

Washington Post, September 22, 2010

Column/Blog: "The Answer Sheet" by Valerie Strauss

## Are charter schools really innovative?

My guest is [Marion Brady](#), veteran teacher, administrator, curriculum designer and author.

By Marion Brady

Peter Ruddy Wallace was the speaker of Florida's House of Representatives years ago when charter-school legislation was adopted. He saw [charters](#) as incubators of innovation and experimentation.

So did I. Indeed, not long thereafter, I accepted an invitation to serve on the board of governors of a new charter school serving a built-from-scratch new town in a neighboring county. And, partly to enhance my board member-related knowledge and skills, and partly to gather material for Knight-Ridder/Tribune columns on the subject of charters, I visited those within reasonable driving distance.

I believe America's broad-based system of public schools is a bedrock of the Republic, and that the country has gotten a better return on its investment than it deserves. But I also believe that major changes are long overdue, that fresh thinking is essential, and that serious problems are being made worse by [simplistic reforms](#) being pushed by self-serving corporate interests working through politicians.

One of those reforms is driven by an assumption that charter schools are wellsprings of new ideas. Unfortunately, with rare exceptions, that's not the case. I've yet to actually see something happening in a charter that couldn't be happening in a traditional public school. If there are exceptions, give credit to a local or state bureaucracy "loose" enough to permit it.

Official policy, not lack of educator imagination, not laziness, not union obstinacy, not anything else, is the main reason schools function very much as they did a century ago. Put the blame where it belongs.

There are several reasons why most charters differ little or not at all from traditional public schools. Here are four:

### **1) Innovation and experimentation aren't what motivate most of the people seeking charter approval.**

For several years I subscribed to an Internet "listserv" that gave charter enthusiasts across the United States an opportunity to chat. It didn't take long to discover where most of them were coming from. They didn't want to do anything really different; they just wanted to be in charge.

This doesn't mean that most charter schools don't offer something attractive. They do. That's what gets their applications approved. But "attractive" isn't the same as "innovative and experimental." If what a charter applicant wants to do is a good idea but it's already being done somewhere else (as is almost always the case), it's not an innovation.

What's needed, then, isn't another charter, but a procedure for finding out what interesting or promising idea is being explored somewhere, checking to see if it's actually working as advertised, and if it is, providing the support necessary to put it in place locally.

**2) Charter schools aren't ordinarily a source of great new ideas (at least in Florida) because most of them have been created not to experiment and innovate, but to sell houses or eventually peddle them to the regular school system (at, of course, a profit).**

As I learned firsthand, developers usually know little and care even less about educational innovation. They just know that most people who buy upscale like the sound of "charter school."

Charter legislation often stipulates that only local, non-profit groups are eligible. So what do developers do? They create a non-profit organization to get the charter, then the organization hires a for-profit company to run the school.

During the years of my peak interest in and enthusiasm for charters, three out of four newly approved ones in Florida were [being run by companies](#) with practices so standardized they were using the same glossy promotional brochures in other states. They were "McCharters," and they were in the school business not to experiment and innovate but to make money. I don't see any evidence that such isn't still the case.

It's ironic: Legislation originally intended to strengthen public schools is now being used as a sneaky way to privatize them.

**3) In very few states are the entities that grant charters really knowledgeable about education's deep-seated problems.**

Neither are they sufficiently open to unorthodox approaches to approve applications that don't meet fairly traditional public and bureaucratic expectations.

I've been involved in education as teacher, college professor, administrator, writer of textbooks and professional books, consultant to publishers, states, and foundations, and visitor to schools as far west as Japan and as far east as the Greek islands.

For what I'm convinced are sound reasons, I've come to favor shorter school days, the elimination of textbooks, standardized tests, grade cards, grades, traditional school buildings, single-teacher classes, the required "core" curriculum, and other policies and procedures. Would I be able to get a charter? Hah! Not a chance!

**4) Charter schools aren't usually sources of great new ideas, and aren't likely to become such, because of subject-matter standards and high-stakes, standardized tests.**

Imagine a close-knit group of experienced educators, unhappy with the status quo, thinking about opening their own school.

They make a list of the kind of people they want their students to be and become. Yes, they want them to be knowledgeable. But they also want them to be curious, creative, self-aware, empathetic, confident, courageous, resourceful, in love with learning, and possessing what Albert Schweitzer called "reverence for life."

They devise a curriculum, apply for and are granted a charter. A year or two down the road, there's a collision of aims and priorities.

The state says to the educators, "We're giving you tax money. In return, we're holding you accountable. Your students have to take the state's annual standardized test."

And the educators say, "WHAT!? What's your definition of accountable? Didn't you give us a charter to help students become critical thinkers, curious, creative, self-aware, empathetic, confident, courageous, resourceful, in love with learning, and capable of wonder?"

"Yes."

"And now you're telling us that a standardized, one-shot, paper-and-pencil, multiple choice, bubble-in-the-oval, machine-scored test of short-term memory of the contents of a few school subjects - you're telling us that a computer is going to spit out a number that tells us whether or not we're succeeding!? You've gotta be kidding!"

The charter school movement has been billed and sold as a strategy for strengthening public education via experimentation and innovation. What it's done instead is remind us of the ubiquity of the Law of Unintended Consequences.

But that shouldn't surprise anyone. That's because, generally speaking, those most determined and successful in promoting charters rarely know much about educating. They've just bought the view of the late conservative economist Milton Friedman that privatizing public schools and forcing them to adopt market forces will shape them up.

It doesn't hurt, of course, that a side benefit would be the weakening of unions, and the broadening of corporate access to the half-trillion dollars a year America spends on education.

##