
POLICY PERSPECTIVES

from



Education Policy & the California Chartered Sector

*Conversations in Minnesota with Eric Premack,
Charter Schools Development Center, Sacramento CA*

By Ted Kolderie • November 21-23, 2013

Eric Premack grew up in Minneapolis; graduated from Washburn High School. After graduate school in public policy he went to California; worked initially with the Office of the Legislative Analyst where he was assigned to education finance; then worked as a consultant in the field. In 1991 he began making people in California aware of the chartering legislation then just enacted in Minnesota, and became involved with passage of the charter legislation in California in 1992. He set up CSDC as a support organization for the chartered sector in California. About 40 percent of the schools in this largest chartered-school sector in America work with his organization. He is close to the key actors in California education policy.

What follows are notes from the several discussions with Eric, partly about chartering but also about the important new directions in K-12 policy generally in America's largest state.

Eric came to Minnesota as the second visitor in the series Education|Evolving is organizing in its effort to stimulate and broaden the discussion about education strategy in Minnesota. Jal Mehta from Harvard was here in October. If you would like notes of earlier discussions or notice of future visitors let us know at info@educationevolving.org.

The pages that follow are Ted Kolderie's notes on what he thought was most significant for the developing education-policy discussion here in Minnesota.

Education in California

This state has long been highly centralized. The education code runs 5,000 pages or more; a row of books several feet long. The state picks the districts' textbooks. It tells the districts how to build their buildings. For 40 years it has guided the K-12 system with a heavy hand. California has about 6,000,000 students; about 1,000 districts, about 7,000 schools.

Now the state—meaning both Jerry Brown, the governor, who is very smart and who has a very strong and experienced staff, and the state board chaired by Mike Kirst—are reversing this. They have decided state control basically has not worked. Brown now talks about 'subsidiarity'. Legislation this summer wrote a new weighted-student finance formula, and they are on their way to returning control to the districts. Most of the roughly 50 categorical are being abolished. Districts will get more money if they have students in poverty and if they have English-language-learners—and if they have large concentrations of these, the financing will go up even more.

The unanswered question now, the issue now, is whether the districts will do right with this money? Will they use it as intended for the students? No one really knows at the moment how this will come out. The major associations support this; the advocacy organizations are naturally nervous.

But just at the point the state is retiring, the federal government comes crashing in from 90 degrees with its own prescriptions for how to run the system. So there is, or is likely to be, significant conflict between the state and Washington. The state wants to transition gradually into the new assessments; testing the tests before making them universal. Duncan says no—got to test all students in 2014. Duncan says California has to make student scores a factor in teacher evaluations; California/Brown resists that, so Duncan is threatening to cut off billions from California.

Up to this point California has gone along with most of what Duncan asked. It zipped the Common Core through the Legislature with basically no discussion at all.

The chartered sector, within California

California enacted chartering in 1982; the second state (after Minnesota) to do so. Today there are about 1,100 schools (somewhat fewer chartered organizations, since some organizations operate two or more schools). About 500,000 students. About 100 new charters are granted each year.

It's impossible to generalize about the schools in this sector. They're in the big metropolitan areas and in the most remote rural areas. They range from a dozen or so students to several thousand. There are conventional schools and very non-traditional schools. Some are almost 'military,' as for adjudicated youth. Some are online, virtual. Some are basically home-school operations; some of these with several thousand students. About 15 percent of the schools were district schools that converted to charter status to gain autonomy or to protect their model against 'bumping'. Some are free-standing, single-unit schools; some are parts of a 'charter management organization'. The largest CMO in the state—which actually works with us—has 38 schools. The single-unit schools tend to be more innovative. But on the other hand there is Rocketship, a 'blended' model, which is a group of chartered schools.

