

Charter Schools: It's Not Black and White

Charter schools are the subject of political campaigns, in-depth reporting, conversations at Little League games and, certainly, one of the most controversial topics in public education today.

President Barack Obama declares them an avenue for innovation; the Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, believes they offer hope for aggressive reform; and, yet mere mention of charter schools to some public school teachers and administrators evokes a reaction of doubt and fear.

Why are they so popular with some, and scorned by others? What makes them so polarizing?

As background, I have been an education lawyer for over 29 years. My practice has included serving as in house counsel for the San Diego Unified School District and currently, as a partner with the largest comprehensive education law firm in California, where I am co-chair of the firm's Charter School Practice Group.

For the record, I am neither a proponent nor an opponent of charter schools. I am, however, the strongest possible advocate for public education. But even fans can be critics, which is to say that I do not see public education as perfect.



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I see room to advance and improve public education but I do not believe that charter schools are the single answer. Because the challenges to public education are multi-faceted, so too are the solutions.

Charter schools were created by the California Legislature in 1992 in response to a voucher initiative in order to, among other things, "encourage innovative teaching methods, expand learning for academically low achieving pupils, expand choice and provide vigorous competition to stimulate improvement." Education Code Section 47601.

To my mind, charters are not the revolution that some make them out to be, yet without question, they are part of the evolution of our nation's school system. You simply cannot ignore a movement that is born of a desire to speed up reform, advance innovation and give authority to the people closest to the students - the teachers, parents and site leaders.

Upon close examination, it is easy to understand why some educators are skeptical of these advances they have found a better way to educate, when many charter proponents have never taught, never designed lesson plans or provided instruction to meet the wide range of student needs and abilities.

You can see the initial "rub" that charters can present to educators.

To many, it seems that simply having received an education makes people experts in education.

Not so. Charter champions observe that time is being wasted, indeed lost, because it simply takes too long to affect important changes that can help make today's classrooms more effective.

The forces and voices for reform say that we need our strongest education leaders at the sites, not in administrative offices where they are removed from the children served. Further, they believe that we could achieve change faster and integrate new teaching strategies if we allow site leaders and teams to make decisions without waiting for administrative review and approval.

Charter school proponents want improved education now, not in a year or two. They recognize that one size does not fit all, therefore, charters should be given the opportunity to try different methods for reaching students.

Over the years, I've observed that some people are abusing the notion of charters to address concerns unrelated to student achievement. Specifically, I see that some charters are proposed because parents are angry that a neighborhood school will be closed, for budget reasons, and they counter with a charter petition to keep their children from being moved to another school in the district. Some charters appear to serve only gifted students, or to make money through independent study students.

To be clear, charter schools were created through legislation as an avenue for innovative instruction.

They are intended to move the balance of power from a district office to the site, allowing education leaders who are closest to the students to make decisions in the best interest of those students. They were not intended to be a way for parents to privatize public school.

I believe that three of the most exciting things happening in our public schools today are the push to go green in classrooms and school district facilities; increased use of technology to bring the world inside the four walls of the classroom, and the charter school movement.

I do not agree that charter schools are a silver bullet fix. Charters are an option, and alternative, and they are intended to help improve the overall education system. Experience tells me the best course is



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to examine charter petitions with a vigilant eye on improved education for children - not income for a new private company - and school boards must provide strong, focused oversight to hold these charters accountable for the results they promise.

If we see improvement, the students are the winners. And, if we do not see the results outlined in the charter petition, then school boards must not be slow to pull the plug.

Charters are a call to action for school boards throughout the state and nation to ensure that this new and rapidly growing movement is held accountable to the population it seeks to serve - our students.

Fraternity Chapters: Guiding the Young

Personal standards guide us and provide the individual code by which we live. Each of us conducts our self within a range of behavior and actions defined by standards we develop over time and through experience. We accept clients based on personal and professional standards. We choose friends and partners and make every decision, both daily and long-term, based upon them. Our future, and our personal success, depends upon the depth and breadth of the standards we continually develop.

As the president and chief executive officer of the North-American Interfraternity Conference, representing 73 major men's fraternities operating on more than 800 U.S. and Canadian campuses, I agree that college is a time when young men and women develop into the persons they will become.

