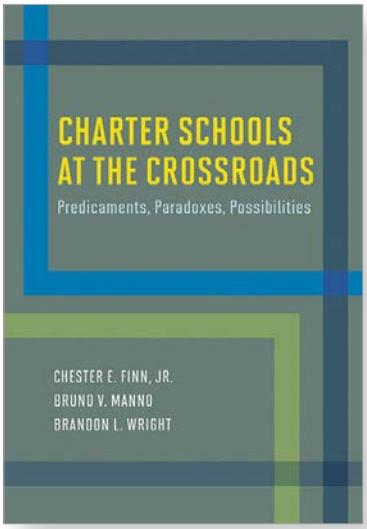
A Judicious Overview of the Charter Movement

Authors consider the controversies and the promise

Charter Schools at the Crossroads: Predicaments, Paradoxes, Possibilities
by Chester E. Finn Jr., Bruno V. Manno, and Brandon L. Wright

Harvard Education Press, 2016, $62; 270 pages.

As reviewed by David Steiner



Here is a very useful, synoptic guide to the American charter-school sector upon its 25th anniversary. *Charter Schools at the Crossroads* begins with the first charter-school law (Minnesota, 1991) and chronicles the sector's growth to today's 6,800 schools serving 3 million students, or 6 percent of the K–12 public-school enrollment. The text is replete with interesting facts, such as the number of rural charters in the nation (785), the percentage of charter schools that belong to national networks (40 percent), and a comparison of annual teacher turnover (18.4 percent in charters, 15.7 percent in district schools).

Those who have encountered the delightfully acerbic animadversions of which Finn is a master will be disappointed. This is not the voice that once opined that teachers can be "ignorance factories…. Why not get rid of the people who aren't getting the job done?" Now president emeritus of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, Finn has co-written the book with Bruno V. Manno, senior advisor to the Walton Family Foundation and emeritus trustee of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, and Brandon Wright, who serves as the editorial director at the Fordham Institute. All of these authors and organizations can plainly be counted in the pro-charter camp, yet the book takes a balanced approach and a judicious tone throughout.

The authors provide a mostly even-handed summary of the research that evaluates and compares charter-school performance to that of other public schools. They explain that the challenges for researchers are that the school effect must be disaggregated from family background, and that their methods must account for "selection bias"—the likelihood that children whose parents choose a charter school are already different from those whose parents do not. Few researchers would quibble with their methodological preference: "When it comes to pupil achievement, assessment of gains over time (panel studies), rather than absolute levels at a specific point in time, is superior." Their summary of the sector's academic outcomes, which draws heavily on a series of studies by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University, is likewise relatively uncontroversial: there is a positive achievement effect for poor, nonwhite, urban students, but suburban and rural charters come up short, as do online charters, about which the authors duly report negative findings. All fair as far as it goes, although readers who want to dig into the controversies around selection bias, methodological research issues, or a final reckoning of impact will be disappointed. The critical literature from Bruce Baker of Rutgers University, the thinking from Matthew Di Carlo of the Albert Shanker Institute on what those "extra days" of learning do or don't mean in terms of movement from one percentile of performance ranking to another—these and other such debates are simply passed over.

Is it possible for an empirically oriented book, presumably designed for students of the contemporary education scene, to be too careful? Fifteen years ago, having judiciously reviewed the record and the criticisms of charter schools (*Charter Schools in Action: Renewing Public Education*), Finn and Manno were willing to render a judgment, arguing then that "schooling based on choice, autonomy, and accountability can undergird a new model of public education." In their current book, we are assured that the charter-school model "is here to stay," but that "we cannot claim today that the word *charter* is any more determinative than *district* when it comes to analyzing or explaining school performance."

A few pages later, we are told that the charter sector "has advanced public education as a whole." Well, how exactly? And to what degree? The problem is that often the forest gets lost because the leaves aren't counted: the authors describe a CREDO report's conclusions on the cumulative advantage of urban charter schools for poor African American students but give the reader no sense of how trustworthy they deem the report to be nor how significant the purported charter-school impact is—compared, for example, to

the results of any other major school-reform strategy.

The authors delineate many concerns about the charter sector. In a section titled "Who Watches the Watchers?" they point out that in some states, authorizers operate virtually unchecked, with dire consequences for students, and that the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools approves the quality controls of only two states (Hawaii and Louisiana) and the District of Columbia. In Minnesota, it took the legislature 18 years after passage of the state's charter law to counteract sloppy authorizing by placing more power in the hands of the state education agency.

On a related issue: education reformers often decry the obstructionist power of vested interests, especially those of teachers unions. Finn and his colleagues, however, note that charters themselves are not impervious to financial and political corruption: "Low-performing schools also crave students, resources, and legitimacy.... Firms that earn their living by operating or selling services to schools naturally want to sustain their revenues. So do authorizers that derive their income via a formula keyed to student enrollments." A section on Ohio charter politics makes such claims explicit, naming names of individuals and operators who held up charter-law reform in that state for a decade through massive campaign contributions and behind-the-scenes glad-handing. Neither are the authors sanguine about for-profit operators, noting that, "Something is plainly awry when schools or their service providers enrich their owners while producing shoddy pupil outcomes."

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The authors also worry that the sector has not sufficiently diversified. Philanthropists have become so enthralled with urban "no excuses" models that "we must also ask whether philanthropy's role in shaping this sector … has excessively narrowed its scope and constrained its possibilities." Alternative models and missions remain unfunded.

But while the authors do not hold back on critiquing the charter sector, they turn surprisingly coy in examining where it might be headed. They identify but do not weigh in on important battles within the sector, such as special education quotas, disciplinary practices, and backfilling (the practice of admitting new students when spaces open up throughout the school year). On the latter, for example, they note disagreement between Paul Hill and Robin Lake, colleagues within the Center on Reinventing Public Education, but they demur on taking a side themselves, declaring, "From where we sit, they both make compelling arguments." As for debates about discipline, the authors ask, "How to strike a legally defensible, morally acceptable, fiscally manageable, and educationally sound balance between the rights or interests of one child and those of many others who attend that school? ... Such questions have no easy answers." But the reader is left wishing they had posited a few.

Given its evenhanded approach, *Charter Schools at the Crossroads* constitutes a perfect anchor text for a full overview of this major sector of American schooling. At the same time, those seeking new material with which to critique or celebrate this most important education-reform approach will have to look elsewhere.

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"What about Instagram?"