In the Eye of the Beholder: Charter Schools and Innovation

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By

Robin J. Lake*

Abstract:

Many expect that charter schools will produce innovations, but it is unclear what kinds and how much innovation is desirable. This paper summarizes the research evidence on charter school innovation to date and suggests ways to more productively pursue future research and development in the charter sector. The paper addresses three main questions: In what ways are charters being innovative? How can we assess the value of charter school innovations? And, how might we encourage and enable charter schools to innovate more aggressively regarding instructional methods and uses of technology?

Existing research shows that charter schools are doing many things differently than other public schools. While charter schools do not appear more likely to adopt entirely new instructional designs than other public schools, research shows that charters are more likely to adopt and sustain best practices, experiment with new uses of funding and governance, and repackage existing practices in new combinations. Such innovative processes and organizational tendencies may be as important as innovations "per se." If states and the federal government wish to encourage greater innovation around charter school instructional techniques and technology use they should invest in strategies that specify clear and attainable goals for charter school experimentation, reduce financial and regulatory barriers to innovation, and evaluate whether charters are meeting those innovation goals.

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* Robin Lake directs the National Charter School Research Project at the University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education. She specializes in charter school research and policy development that focuses on effective accountability policies, scale and supply, and school district use of chartering as a reform strategy. Lake has authored numerous studies and technical assistance reports on charter schools, including Charter Schools and Accountability in Education. Lake may be reached at the Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, 2101 N. 34th St., Suite 195, Seattle, WA 98103-9158 and by email at rlake@u.washington.edu. Gregg Vanourek, Paul Hill, and Meghan Holland all contributed ideas to this paper. Referees for the *Journal of School Choice* pointed out ways to significantly improve on the original manuscript.

I. What is innovation, anyway? And how much is enough?

In its most common definition, innovation means the act of starting something for the first time, introducing something new, or bringing in new methods, ideas, etc.[1] In the world of education, the presumption is that some new practices will produce new approaches to schooling that will ultimately lead to better outcomes for students. That implies that charter school innovation should be considered the means to an end, and not a goal in itself.

Others, however, have offered different definitions. John Pincus writes that although people in education have commonly thought of innovation as something new, "this definition of innovation is of little value when the aim of innovation is taken to be the improvement of educational processes, educational outcomes, or the economic efficiency of education."[2] He argues that innovations in education instead should be thought of as technologies that improve educational outcomes, improve working relationships or processes within the school system (or between the school system and the public), or reduce the costs of education without significantly reducing the quality of desired outcomes or processes.

What did policymakers and advocates expect from the charter schools in their states? Twenty-nine states, or 72% of all charter school laws, include some explicit intent for charter schools to serve as "laboratories" for new models of instruction, accountability, or governance.[3] Many people think of the chartering strategy as a way to bring a new governance structure into public education (with nonprofit, site-based governance) or as an avenue for deregulation or market-based reform based on choice, competition, and accountability for results. All of these are components of chartering, but innovation, too, is meant to be built into the design and set-up of

chartering, into its very DNA.[4] According to many advocates, chartering is in large part about experimentation with new models, evaluation of those models via the authorizing process, and—eventually—deployment of what works, leading to transformation or renewal in public education. In this sense, the charter policy itself is thought to be an innovation, as was the case with the nation's first charter law, in Minnesota, which received the prestigious Innovations in American Government Award from Harvard University.

Part of the confusion rests with not only unclear or imprecise legislative intent and subjective definitions of innovation, but also hazy thinking about innovation in general (this is true even in the business world, where innovation is prized). At what point does something new cease to be innovative? Immediately after it has been used? When it becomes commonplace? After a few months or years? There is no policy guidance on such questions.

Though the expectations were vague in many cases, it does seem apparent that innovation of some kind was expected to be a central product of the charter school movement. Less clear, though, is by what standard researchers and the public should *assess* charter innovations. Are charter schools, at least in part a policy designed to produce innovations, producing sufficient <u>types</u> of innovation and <u>amounts</u> of innovation to satisfy policy goals?[5] Is it enough for the charter school movement to produce one new important instructional practice or must the "average" charter school use vastly different instructional practices than other public schools? Nobody can say. Which kinds of innovation are more valuable or productive? Nobody knows for sure.

