THE IMPORTANCE OF CHARTER/ING

AS A PROCESS FOR INNOVATION

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We've had "charter schools" for 10 years now. Here in Wisconsin and nationally everybody wants to know how it's coming. This is an important question. Not surprisingly there are lots of studies being done.

I wish these studies and evaluations were helping more than I think they are. The discussion is at the moment quite muddled. In a sense this is understandable: The states are doing something new. New policies, new institutional arrangements, new organizational forms are appearing. But people are trying to fit new pieces into old patterns . . . trying to describe new things with old terms. And that does not work very well. This is the problem I told John Witte I would talk about. He asked me to go first.

Let me try to explain the confusion, the unclarity.

Most people talk about all this as "charter schools". They say "charter schools" when they mean, literally, the schools. They say "charter schools" when they mean the law, the program, the whole idea of the state letting somebody else start and run an autonomous public school – or, in Milwaukee, the idea of the state letting somebody other than the district board offer public education by sponsoring one of these "charter schools". Nobody really knows whether it's "charter schools *are* . . ." or "charter schools *is* . . ."

Now these are quite different things: the schools, on the one hand; the new process for creating new schools on the other. But the two are mushed together: "charter schools". We don't think about the state's new program for creating schools separately from thinking about the schools-created. So we don't evaluate charter/ing separately. And this is a problem.

When people ask "Is it working?" they are mainly asking whether students are learning. This becomes the test for the schools – and not unreasonably . . . though we can wonder whether test-scores should be the only measure of student success . But – as I will try to explain – this is not a reasonable way to evaluate the law, the program . . . what is essentially a research-and-development process. The two are very different things.

In an R&D process we are looking for innovations. Not every new thing tried will succeed. Many will fail; perhaps most. That's OK: Not every trial *needs* to succeed. How many researchers needed to find penicillin? Or invent the light bulb? Nor in its early stages is an innovation likely to look very impressive or even to work very well: The Wright Brothers did not create the DC-3; certainly not the F-16. 'Flying machines' had to evolve. And they did. It is a trial-and-error process: We all understand that.

The R&D process cannot be evaluated by the same measures we use to evaluate a production process, where the idea is to put proven models into use and the goal is for the failure-rate to be zero. The job for R&D is to find new and better models.

It is critical to have an R&D process in public education; to be developing new forms of 'school'. As Joe Graba explains better than anyone, we are now asking public education to succeed with all kids. It has never done that. It was not built to do that: Conventional school was not designed for the kinds of kids that have never graduated. Success with these kids will require different kinds of schools. We cannot get these different kinds of school by changing the schools we have. It is not possible to change existing schools that radically, that rapidly. The different schools will have to be created new. Charter/ing is the opportunity to do that: the states' great gift to boards of education in this country. Districts need to use this opportunity aggressively, to create different

kinds of school. "Charter schools" in this sense is an institutional innovation; a radical change in the traditional 'givens' of K-12; the legislature withdrawing the district's historic 'exclusive' to offer public education within its boundaries and opening this opportunity for somebody other than the administration to start and run a public school truly free to try new things.

But if the institutional innovation – the new process for creating new schools - is not distinguished from and evaluated separate from the schools charter/ed, then when we see some "charter school" failing we are likely to conclude that the law – "charter schools" as an institutional innovation - is also failing.

Most evaluations I think do not make this essential distinction . . . though, I am happy to learn, John Witte's research does appear to focus on what I am calling charter/ing. Most, I am afraid, still try to evaluate charter/ing by the standards used to evaluate the success of the schools – thus putting the institutional innovation at risk.

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The term 'charter schools' has another unfortunate effect. The adjective 'charter' suggests that the school created through this new process is a kind of school; so that "charter schools" becomes some pedagogical reform. A Montessori school is a kind of school; so is a Core Knowledge school and an Edison school. A 'charter school' is not a kind of school - as everybody agrees.

Charter schools differ; and not only in their learning programs. Christine Jax used to say when commissioner in Minnesota, "If you've seen one charter school you've seen . . . one charter school". But the impression persists. And so the evaluations tend to skip over the learning programs in use and try to relate student learning to the legal, jurisdictional character of the school as a "charter school".

This is problematic. A charter public school is different from a district public school, true: not run by the district administration, perhaps not owned by the district, usually operating under different rules. These schools do have that in common. But the charter is an empty institutional structure, as a building is an empty physical structure: Kids learn from what its designers put into it. If the curriculum and the teaching practices and the methods and materials and the technology for learning differ from school to school . . . if "charter schools" has no meaning in terms of what most directly affects student learning . . . how exactly does research evaluate student learning 'in charter schools'? What is it about "charter" . . . what is the constant . . . that presumably accounts for student performance, if not the learning program? Why would we not focus the evaluation on what is intended to lead to learning?

The impulse to evaluate student performance in relation to the jurisdictional status of the school responds to the political, ideological debate. Some people like, and other people do not like, the idea that public education can now be offered by an organization other than the local board, or a school started by

somebody other than the superintendent. Proponents hope to show that schools run by somebody else are succeeding; opponents would love to show these are not succeeding. This is predictable and understandable. But this does not advance our understanding either of charter/ing or of what accounts for performance in the schools charter/ed.

