that charters are especially valuable to poor and minority children. In the words of a research summary: “This study found that public charter schools posted superior results with historically disadvantaged student populations.... In nearly every category and subject area [charters] outperformed traditional public schools for

the following student populations: Black, Hispanic, high-poverty, English-language learners, and special education.”

Thanks to funding from the Robertson, Fairbanks, and Smith Richardson foundations, among others, the CREDO investigators supplemented their national study with regional investigations. During 2012 and 2013, they conducted quality studies in five states that indicate how high the bar has risen in the charter sector.

In Massachusetts, the typical charter school student now absorbs the equivalent of two and a half extra months of learning every year in math, compared to peers in conventional public schools, and one and a half extra months of learning in reading. This advantage was even larger at big-city schools. In Boston, charter students surpassed conventional students by the equivalent of 13 months of additional learning per year in math, and 12 months in reading. In other words, by the time regular public school kids learned one year of material, the charter pupils had covered about two years’ worth of knowledge. Not one single Boston charter school was found to have significantly lower-than-average learning gains.

In Michigan, a typical charter school student gained an extra two months of learning in both math and reading over the course of a school year, compared to regular public school children. Here again, the advantage was especially pronounced within urban areas, with charter kids in Detroit gaining nearly three months of extra achievement. In math, 42 percent of charter schools outperformed their district school counterparts, with only 6 percent performing worse. In reading, 35 percent exceeded district schools, while 2 percent lagged.

The same investigation in New York City found charter students outstripping others by five months of extra learning

per year in math, and one extra month in reading.

Indiana students absorbed an extra month and a half of learning per year in both math and reading.

And in New Jersey, charter students gained three extra months of learning in math, and two extra months in reading, each school year. The big-city effect was again present: In Newark, charter students gained an additional nine months per year in math, and seven and a half months in reading.

A successful social movement

Charter schooling is no longer in its experimental stage. It is a proven model. Good charter school operators have demonstrated that they can produce consistently impressive results with the very same children who are floundering in conventional urban schools.

It’s already clear that charter schooling is one of the great self-organizing social movements of our age. An army of independent social entrepreneurs refused to accept the heartbreaking failures of our government-run schools. Long lists of private donors like Don and Doris Fisher, the Walton family, Eli and Edythe Broad, Laura and John Arnold, Bill and Melinda Gates, Katherine Bradley, Michael and Susan Dell, and others made heavy investments over many years. They powered a spontaneous uprising, with little or no help from the education establishment, and constructed an alternate universe for students.

As philanthropists now deploy an additional surge of resources into bringing today’s best charter schools to new communities, I’ll make a prediction: A decade from now, the cumulative results are likely to demonstrate that charter schools are the most important social innovation in America of the last generation. **P**

Overall, charters are already as good as or better than conventional schools, and they are accelerating steadily, as weak schools get closed down and many strong ones get founded.