What's more, some have argued that it may be innovative for charter schools to bring an already existing practice into a community where it isn't currently in use. In many sectors, the essence of innovation is developing more productive allocations of labor and capital. And so it is with chartering, though this has been muffled by political interests. In the private sector, most innovations come in small packages, most often resulting in minor improvements on existing products or rare disruptive technologies that fundamentally change the common perceptions of what is possible.[6] Should we expect more from the charter sector?

II. What we do know

With so many possible definitions and measures of innovation it should not be surprising that researchers have reached different conclusions on the question of charter school innovation. Below are the four ways researchers have thus far attempted to define and quantify innovation in charter schooling and what the studies that fall under each definition have found:

Something never before seen or done in public education. Generally, under this definition of innovation, charter schools have not yet been shown to be much more (or less) likely to invent brand new curricular or instructional approaches, though examples of such innovations are evident. In the only cross-state study of this question, Chris Lubienski found that charter schools in four states often had markedly different approaches to administration and governance than public school districts, but that actual classroom practices were not, for the most part, original or new to public education.[7] Exceptions to Lubienski's study were virtual schools and online learning, which charter schools were found to be pioneering. One study of Michigan schools

asked local principals to rate the instructional practices in charter schools and found charter schools were perceived to be "somewhat more innovative" than traditional public schools.[8]

Numerous other reports, however, have documented governance-related contributions that charter schools and charter laws have made to public education, such as teacher cooperatives, direct funding to schools, and opportunities for organizations other than local school boards to run and oversee new public schools.[9] Other studies find that charter schools have contributed innovative accountability designs and unique approaches to staffing and compensation.[10]

Chester E. Finn, Jr., has offered that charter schools seem to be repackaging existing instructional approaches and thereby creating new instructional school designs.[11] For example, the KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) schools combine dynamic and outstanding educators, significantly more time in school, a rigorous college-prep curriculum, a strong culture of achievement with clearly articulated pillars of success, and lifelines of support for previously underserved schoolchildren. None of these practices is innovative alone, but when aggregated this way they comprise an attractive and successful new public school design.

This definition of innovation "per se" is by far the most common conception, but researchers and scholars have also considered whether charter policies encourage public schools to act in new ways organizationally.

Something new to a community or student population. Some studies have defined as "innovative" schools that bring existing education programs or practices into communities that

had not formerly had access to them. Studies on charter school competition have documented charter school practices that bring education designs traditionally confined to private schools such as Montessori or Waldorf into public school districts.[12] Others have speculated that charter schools may be more likely to personalize instruction for all students rather than creating add-on programs for gifted or special needs children.[13] Recent studies at the University of Washington on charter school educational approaches suggest that charters may make college prep and other advanced placement programs more accessible to minority and low-income students.[14]

Something that responds to family needs and preferences. Taking another approach, Teske, Schneider, Buckley, and Clark found that charter school operators define innovation differently than other public schools: contributing something unique by responding to family needs such as safer and focused schools.[15] They also note that charter schools are more likely to offer better facilities (despite funding differences), and that charter school staff are more responsive and courteous to parents than other public schools. Similarly, researchers have found that charter schools are also more likely to be theme-based (e.g., schools focused on the arts, entrepreneurship, environmental education, etc.) and offer K-8 or K-12 grade spans that allow parents to avoid middle schools.[16]

A process of adopting and sustaining existing best practices. In their study, Teske et al. also found that charter public schools are more likely than district public schools to adopt promising practices such as use of technology in the classroom, new staff development programs, involvement of teachers in policy making, pre-K programs, and parent contracts designed to boost parental involvement.[17] As discussed above, charters also appear more likely to embrace

academic reforms as an integral part of the school mission and not merely an add-on to the existing program, and they may be more likely to target instructional practices to the most suitable populations. Some argue that this "uptake" function is an essential aspect of chartering as a policy tool.[18]