Extensive research on education supports the extent to which we develop throughout our late teens and early 20s. In that time, we formal-

ize our personal standards based upon what we know, have seen and are taught. At that time of life, our brains want to understand the meaning and importance of social engagement, of achievement and the importance of goals, of accountability, of self-worth and the importance of giving back to community. And the many definitions of community become clear - the family, the campus, the city, state and country, and the world.

Since the American Revolution, fraternities have embraced the principles of freedom of inquiry and liberty of thought and expression. They celebrate and advocate excellence in the liberal arts, sciences and all endeavors in today's academic realm. They recognize students with high standards and aid in their development by encouraging young men with like ideals to share with each other and debate their thoughts, vision, goals, aspirations, and personal standards. Younger members develop by watching, listening and pushing boundaries, and older members grow by teaching, by establishing boundaries and by providing accountability.

This process never ends because the age of student members largely always remains 18 - 22. This is important because the younger members always have considerable development ahead of them, and the older members, just at a time when they come to understand themselves and use that understanding to guide younger members, move on to that preparation to build their lives. Developing - growing up - is a process that continually repeats itself every year on every college campus. And in every fraternity chapter that process is purposefully guided by standards. It is one of many added values to membership.

The fraternities of the North-American Interfraternity Conference operate by an agreed-upon set of standards. Developed by the membership with the goal of helping younger members clearly understand what membership means, and helping older members understand their responsibility in teaching and modeling, the standards provide an excellent co-curricular education for every member, and in turn, this emphasis adds to the co-curricular experience on every campus.

North-American Interfraternity Conference standards encourage and support academic achievement; campus involvement and leadership; risk management on topics such as alcohol use, fire safety, hazing, and sexual abuse; the value of ritual; and the importance of communicating the value of education, career preparation, civic engagement, leadership development, values, and ethics.

North-American Interfraternity Conference standards encourage the colleges and universities that host fraternity communities to provide for-credit leadership classes; to encourage faculty advisors for chapters through incentives; financial management, property and account collections support; and programming to inhibit/prevent problem behavior.

To help the campus and the fraternal movement quantify development and success in these areas, the North-American Interfraternity Conference standards also ask campuses to provide data documenting academic achievement, membership and graduation rates among other information. From this, we know fraternity membership continues to be attractive to today's college student. Membership and the number of chapters have consistently trended upward over the last three years - and in a fairly dramatic way.

We also know student members internalize these standards in other



quantifiable ways. In 2009, fraternity members contributed 1.2 million hours in volunteer community service. They raised \$6.2 million for philanthropies through events and service. On more than two-thirds of campuses hosting fraternity/sorority communities, the all-fraternity grade point average exceeds the all-men's average, and on well over half of those campuses the all-fraternity average exceeds the all-student average.

Further, the North-American Interfraternity Conference's annual tracking of data consistently reveals that fraternities and sororities are the largest and most visible values-based organizations on campus; they are the most successful leadership development program for college students; they provide the largest network of volunteers in the U.S.; combined they provide an average of more than 10 million hours of volunteer service annually; and they are the largest not-for-profit student landlord, owning and managing more than \$3 billion in student housing for more than 250,000 students in 8,000 facilities.

The fraternity experience allows young men to learn business models through the operation of the organization. They set, monitor and maintain budgets; facilitate leadership succession; create and implement member education plans; organize and implement community service and philanthropic events; monitor member behavior, academic achievement, campus involvement, and the overall development of their chapter's unique brand.

And the importance of their unique brand helps them to realize and value healthy competition and the benefit of successful results. Older members come to realize the higher the standards, the better the brand; the stronger the brand, the greater the chapter's attractiveness; and the more attractive the operation, the greater its success - in recruiting new members, in developing young members, in leading the fraternity and campus community, in developing a solid college student through a man with standards who is prepared to lead a life of significance and relevance.

Relevance, significance, and the early, co-curricular life lessons that create those, are the tangible results that begin with a first-year student's vague understanding of what it is to have standards. They are the tangible results today's fraternity men receive on campuses in California and throughout the U.S. and Canada.



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