Basically the authorizing body is still the local district. There is an appeal process to the 'county board of education' and/or to the state board, but this is a hard road and not much used. People do ask why the districts grant charters. They sense the state board, and Gov. Brown, are pro-charter. So it's possible they'd rather do it themselves than risk it being done on appeal. Also, some of the districts, and their staffs, do like and admire what the charters propose to do, so are supportive. And, the proposal/planning for charters has gotten pretty good.

The Charter Schools Development Center (CSDC), which I started and head, has about 4 percent of the schools as members. We do training, advocacy, trouble-shooting, management consulting. Many schools are affiliated with the California Charter Schools Association (CCSA) and many are members of both. CSDC has about nine staff members; runs on a budget of about \$2 million a year. CCSA is orders of magnitude larger; maybe 10-times our size in staff and budget. It gets big grant support. CSDC is almost entirely fee-based.

Between the two are big differences in philosophy. CSDC has always seen chartering as the way to create new, better, different kinds of learning. CCSA was set up after 2000 more to produce schools in the traditional model that would 'perform' high on tests. Also, it's more oriented to management networks, to the CMOs and to 'scaling up' as a major objective. Some of the most important disagreements, fights, about 'chartering' in California are between the two of us. A while back, though, Don Shalvey, now at the Gates Foundation, was telling us that you both need each other. The group that pushes traditional schools needs to deal with its 'creaming' of students. Our group needs to deal with the issue of defining and measuring alternative achievement.

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The Q&A went about this way:

Q: Say more about the disagreement with Duncan.

A: Under NCLB the 'consequences' for not making AYP were, everybody thought, unrealistic. The state now has about 80 percent of its schools 'failing' by this definition; it would be at 95 percent in a few years. California asked for a waiver. Duncan's criteria included this mandate to use scores in the teacher evaluation. California is balking at this. A consortium of districts—including Los Angeles, Fresno and others—asked for and has received a waiver for themselves. Presumably they agree to the use of scores in the evaluations.

Q: How many chartered schools close in a year?

A: From 15 to 40. Early on, most closed because of problems in financial management or governance. More recently, more for academic reasons. Sometimes for good reasons and sometimes not. There was a school in Richmond that had been improving rapidly but was closed anyway—the closure urged by the CCSA. This even though the district comprehensive high school was worse than the chartered school being closed.

Q: Why?

A: Reasons are mixed. A person in the technology world that I've known, and like, tells me privately: Eric, we have to show the charter sector is better; does regular school better. Once we establish this 'beachhead' we can allow some innovation. Others truly believe that only scores matter for learning; that 'numbers show us the truth'.

Q: You mentioned one school out in the desert, in Nevada. How does the authorizer oversee a school like that?

A: This one serves students referred by the juvenile court; has a high social-services element. It's an 'in-house' charter; granted by a county board of education to itself. This arrangement can be a problem: Will an organization oversee itself well (though the arrangements seems to work well in this particular school)?

Q: I take it you don't much like standardized testing?

A: Actually I do. It is important at the elementary level; most important there, probably. The problems come in the way the results are used. It measures only a narrow slice of learning.

Q: Do you see any alternative assessment developing?

A: I'm on the board of a school in Oakland where the students are all too old for the regular testing. We buy a NWEA assessment; use that as an 'exit exam'. And we guarantee that a certain proportion of the graduates will in 'X' amount of time be

gainfully employed. That's more of an accomplishment than you might think, with young guys who basically have never gotten up in the morning to go to work. There is also the problem that with the intense focus on the tested areas there is now so much less interest in the non-tested subjects. I do fault the charter sector for not having done enough to develop alternate definitions of performance and alternative forms of assessment.

Q: What sort of innovation do you see?

A: Some of it is about doing better on tests. Rocketship fits in that category. It has gotten a very high score lift—and currently it is redesigning; will probably change significantly. But some schools are defining broader goals, and learning programs. The Language Academy of Sacramento, for example, aims to teach English to Hispanic kids and Spanish to Anglo kids. Their strategy is to do just well enough on the state assessments to get by. If California valued dual-language that school would top the state. But the state does not care whether or not a student can speak Spanish.