In sum, studies of charter school innovation so far show that charter schools are doing many things differently than other public schools. It seems clear from the literature that charters have contributed new ways of approaching governance and internal operations. Charter schools seem to be more likely than other public schools to experiment with unconventional staffing, scheduling, and compensation arrangements and to be responsive to family preferences and needs. Charter schools may choose instead to focus on offerings they feel are more desirable to students and parents and that will lead to better learning, such as safer schools, innovative staffing or arrangements, and more personalized learning environments. Such governance reforms may also have made it possible for charter schools to achieve comparable outcomes at lower costs through internal efficiencies.[19] In the end, such outcomes may, as Pincus argued, prove to be most valuable to the education community.

As for instructional innovations, charter schools appear less likely to have experimented broadly with curricular and instructional models new to public education (though they have been "early adopters" of new instructional delivery mechanisms and structures such as virtual schooling), but charters schools do seem to provide a mechanism for bringing certain instructional approaches into communities or to certain student populations. As a structural innovation, they may also be more likely to adopt proven practices.

So what should policy leaders make of this? Charter schools are innovating in many ways, but why do their classrooms not look dramatically different from other public schools?

III. Policy and market incentives may undercut potential for charters to innovate in instruction

Some legislators surely hoped to create an open sector of new public schools prone to truly unconventional teaching approaches or experimental instructional designs. It may have been a mistake, however, to believe that charter schools would, on their own, adopt dramatically different instructional designs. As some have suggested, charter schools may not have the proper incentives or sufficient funding levels to encourage great experimentation with instruction.[20] State and federal accountability pressures and the urgent need for better public school options may create intense pressure for use of proven teaching methods in charter schools.

There is even a split within the movement. An increasing number of charter school leaders assert that charter schools must stand for quality first, emphasizing replication of what is working in existing schools rather than experimenting with new approaches. Others, such as Ted Kolderie (considered one of the originators of the charter concept), argue that policymakers should have more tolerance for continued experimentation, since the most successful and influential innovations challenge the most fundamental assumptions about what "works."[21]

There is also profound disagreement about which kinds of experimentation are most likely to lead to better academic outcomes. Innovations in governance and administration, dismissed by

some as too far removed from the classroom to drive student achievement, are thought by others to have great potential to leverage improvements.[22]

Overall, both the policy and research worlds remain conflicted about how to judge different types of charter school innovation—and whether innovation serves the public interest at all. As a result, charter schools are caught in a tug-of-war, with accountability pressures and parent expectations pushing them toward proven instructional practices,[23] while critics pan them for not providing novel approaches to public schooling.

IV. Moving forward: encouraging innovation in instruction and technology

Fundamentally, innovation is in the eye of the beholder. Studies and debates that continue to center around whether charter schools are or are not innovative will only contribute to more divisive policy debate on the subject. For those who hoped to see innovation take different shape or scale in the charter school movement, it is time to take action. Rather than exhortation, policymakers can act aggressively to encourage charter schools to truly be laboratories for new approaches to instruction or uses of technology. They can adopt clear desirable outcomes or goals related to innovate practices, create incentives, remove barriers, and then set up evaluations to learn whether charter schools are meeting those goals.

At least two models for such innovation strategies are possible: states could become much more specific and targeted in their innovation goals for charter schools, or the federal government could support a broad R&D effort to stimulate innovation in charter schools.

State charter innovation policies: In place of state charter school laws that only imply the goal of innovation, public officials could specify explicit innovation goals and incentives. Statutes, public grant guidelines, and evaluation guidelines could promote new approaches to instruction that are relatively untested yet are still plausibly linked to improved student outcomes, greater parental satisfaction, or more efficient uses of public dollars. Monetary and non-monetary incentives and accountability standards would have to be carefully designed to give schools flexibility and reason to innovate. For example, a sub-set of state schools could be funded as "innovation zones," receiving extra funds to experiment with specific instructional designs while coming under closer scrutiny to produce tangible results in an evaluation specifically designed to assess innovation zone schools.

