

A DEMOCRATIC GUIDE TO PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS: ORIGINS

CHARLES BARONE, DANA LAURENS, AND NICHOLAS MUNYAN-PENNEY

Minnesota opens first charter school

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ST. PAUL, Minn. (AP) —
After more than a year of
debate, Minnesota this fall
opened the first of a new kind of
school.

It's a public school. But it's
run by a panel of parents and
teachers, not by a school
district.

it's OK for somebody else to
offer public education."

Charter schools represent
another alternative in the
national debate over school
choice, which mostly has
focused on the Bush
administration-backed plan —
opposed by public school educa-
tors — to give parents vouchers
to send their children to private



MAY 2019

Cover Image: Associated Press, September, 1992.

CIVIL RIGHTS AND LABOR LEADERS WERE AMONG THE EARLY PROPONENTS OF THE CHARTER SCHOOL MODEL

A diverse set of national progressive leaders have advanced public charter schools from their inception through the present: former President of the American Federation of Teachers, **Al Shanker**; the past two Democratic Presidents, **Bill Clinton** and **Barack Obama**; the late liberal icon Senator **Paul Wellstone**; and former Governor of Vermont and Head of the Democratic National Committee, **Howard Dean**, to name just a few. Minnesota Democratic state senator **Ember Reichgott Junge** authored the nation's first charter law. Big-city mayors like **Cory Booker**, **Jerry Brown**, **Antonio Villaraigosa**, **Vincent Grey**, **Mitch Landrieu**, and **Tom Menino** have succeeded in creating some of the most high-performing charter sectors in the country.

“Why shouldn’t every school be a charter and enjoy the kind of autonomy now being offered to only a few?”

–Albert Shanker, Founder of AFT, 1994

Many historians trace the origins of the public charter school model back to 1974 when Ray Budde, a professor at the University of Massachusetts, published a paper titled “Education by Charter.” According to Ted Kolderie, who was involved in the design and passage of the first state charter school law in Minnesota in 1991, Budde’s main goal was to empower educators and school leaders:

Budde’s proposal was actually for a restructuring of the district: for moving from ‘a four-level line and staff organization’ to ‘a two-level form in which groups of teachers would receive educational charters directly from the school board’ and would carry the responsibility for instruction.

While the report didn’t receive much attention at the time, it was republished 14 years later and caught the eye of then President of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), Al Shanker. Shanker was so intrigued by the idea that he penned a column in the *New York Times* titled “A Charter for Change” which took the charter conversation nationwide. Shan-

ker saw charters as a vehicle for advancing a proposal that AFT members had recently approved allowing teachers to set up their own autonomous schools:

The main idea that gripped the [AFT] delegates was the prospect of having hundreds, even thousands of school teams actively looking for a better way – different methods, technologies, organizations of time and human resources – to produce more learning for more students.²

Shanker was as politically astute as he was wonky. In part, he saw public charter schools as a viable alternative to privatization and vouchers:

If schools are to improve, they'll have to support a constant inquiry and search for new and better ways to reach youngsters. If they don't, the public will look for something other than public schools to educate our children. –Shanker, 1988³

No one can know for certain what Shanker would think about the charter sector today, but it's important to review some of his writings, in part, because many observers cite Shanker as the go-to source for defining the “original idea” behind charter schools. The problem is that in doing so, they also have grossly distorted what Shanker actually said.

***Two myths perpetuated by
Shanker's successors:***

1

He viewed public charter schools solely as “laboratories of innovation.”

2

He eschewed competition and was opposed to public charter schools as part of a system of public school choice.

The two related myths perpetuated by Shanker's successors are that: 1) He viewed public charter schools solely as “laboratories of innovation” which implies Shanker envisioned only a limited number of public charter schools, and 2) Shanker eschewed competition and was opposed to public charter schools as part of a system of public school choice.

In a piece entitled “Restoring Shanker’s Vision for Charter Schools,” Richard Kahlenberg and Halley Potter erroneously claim:

Originally conceived as laboratories with which traditional public schools would collaborate, charters became a force for competition, with some suggesting they replace regular district schools.⁴

Similarly, AFT President Randi Weingarten asserts:

Unfortunately, some charter proponents have shifted the intent of charters from incubating ideas and sharing successes to competing for market share and taxpayer dollars.⁵

What is truly unfortunate, however, is that Kahlenberg, Potter, Weingarten, and others have succeeded in getting too many elected officials, policymakers, and reporters to parrot these false claims. What Shanker actually said is the exact opposite.

Shanker liked the idea of choice and competition, stating:

A charter implied both the ideas of a franchise and competition. A school system might charter schools distinctly different in their approach to teaching. Parents could choose which charter school to send their children to, thus fostering competition.⁶

Shanker also saw charters as having a role far beyond being “laboratories” and, in fact, argued against setting artificial limits on their growth. In a *New York Times* op-ed entitled “Every School a Charter,” Shanker proposed:

*What we really need – at the very least – are statewide curriculum frameworks and state-wide assessments systems. Then, students and teachers in every school will know what kids are responsible for learning and whether or not they have learned it...Once those things are in place, why limit charter schools to five or ten or a hundred? Why shouldn't **every** school be a charter and enjoy the kind of autonomy now being offered to only a few?⁷ [emphasis added]*

In just 100 words, Shanker, more three decades ago, encapsulated the framework for accountability and public school choice that so many Democrats embrace today.

