EXPERIMENTATION FALLS SHORT AS A JUSTIFICATION FOR MORE CHARTER SCHOOLS

Helen F. Ladd

"This is the published version of the following invited article: Ladd, H. F. (2019), Experimentation Falls Short as a Justification for More Charter Schools. J. Pol. Anal. Manage., 38: 1074-1076, which has been published in final form at https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.22165. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Use of Self-Archived Versions."

Copyright and Photocopying: Copyright © 2019 by the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored, or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior permission in writing from the copyright holder. Authorization to photocopy items for internal and personal use is granted by the copyright holder for libraries and other users registered with their local Reproduction Rights Organisation (RRO), e.g. Copyright Clearance Center (CCO), 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, USA (www.copyright.com), provided the appropriate fee is paid directly to the RRO. This consent does not extend to other kinds of copying such as copying for general distribution, for advertising or promotional purposes, for creating works or for resale. Special requests should be addressed to: permissions@wiley.com.
EXPERIMENTATION FALLS SHORT AS A JUSTIFICATION FOR MORE CHARTER SCHOOLS

Helen F. Ladd

Philip Gleason’s argument for expanding charters rests primarily on the desirability of educational experimentation. He begins by crediting Al Shanker, who, as the leader of the American Federation of Teachers in 1988, called for charter schools as a way to promote innovation in education. Although he briefly acknowledges that Shanker’s vision for charters differed significantly from the current version of charter schools, Gleason fails to mention that by the mid-1990s, Shanker was so disaffected with the direction in which the charter school movement was headed that he strongly criticized them in several weekly paid advertisements in the New York Times.¹

Nonetheless, Gleason asserts that the right way to assess the success and potential of charter schools is to “ask whether the central motivating feature of Shanker’s vision has been fulfilled. . . . In short, are charter schools searching for better ways to educate children, and are we learning from the search?” (Gleason, 2019). By focusing on potential benefits from experimentation, he is ignoring the systemic costs of charter schools that I highlighted in my initial essay.

In addition, Gleason’s discussion of charter schools is limited by his failure to make any reference to public accountability. This absence is both surprising and unacceptable given that charters are publicly funded, and that education is deemed so important to the life chances of individuals that we make it compulsory for all children. Moreover, the fact that experimentation inevitably involves taking risks means some form of accountability is needed to ensure that the risks of harming children are not excessive.

Some supporters of charter schools might argue that government-imposed accountability is not needed because, as schools of choice, charters face strong market-based incentives to be effective. But other supporters disagree. In their 2000 book

¹ See Shanker’s statements on 7/3/94, 12/18/94, 11/19/95, 2/18/96, and 12/22/96, available from the American Federation of Teachers.
strongly supporting charter schools, for example, Finn, Manno, and Vanorek argue that public accountability is critical to the success of charter schools (Finn et al., 2000, ch. 6). They call for an accountability system for charters based on full disclosure and transparency, an approach they prefer to regulation so as not to burden charters with bureaucratic regulation. While some people might prefer regulation—for example, in the form of minimum qualifications for teachers—and others might quibble with the details of their proposed approach, it is hard to argue with the need for some form of public accountability.

Accountability to Finn, Manno, and Vanorek includes full public disclosure of the activities of individual charter schools, clear procedures and adequate capacity of charter sponsors, and periodic evaluation by the state government. Individual charter schools, they argue, should be fully transparent about their mission, their curriculum, student performance, fiscal soundness, organizational viability, and compliance with the law. Only with full publicly available information will parents and policymakers be in a good position to make wise decisions about individual charter schools. Charter school sponsors or authorizers, in turn, should have a clear charter approval process, one that assures in advance that the schools will have the staff and the capacity needed to provide high quality education. Further, the authorizers need sufficient staff to support struggling charters and to make wise renewal decisions. Finally, the state should make available information on its charter school program as a whole with periodic evaluations of its overall impacts. The authors also argue that the state should undertake independent financial audits of both the schools and the sponsors to assure against fraud and misuse of public funds.

In practice, the charter authorization and accountability systems in many states are inadequate. Take California, for example. Specifically designed to encourage the growth of charter schools, California’s system is highly decentralized with little accountability for the districts and county offices that act as authorizers. A recent review of the state’s system noted the small scale, modest funding, and limited capacity of many local authorizers and the low bar for charter renewal that follows from the absence of a distinct renewal process (Raymond et al., 2018). In contrast, Massachusetts, with its centralized authorization system, has historically had one of the most effective systems. This high quality may help explain the highly touted success of the Boston charters. Distinctive features of the Massachusetts approach include visits by external teams to evaluate each charter on 10 performance criteria twice during each five-year renewal period and sufficient staffing to help struggling charters on probation to develop remedial programs.

Clearly, public accountability in some form is necessary to maximize the benefits of the experimentation that Gleason promotes. Moreover, it would help ensure that charter schools are responsive to the children and families they serve, have a reasonable chance of succeeding, do not enrich their operators at the expense of serving children, and contribute to the public interest.

A BRIEF NOTE ON MEASURING THE BENEFITS OF CHARTER SCHOOL EXPERIMENTATION

Gleason accurately summarizes many of the high quality studies of the effects of charter schools on test scores, college enrollment, or annual earnings (see his
Of interest in each study is the impacts of charter schools on enrolled students. One should ask, however, whether these studies, regardless of how technically sophisticated they may be, address the relevant policy question. If charter schools were simply experimental schools on the fringes of larger education systems, the answer might be yes. In that case, learning that one or more charter schools or charter networks generate benefits to students that exceed those they would have attained in the traditional system could be useful for determining which types deserve support moving forward and which might have practices that could be transferred to the traditional public schools. Even for this purpose, however, one would want to pay attention not just to student outcomes, but to additional factors contributing to those outcomes. This consideration is relevant, for example, for the evaluation of schools or networks of schools (such as the KIPP schools to which Gleason refers in several places) whose documented success with students may be partially attributable to factors that would not be readily transferable to traditional public schools. Such factors include the availability of additional resources from philanthropists or a school’s willingness to dismiss students (Miron et al., 2011).

More generally, the policy-relevant research question is not whether some charter schools serve a select group of students well, but whether the students in the local system as a whole benefit from the presence of the charter schools. That would require investigating whether all children are doing better on average in communities where charter expansion is greater than in other communities, controlling for other confounding factors. In sum, Gleason’s argument that the benefits of experimentation justify the expansion of charter schools falls short in at least two ways: His failure to address the need for public accountability and the potential for charters to adversely affect students served by traditional public school systems.

HELEN F. LADD is the Susan B. King Professor Emerita of Public Policy at Duke University, P.O. Box 90312, Durham, NC 27708-0312 (e-mail: hladd@duke.edu).

REFERENCES