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The confusion about 'charter schools' is just one part of the larger muddle in our discussion about education policy.

o People talk about 'reform'. In 're-forming' school are we making radical change? . . . or the opposite; change that is gradual and *not* radical?

o People talk about 'school': Does that mean literally the school? In what sense? When the superintendent says 'my schools' s/he often means 'my buildings'. Or is 'school' the organization? Or is it what goes on: school/*ing*? We say 'school board' meaning the district board of education: Schools in this country don't have boards. Sometimes 'school' seems to mean education generally, as in the meaningless term 'school reform'.

o The term 'system' is another puzzle. In one breath people talk about the Milwaukee or Madison system, meaning the organization the superintendent

runs. In the next they will talk about "the system being broken". Is it any wonder superintendents get offended?

This carelessness on the part of intelligent and well-educated people who make their living with words and ideas is just stunning – and is a major obstacle in trying to think our way to a useful solution to the problems of public education. If a electrician came into your home and was as careless with the tools of his trade you'd order him out.

We are never going to make progress with these new and unfamiliar policy ideas until we find a way to think and talk clearly about what is happening and ought to happen.

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Having sufficiently cursed the darkness let me now light a candle . . . set out a framework for understanding and discussing what essentially is going on with what we have called "charter schools".

First, we need to get rid of that term . . . literally, never say 'charter schools' again. Groucho Marx' had a television show where, when the contestant said the wrong word, some ugly animal fell down on a rope, accompanied by some unpleasant noise. That's what you should imagine happening every time someone says 'charter schools' - until the term is gone.

Let's talk instead about charter/ing as the process for creating different public schools new. And for the schools use the adverb . . . say "charter/ed schools".

Then let's evaluate separately charter/ing and the schools-charter/ed.

o Evaluate charter/ing in terms of what happens as a result of the opportunity the law provides. Are schools created? Are they different from traditional school: Does this institutional innovation in fact generate pedagogical innovations? Does the size of schools change? Does 'governance' change? Are there innovations in leadership or in the role of teachers? As, for example, the appearance of teacher-ownership: teachers no longer employees working for an administrator, but professionals in partnerships handling a learning program under an agreement with the board. Do patterns of expenditure change? Allan Odden describes the chartered sector as this country's principal experiment with school-based financing and John Myers likes to say, "Patterns of expenditure are more important than levels of expenditure". Related to this – since the present high-labor-cost model of 'school' is probably unsustainable even with kids in groups of 25 – are there innovations appearing with the use of the web and other electronic technology? The significance of these innovations may be more important – at the moment – than the number of them. (In Wisconsin at the moment, Appleton may be very important.) Then ask: Do they last? Do they spread? Are there second-order effects appearing in the districts? (recognizing that a chartered school cannot *make* the district change).

o Then evaluate <u>the particular schools charter/ed</u>. Do the students learn? But define success – of the students and of the school – on measures that go beyond scores on standardized tests. What kind of culture has been created? How do students and teachers and parents behave? Dee Thomas says that when she was principal in a district high school one of her major problems was to get kids to come to school. Now in her project-based school, as I heard her her say to a national meeting, "my problem is to get them to go home". That may be important. A one-dimensional test of success will not do. John Goodlad says nicely that the American public wants a number of things from school at the same time – and quite properly - just as it wants its automobiles to be safe *and* economical *and* good-looking *and* capacious.

Finally, be realistic: The test of performance cannot be perfection. Nobody bats 1.000 anywhere. The question is always the 'batting average'. And understand: The test has to be relative: to how well the district sector is doing in generating new and different learning programs and in succeeding with student learning.

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You can see from all this what conceptual difficulty exists when two such dramatically different questions are mushed-together under the term "charter schools". And how important it is to find better ways of thinking about what is happening in this new sector of public education. Our understanding has to

evolve as the sector evolves. Evaluation has to get beyond old chestnuts like, "Are 'charter schools' living up to the aims of their founders?"

Public education needs to evolve. Radical change is long overdue. We cannot get the schools we need by changing the schools we have. We will need to create the different schools new. The charter sector is where this innovation can happen. This establishes its importance. This is what fundamentally assures its success. If public education does not open to innovation the forces now appearing will simply sweep around it.

All this requires some special thinking in Wisconsin. Here the law has given district boards the central role in creating new schools. This means a board here is more likely than boards in other states to see charter/ing the way the executive of the Colorado School Boards Association saw it in 1993 - as a new and more effective way to change the program of public education. And is more likely to feel that a school it does not own and run is still 'our school'. The challenge in Wisconsin will be for the board to give these schools real freedom to be really different, and to grow – even at the expense of the schools it owns and runs.

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Charter/ing needs to be evaluated in its own terms, as an institutional innovation. The new charter sector – with its new process for creating schools, and with the new schools created - is radically different from the institution we

have known. Charter/ing introduced powerful dynamics into an essentially static institution; greatly increasing the system-capacity-for-change. It is – as they say in the computer world – an 'open' system, not a proprietary system. With these new dynamics K-12 is now evolving. This evolution is not centrally planned and managed. Wht is emerging is not 'engineered'; not developing like an office building built to a predetermined design. It is organic: growing, unfolding, showing us new and unexpected features all the time - in the learning programs, in the governance of the schools, in financing, in the arrangements for sponsoring, in the laws themselves.

A real obligation lies on those in the research community to evaluate the process of new-school-creation separately - and with measures appropriate to the research-and-development process which in fact it is. Truly serious research and evaluation will need to follow this evolving process longitudinally over time.

It is quite possible for charter/ing to be succeeding in a state – or in this country - even though many of the schools charter/ed are not.

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