vides little that particularly lends itself to education economics research. It could, however, provide a useful resource for educational management educators and university administrators.

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Reference


Beginning in 1991, states began adopting legislation to allow public schools to operate with some independence, calling them charter schools. By 1999, more than 1,000 charter schools were in operation in 29 states serving over 100,000 students. Hassel reviews the political forces in four states (Michigan, Massachusetts, Colorado, and Georgia) that adopted such laws. He then describes problems in implementation and early results in the same states. The study uses interviews with officials, newspaper accounts, and official records.

The definition of a charter school differs across the states. Although categories are not simple, Hassel distinguishes strong charters with more independence from local school districts from weak charters that are closely aligned with local school districts. He traces the differences to the political forces that shaped the laws and implementation. The book concludes that charter schools will have a better chance of thriving and being of positive influence on traditionally organized schools when they have greater independence and more funds. The book will have appeal to proponents of charter schools because it takes as given that more independence for charter schools is likely to improve performance.

The book hints at deeper problems for education reform. Problems relevant to the charter school initiative are also problems for other educational reforms.

A key issue is how to evaluate the performance of a school so as to decide whether to continue its charter. A central point of chartering is to create a market place, to invite entrepreneurs to devise new ways to operate public schools and then winnow out those that underperform. A brief concluding chapter points to the monitoring problem without resolving it. If we could convincingly measure all the results we care about, chartering, contracting, and other incentive regimes would have more chance of success. Because we are unlikely to find such measures, bureaucratic rules are unlikely to replace informed judgement about what makes a good school.

A second issue is finance. Many charter laws provide that charters will get an amount per student, often something less than the local school district spends per student. Hassel compares per pupil spending at some charters with average per pupil spending at local schools. Unfortunately, the financial information is limited. Some charters raise philanthropic dollars, indeed some are operated by philanthropies. If a school raises philanthropic dollars, then its total spending will be more than its tax finance. We should not conclude that the presence of philanthropic dollars means that the charter would otherwise have run a deficit. Cost comparisons should be made with care.

A third problem is in comparing traditionally organized schools to charters. Traditional public schools show considerable diversity in program and performance. Hassel observes that the instructional programs at charters are within the range of programs offered at conventionally organized schools. The case for charters is one of performance incentives rather than instructional innovation.

A fourth issue is the role of state regulations. When charter schools waive normal state regulations, one might wonder why the local schools remain subject to them? If local public schools must hire certified teachers, follow complex reporting systems, and monitor attendance, but charters are exempt, what happens? If regulations can be modified for charters, why not for the others? To what extent might performance gains at charters be due to modifying regulations?

A fifth issue is replicability. Education reforms often attract highly effective leaders, people whose dedication and extra effort is more likely to be effective. That pioneers often enjoy more than average success means that comparison of an innovation with traditional operation must be done with extra care. Will today’s innovation come at age ten to look just like today’s convention? The charter schools are too new to consider how performance changes with time. Might charters best be compared to newly organized conventional schools?

A study might provide information about the extent to which charters locate in urban, suburban, and rural areas. Schooling problems differ substantially by location. It would be helpful to know the skill mix of staff, for example, the ratio of certified to non-certified staff in charters not required to hire certified teachers. The study
observes that charters typically operate at about a third the scale of average public schools. Does the scale difference reflect the lack of start-up capital or does it reflect a judgement about the adverse effect of scale on performance? The study hints that charters must provide transportation, lunch, and special education. It would be helpful to know how the cost to charters of providing these services compares to conventionally organized schools.

The study is clearly written, gives primary focus to political issues, and despite a favorable disposition toward charter schools, draws limited conclusions. Deeper economic analysis would be welcome.

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PII: S 0 2 7 2 - 7757(99)00054-0


Imagine this situation: your local school system has failed, the state government is threatening to put the courts in charge of the school district, and you are a community leader who has been called upon to save the city schools. What do you do? What do you do?

Authors Hill and Celio have written Fixing Urban Schools to help such people. They discuss many reform ideas proposed to save schools: higher standards, teacher development, thematic school designs, site-based management, charter schools, school contracting, and vouchers. Their self-stated primary contribution is to point out 1) that every reform proposal has a zone of wishful thinking: things that the reforms can’t cause but need to happen to be successful, and 2) that some reform proposals cause the events needed in other reform proposals’ zones of wishful thinking. They conclude that only a multi-pronged attack consisting of multiple reforms will maximize the probability of success.

Reforming schools is not easy. Finding common ground and being able to discuss ideological hot buttons is essential. The authors point out that the means differ, but reformers agree that schools must be simpler, parents and teachers must share responsibility for education, and standards should be high. Many reform proposals like vouchers are such politically sensitive issues that their mere mention can shut down dialogue. The authors stress that no single reform is so powerful that it can’t be discussed. Furthermore, many reforms can be implemented on the margin, they’re not all-or-nothing proposals. Most of all, we simply don’t have empirical evidence on whether these reforms work. So far all we really have is theory.

The strong point of this book is that it is relevant to all situations. It realizes that what plays in Pittsburgh may not cut it in Cleveland because of different problems and political situations. It emphasizes general concepts and good advice that must be tailored to the situation. For instance, it advises reform leaders to have separate teams dealing with daily crisis management and long-term planning. Failure to do so means you’ll never get past the crisis management stage. A good short-term goal is to increase reading scores. This will show that you can get results and will instill confidence in the reform efforts. It describes how to get help from outside organizations. It warns against adopting every special program that’s out there, preferring instead that schools only adopt programs that fit into a coherent complementary strategy. Do not cave in to the special agendas of every vendor or political group. Ask for flexibility from the state and national governments: funds are often available, but the rules for spending them are stifling. They can make exceptions to their rules.

Reformers are tempted to get reform ideas from the groups that run the schools, such as the principals, teachers’ union, and PTA. Hill and Celio say reformers should listen to these groups, but shouldn’t give them control. They have a vested interest in the status quo and cannot be trusted to enact honest reform.

The authors point out, “Despite the fact that no reform proposal has a corner on truth, it is clear that many proposals have a piece of it.” These reform strategies should be used in conjunction with each other. They should be tailored to meet the specific situation the school faces. The authors discuss various combinations of reform proposals and how they would work synergistically to improve the incentives, capabilities, and opportunities of schools.

This is a well-written, useful book for people thrust into the fires of fixing urban schools. The authors drop a tantalizing hint of a future book that describes how seven school districts’ reform efforts are going. That book, too, would be useful, allowing reformers to learn from other schools’ experiences. It’s tempting to ask Fixing Urban Schools to provide more specific advice. As the authors say, though, 1) one size does not fit all, 2) there’s only theory on what works and what doesn’t, and 3) providing general guidelines means the book is applicable to situations that all reform leaders face.

If you are a community leader who has been asked to rescue a failing school system, this is a valuable book. Buy it. Read it. Live it. Yours is a difficult task, but a task critical to the future of our society.