1990 to 1991 the proportion of students not using their local school increased from 22 percent to 31 percent. The proportion fell slightly over the following two years.

That is, Fiske and Ladd failed to compare segregation under dezoning with segregation under zoning. In fact, the Smithfield report finds that, although income segregation rose from 1991 to 1993, it was still lower than in 1990, the final year of zoning. The evidence is that choice among government schools reduced income segregation.

Like Fiske and Ladd, the Smithfield Project found that dezoning caused a slight rise in ethnic segregation. Choices made by Maori families (such as attending schools emphasizing Maori culture) contributed to the increase in the segregation of Maori and white students under dezoning. Many would agree that Maori parents should be free to send their children to schools that emphasize Maori language and culture, but these decisions inevitably increase white/Maori segregation.

Fiske and Ladd assume that central authorities can and will institute policies to fix the problems of low-income schools. What they neglect to explain is why these magical policies were not adopted in the past and what they would look like in practice. For example, they urge the introduction of “managed or controlled choice” under which students would be assigned to schools based on their preferences in a way that balanced their interests against the interests of other students and the community as a whole.” The only aspect Fiske and Ladd are clear on is that unpopular schools would not lose as many students as they would under an unmanged system.” In effect, students would be held hostage in failing schools until the educational bureaucracy eventually came up with a policy that worked. What a choice.

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The Charter Movement
Public education’s new lease on life

Charter Schools in Action: Renewing Public Education
by Chester E. Finn Jr., Bruno V. Manno, & Gregg Vanourek
Princeton University Press, 2000; $27.95; 288 pages

As reviewed by Bruce Fuller

The robust charter school movement is one of the most intriguing civic revivals of the past decade. It is as though the ex-bowling partners of Robert Putnam’s lonely souls simply left the lanes behind to create this feisty array of alternative schools.

Almost 1,500 charters have been granted to a colorful variety of neighborhood activists and well-heeled corporations. The mandate was to build schools that are defined mainly by what they are not: bland or bureaucratically run public schools. From Mormon enclaves in Arizona to black liberationists in Michigan to Web entrepreneurs in California, this breathtaking array of sponsors soon will serve 500,000 students via an archipelago of small schools, enrolling fewer than 200 children on average.

Chester Finn and his coauthors are enthusiastic flag-wavers for the charter school movement. Readers who already praise the idealized magic of market forces in education will hear crisp, satisfying echoes in Charter Schools in Action. But the authors are respectful of the flag burners and skeptics as well. Even readers who question the long-run wisdom of creating charter schools and of public support for private purposes will have difficulty putting this book down. The authors are largely candid in acknowledging the limits of privatization, including school vouchers; they are inspired in exploring a middle ground for publicly accountable versions of choice.

Indeed, the authors occasionally surprise readers, particularly with their recurring interest in the subtle institutional dynamics—from state charter laws to the nitty-gritty of making these human-scale organizations actually work over time—that mean life or death for fledgling charter schools. This focus on organizational behavior, embedded in local political economies, is a refreshing break from the tiresome tracts that simply reiterate faith in market competition. The editorial writers at the Wall Street Journal should read this book carefully.

The authors are militantly committed to finding ways of holding charter leaders’ feet to the fire with regard to transparency and accountability. This will not sit well with some political allies, such as Howard Fuller, who argues that Milwaukee’s voucher-financed alternative schools should not be forced to participate in the statewide testing program. Charter Schools in Action details a fresh approach to accountability that would judge charters by their concrete ability to raise achievement, moving
beyond their uncontested effectiveness in reproducing particular cultural norms. Still, the authors are sensitive to the importance of giving expression to parents’ ideas of how children should be raised, moving beyond mechanical attempts simply to raise test scores.

The authors’ analysis is less than penetrating, however, in defining how public authorities can respond decisively without stifling the inventiveness of legitimate charter schools. What should the state do when charter schools either don’t disclose information or distort their record? In California, where each new student generates $6,700 in state dollars, charters are not legally required to disclose their revenues, their use of public money, or details about their effectiveness.

Local political leaders rarely object to rechartering such schools, even when there is scarce evidence of their effectiveness. Three years of state assessment data in California now show that charters mirror the uneven pattern of garden-variety public schools: some charters are clearly raising achievement; others are mediocre or worse. Given the warm feelings surrounding most charter schools, however, what rational school-board member is going to vote against rechartering?

Even readers who question charter schools will have difficulty putting this book down.

A Dead Horse
The authors distinguish themselves from the education Right in articulating the problems with the privatization of school management. They argue, “While market forces are necessary, they may not be sufficient to assure quality.” They label publicly funded ventures such as charter schools a “third [reform] option,” placing them between the recentralization of education policy and voucher remedies. They candidly reveal that achievement data on charter schools are “sparse” and propose that government remedy this situation.

The authors are more typical of the Right in their beating of a dead horse, the public schools. The authors tacitly assume that the state and schools are static institutions, forever stuck in the bureaucratized “one best system.” Here they, perhaps ironically, are being too humble. The school-choice movement, of which charter-schools and the authors are a part, is having a distinct effect on sluggish urban school systems and how we think about reform. In particular, state governments have moved aggressively to enact centralized accountability efforts and merit incentives for effective schools and teachers, and they have pushed forward on strategies of radical decentralization, including charter schools and the devolution of power to local school councils, as in Chicago.

One in four school children in the United States no longer attends his neighborhood school; fully 15 percent of all kids (more than 7 million) now participate in a public alternative school. Finn and his colleagues should take some credit for the difference they have made and reassess whether the beast is changing.

Furthermore, like much of the Right, Finn et al. remain remarkably naïve—perhaps in denial—about how private interests continue to undermine the struggle to spark the participation of parents and other citizens in more-human-scale public spaces. Take one controversial example. The Edison Charter School in San Francisco, run by New York–based Edison Schools, is losing about half its teachers each year. One frequently expressed reason is that Edison’s managers, sitting across the country in comfortable Manhattan offices, mandate a uniform curriculum package and enforce its implementation through classroom inspections.

How does the routinization of teaching, advanced by private experts, differ from that of the publicly funded professionals the authors so harshly criticize? Similarly, how does taxpayer support of home-schoolers, who form a confederacy around the charter banner but rarely see one another, advance civic cohesion in suburban towns and rural areas? The authors refuse to accept the fact that the charter financing mechanism is being used to strengthen not only local communities but also private tribes.

Furthermore, the authors’ blaming of the “public school monopoly” for the erosion of civic engagement isn’t convincingly argued. It reminds me of attributing family poverty to the (old) welfare system. Certainly it’s important to press the question of whether professional educrats, bureaucratic centralism, and a regulatory state erode parents’ motivation to participate in their local schools. But the authors’ rigor loses considerable steam when they fail to ask, How are corporate hierarchies and private school-management companies enabling a more robust version of Tocquevillian democracy than public bureaucracies? And, as market forces continue to separate rich and poor families in the U.S. and drain inner cities of decent jobs in the name of higher profits, can we really blame urban schools for parents’ alienation from many institutions?

The paradox facing charter-school advocates is that, in the name of encouraging radically decentralized control of schools, they may unwittingly help to undermine the state’s political ability to address the deeper structural and economic problems facing public education. Who will charter leaders blame then, when children’s achievement remains disappointingly low and grossly unequal?

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