The primary benefit of this approach is that it sends a clear message to potential or current charter school operators about what values and outcomes the state or funders or authorizers expect to see from the charter schools. A specification policy also sets real incentives for achieving those goals if high-stakes evaluations, charter application processes, charter renewal decisions, and new grant funding are all tied to innovation goals.

The most likely problem is that states may not be able to create a consistent set of goals across different levels of government for a number of years. A charter school serves many public and private masters, including its direct authorizer (the school district or other local or state agency that approves the application), state evaluators, legislators, state education agencies, federal grant agencies, private funders, etc., that all have influence on defining terms of success for an individual charter school and the movement as a whole. For a specification strategy to work,

these agencies would at least need to present a reasonably united front, a feat possible in small states with a unified government like Delaware, but hard to imagine in large states like Texas, or states with fragmented state governance like California.

The success of a targeted state strategy also presumes that government officials and others have sufficient information to know which types of innovation are worthy of sustained investment. As defined above, officials would only need to anticipate which educational strategies would have plausible links to better outcomes, be they academic or other. States could employ standards for defining reasonable risk, such as research-based evidence that similar approaches to instruction have proven effective. Still, there is little rigorous evidence, for example, that greater experimentation with virtual schooling will yield higher payoffs than experimentation with longer school days or higher teacher salaries.

A federal R&D approach to charter schooling: Another option is for the federal government and nationally focused foundations to take a more strategic and aggressive role in shaping charter innovation. A Research and Development (R&D) approach would attempt to stimulate an ongoing variety of approaches to charter schooling, identify those factors that best contribute to better public schooling, and encourage schools to continuously adopt proven practices as they emerge.

To encourage ongoing variety in charter schooling, funders and government regulators would need to analyze the role of state laws and funding practices in promoting diverse providers and diverse approaches to higher performance, parent satisfaction, and educational productivity.

Significant R&D grants would allow schools or groups of schools to invest in promising experimental designs. If those grants came with temporary exemptions, say 3-5 years from federal NCLB requirements, districts and schools might be more inclined to try promising new ideas. Lubienski has pointed out that private sector R&D centers often enjoy considerable protection from market forces that might discourage risk-taking.[24]

Document successes and failures: The next step would be to categorize charter school variation in ways that allow researchers to begin to link variation to results. For example, merit-based pay structures, new definitions of the role of the principal, extended schedules, and smaller class sizes are just a few administrative innovations that may, in fact, have direct impact on teacher and principal quality and effectiveness. Such experiments may prove to be more important to student learning gains than curricular reforms. Several researchers have recently attempted to create typologies of charter school programs, but no one has yet attempted to link such typologies to outcomes. It is time for failed charter school experimentation to be documented and exposed and for successful experiments to gain clear endorsement.

Finally, as research on innovation in other sectors shows, successful experimental practices do little good if they remain experimental. Successful innovations should be adopted, eventually made commonplace, and then joined or replaced by the next round of innovations. Policy innovation *diffusion* may be as important or more important than new approaches alone.[25] To track the diffusion or uptake of innovation, states need to begin learning about how quickly effective practices spread in the charter movement and why. To ensure that charter schools have strong incentive to adopt new practices, states need to make sure their charter laws create the

right incentives for experimentation. As John Merrifield argues, charter laws that cap charter school growth, limit per-pupil funding, and prevent profit-seeking providers from holding charters close the door to many potentially important sources of private investment and may shut out providers with the most incentive to innovate and maintain cost effectiveness.[26]

The advantage of an R&D approach is that it allows policymakers to hedge their bets about what future practices or technologies will work. The downside is that it exposes states and students to some risk; by lowering barriers to entry, chances of failure increase. To counter that risk, R&D strategies and specification strategies must have highly effective ways to assess outcomes, incent continuous improvement, and allow for swift government intervention if innovations do not succeed.[27]

V. Implications for the future of charter school research on innovation

The approaches to charter school innovation policy described in this paper imply an important new role for charter research, one that takes a much broader approach to evidence of innovation.