GREAT MINDS THINK ALIKE

Some key progressive icons envisioned public school reforms that presaged the charter school movement by calling for greater competition and radical changes to public school governance.

Kenneth Clark. Psychologist Kenneth Clark is mainly known for conducting, along with his wife Mamie, studies on racial identity that played a central role in the landmark Supreme Court school desegregation decision “Brown v. Board of Education.” But a decade later, in 1968, Dr. Clark called for what he referred to as “Alternative Public School Systems.”⁸ Clark believed that the public education system should be more broadly defined as an education system which is in the public interest and that “a system which says that the public has no competence to assert that a patently defective product is a sign of the system’s inefficiency and demand radical reforms in not in the public interest.”



Clark’s call for reform was bold:

“Alternatives—realistic, aggressive, and viable competitors—to the present school system must be found.”

And he was acutely aware of the resistance that such changes would encounter:

*The development of such **competitive public school systems will be attacked** by the defenders of the present system **as attempts to** weaken the present system and thereby **weaken, if not destroy, public education**. This type of self-serving argument can be briefly and accurately disposed of by asserting and demonstrating that **truly effective competition strengthens rather than weakens that which deserves to survive**. [emphases added].*

Hall exactly predicted the types of attacks, from those invested in keeping the system locked into policies that work against the public that our school system is supposed to serve, on the alternative school governance models and choices provided by public charter schools.

James Baldwin. Progressive icon, author, and activist James Baldwin was a friend to both Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and an editorial board member of *The Nation*. According to Pulitzer Prize winning writer Clarence Page, Baldwin “never stopped articulating the anger and frustration felt by real-life black Americans with more clarity and style than any other writer of his generation.”

In the late 1960's, Baldwin espoused views⁹ that were in some ways similar to those of Kenneth Clark regarding radical changes to school governance. At the time, two schools in the Ocean-Hill Brownsville section of Brooklyn were given increased autonomy because Black and Latino parents, frustrated with resistance from White parents to integrate, decided that they needed to wrestle control away from White administrators and union leaders who were not looking out for the best interests of their children.



Baldwin wrote that it was the United Federation of Teachers, led by Albert Shanker, who objected most strenuously to the same type of school autonomy that he would ostensibly come to embrace two decades later. Shanker launched a city-wide teacher strike which put an end to the “alternative way” of educating that happened to be working and was embraced by the Black and Latino parents of the community:

..[What broke the camel's back was the effrontery of the community in daring to pass on the qualifications of some of the teachers to teach their children. Rhody McCoy [who led the district] transferred several teachers out of his district, and this opened the saddest, most acrid, and most revealing chapter of this entire struggle..

McCoy's dismissal of the unsatisfactory teachers was not intended to be an attack on the United Federation of Teachers. McCoy was head of the district, responsible for and devoted to the well-being of the district, and there was no particular reason for him to have thought of the union at all. But his dismissal of the teachers meant he thought that he had the right to dismiss them. (McCoy felt that he had the duty to dismiss them). That he had no such right had to be made immediately and abundantly clear, not only to protect the power of the United Federation of Teachers, but also to prevent any of the billions of dollars involved in the education business from being controlled by black and Puerto Rican communities.

Perhaps nowhere was Baldwin more trenchant than when he described the disconnect between the espoused values of White liberals and the policies they defend that work against the interests of children of color:

The liberal sympathy - for I have never met a Northern school teacher who did not claim to be a liberal - is rarely equal to the dry-eyed task of teaching. I know that a good teacher is rare. I also know that they are not as rare as all that - I am a survivor of a ghetto school - and that their rarity is not the problem. The problem is that they are deliberately made rare and relentlessly weeded out. The process is efficient and it, too, operates on a level which absolves any particular individual of responsibility.

We'll never know whether Shanker fundamentally changed his views on school autonomy 20 years later when he began to voice his support for public charter schools but the conflict between that autonomy and the union's presumption that they, rather than school leaders and parents, are the ultimate arbiter of personnel decisions remains a key tension in the public charter school debate today.

ENDNOTES

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- 3** Shanker, Albert. “A Charter for Change, Con’t: Less TRUTH—Fewer Consequences,” Where We Stand, New York Times, July 17, 1988. Available at: <http://source.nysut.org/weblink7/DocView.aspx?id=1868>
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- 6** Shanker, Albert. “Convention Plots a New Course: A Charter for Change.” Where We Stand, New York Times, July 10, 1988. Available at: <http://source.nysut.org/weblink7/DocView.aspx?id=1886>
- 7** Shanker, Albert. “Every School a Charter,” Where We Stand, New York Times, December 11, 1994. Available at: <http://source.nysut.org/weblink7/DocView.aspx?id=966>
- 8** Clark, Kenneth B. “Alternative Public School Systems,” Harvard Educational Review, Vol. 38, No. 1, April 1968. http://hepg.org/her-home/issues/harvard-educational-re-view-volume-38,-issue-1/herarticle/_1081 (full text available at <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED015981>)
- 9** James Baldwin, “Introduction by James Baldwin,” in Robert Campbell, The Chasm: The Life and Death of a Great Experiment in Ghetto Education (Houghton Mifflin, 1974). Hat tip to Ron Matus of Redine Ed. See more at: <https://www.redefinedonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/James-Baldwin-on-Ocean-Hill.pdf>