Q: What 's your take on the evaluation of charter schools?

A: Little of it is dis-interested. Most of it's by advocates on one side or the other. CREDO, based at the Hoover Institution, looks at performance entirely through the 'scores' lens.

Q: Is there potential in districts forming together to act separately?

A: I'm intrigued, but unsure how this will work. This first set of districts apparently does want to use scores for the teacher evaluation. I'm sort-of sympathetic with the California Teachers Association on this.

Q: Why do we devalue foreign language?

A: I see no justification for it. I never myself understood English grammar until I studied another language and its grammar. And not to value it in California, of all places! Which is not to say it shouldn't be valued in Minnesota too.

Q: But what keeps people from seeing this?

A: Most policy people are verbal, abstract, conceptual thinkers. They think everybody learns that way. At the New Schools Venture Fund meeting a couple of years ago, Ted and I listened to David Coleman deconstruct a little essay. He's largely the brains behind the Common Core. It is all about analyzing complex texts. That's the test of success in learning. I like this, myself. But it will write off maybe a third of California students without the English-language background. And about the same proportion of teachers, who don't have that background either. I am really concerned about this. It is stunning.

Q: Again: We are really saying we're going to ignore this world change?

A: Looks like it.

Q: It's a status thing.

A: Low-level jobs, workers, get less respect and lower compensation, true.

Q: Is there any discussion in CA about PISA results, or the 21st-century skills?

A: California is pretty insular, pretty closed to outside ideas. Maybe because it's so large. It was hard to get the chartering idea in. California people tend not to participate in the national organizations: ECS, NCSL, etc..

Q: How does High-Tech High stand?

A: It has a lot of hands-on activities but isn't entirely a project-based school. The first school did really well; had top teachers. Got early Gates Foundation financing. Now it's a sizeable group. Scores have modulated. But it will adapt, and survive. Larry (Rosenstock) is very smart. Other schools will struggle more.

Q: Is there interest in STEM schools?

A: Yes, lots right now. There were 3,000 people in Sacramento last week for a conference. But those folks need to be careful.

Q: I'm wondering what you think the ideal system might look like?

A: I'd try to create some space for the truly different, including different versions of achievement. Rigorous, but different. Probably outside the state agency, where the instinct is to kill something truly radical.

Q: This is what we're trying to do in my district. We're hopeful. We will have to change the way we teach. Our 'achievement gap' is already the lowest in the Twin Cities area.

Q: I'm interested in the parental opt-out. I'm home-schooling a child. I'm starting to think more about this as an approach.

A: Home-schooling is a big part of the California charter sector. Initially it terrified our Department of Education. One school ballooned—the department tried to get at it by saying the kids weren't meeting the seat-time requirement. There is significant money available for teachers and materials when home-schooling is organized under the charter law.

Q: What proportion of the charter sector in CA is unionized?

A: Maybe 20 percent. Mainly in the schools that converted from district status. The more important thing, though, is whether the unit at the school is a separate local or a part of the district bargaining unit.

There were two additional sessions: one at dinner and one at lunch the next day. To some degree those discussions covered the same ground, but here're a few additional notes:

- California is also changing its school evaluation system. The Legislature has required a new 'performance index'. The state board is to develop the new index. It will limit the degree to which the measure of school success can rest on test-scores; actually sets both a minimum and a maximum: 60/40 or 40/60, I forget which.
- There're also supposed to be 'local control' plans for annual validation of schools. My hope is that this is where some new definitions of achievement can be worked in, for the charters. There is widespread support for this. When the bill came up, the line of those K-12 association representatives wanting to testify ran outside the hearing room and down the hall.

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Education | Evolving means to bring others here over the next several months, offering other perspectives on education policy . . . focusing on that most difficult question: How does the system change and improve?