Evaluations linked to state and federal innovation strategies would need to consider diffusion and productivity questions, including whether the constellation of chartered schools behaves differently than that of district public schools: Is the charter sector more likely to try to reproduce or scale-up the most effective schools and practices? Are charter schools more likely to form inter-school networks and find collective cost savings?

Typologies attempting to link charter practices to outcomes should pursue topics that bring objective and robust evidence about innovative practices:

Finances: Are charter schools arranging dollars differently to support better learning? This research should include a look at class size arrangements, staff development allocations, administrative funds, investment strategies, R&D activities, etc.

Staffing patterns/teaching environment: Are charter schools producing new staffing structures (e.g., teacher induction/mentoring models) that positively influence student outcomes? New pay structures? Innovative labor agreements? Are they tapping new labor markets?

Leadership: Are charter schools creating an "opportunity space" for school leaders to have more autonomy—and for governing boards and school leaders to create a more effective division of labor between them? Are charter schools attracting entrepreneurial talent into the education sector that somehow changes public education's standard operating procedures?[28]

Sustainability: Are chartered schools more likely to maintain a strategic direction over time, given that they are self-governed and not steered by distant, politically elected school boards?

Accountability: Are charter schools held accountable in new ways by government, families, or others?

Parent and student engagement: Are charter schools finding new ways to involve previously disenfranchised populations?

Special needs: Are charter schools producing new approaches to serving special education students, English language learners, gifted pupils, and other students with unique learning needs?

Partnerships: Are charter schools more likely, as some have found, to form public-private partnerships and tap new sources of funding for public education? Are chartered schools providing new models for joining public education efforts and urban development?

Safety: Are charter schools demonstrating new ways to make schools safer?

Tool for district reform: Does chartering, as some have suggested, allow district reformers to make changes that would have been impossible within union contracts and district bureaucracies?[29] What effect do such district reforms have on student outcomes?

V. Conclusion

Though subjective definitions and mixed policy signals cloud the picture, it is now becoming clear that there are noteworthy public school changes in play as a result of charter school laws

around the country. It is time to stop debating whether charter schools are or are not innovative and instead document innovations, assess their effectiveness, understand their limitations, and discern how to replicate and deploy successful innovations widely.

Even though current research points to what new practices have emerged and spread as a result of charter school policies, the debate over whether such charter innovation is enough and whether it is the right "kind" is likely to continue. As this review has shown, there is ample evidence that state charter laws have produced innovations, but many believe charter school classroom practices do not look sufficiently different from other public schools to merit expansion of the movement. As this paper shows, private sector expectations about innovation are, in many ways, very modest. Should we expect more from the charter school movement?

Research cannot answer this question for policymakers, but it can better inform subjective debates with objective information. To start, researchers should take a more expansive definition of innovative practice, analyze what kinds of policy environments contribute more or less to desired innovations, and link various innovative practices to long-term student outcomes.

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5 Merrifield outlines a useful typology for what kinds of reform chartering might achieve. John Merrifield, "Charter Laws: Disaster, Detour, Irrelevant, or Reform Tool?" *Journal of School Choice* 1, no. 1 (2006): 3-22.

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14 Jon Christensen, Lydia Rainey, Brock Grubb, and Betheny Gross, *Examining Charter School Educational Programs* (Seattle, WA: National Charter School Research Project, Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, forthcoming).

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17 Teske et al., "Charter School Competition."

18 Ted Kolderie, "Evaluating Chartering: A Case for Assessing Separately the Institutional Innovation" (St. Paul, MN: Education/Evolving, 2003).

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21 Kolderie, "Evaluating Chartering."

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26 Merrifield, *Continuous Improvement.*

27 Such swift government intervention is necessary because although charter schools are intended to respond to consumer preferences, parents may not be able to accurately assess instructional practices, and charter school laws that limit supply may not create strong enough incentives for schools to compete and maintain consumer confidences.

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29 See for example Finn, Jr., "Chartering and Innovating."