



Surveying the Charter School Landscape

EVA MOSKOWITZ'S NEW MEMOIR, ably reviewed in these pages by Chester E. Finn Jr. (see “Success Story,” *books*), might well have been subtitled “My Struggle for School Facilities.” Yes, the founder of Success Academy Charter Schools recounts her transition from New York City council member to CEO of Gotham’s fastest-growing charter school network, as well as the “core educational values and principles” that she believes drive its impressive results. But her battles with the city’s education department over space in underused school buildings resonate throughout the book, illustrating just one of the many obstacles faced by charter entrepreneurs nationwide.

The reluctance of school districts to help charter schools find suitable homes comes as no surprise: charters pose a challenge to the districts’ exclusive franchise to operate public schools. Yet the districts’ resistance runs counter to the findings of a major new study of how charters affect the performance of their district neighbors (see “Charters and the Common Good,” *research*). Sarah Cordes of Temple University shows that elementary schools in New York City see a notable uptick in student achievement, attendance, and grade completion when a charter school opens nearby—and that these gains are largest when the schools are “co-located” in the same facility. In short, while the expansion of successful charter networks surely threatens enrollment in district schools, the evidence indicates that it would benefit even students who continue to attend them.

Of course, it’s not likely that research findings will change the posture of districts toward charter schools. That’s why legislative victories like those achieved in 2017 by charter advocates in Colorado and Florida are essential to ensure a level playing field (see “A Bigger Slice of the Money Pie,” *features*). As Parker Baxter and colleagues report, both states passed laws giving charters equitable access to local tax revenues that supplement a district’s standard allotment from the state. Moskowitz’s memoir reveals how even strongly worded mandates to share resources with charter schools provide districts with countless opportunities for mischief. In contrast, these new laws seek to make it easier for charter schools to solve facilities problems on their own—which perhaps explains why several Florida districts have sued to block implementation of their state’s new policy.

Charter proponents across the political spectrum are united in seeking fiscal equity, but they have no consensus on matters of oversight and accountability. Amid widespread calls for greater

care in authorizing new charters and stronger accountability for existing ones, states like Arizona and some of its Mountain West neighbors have embraced a relatively permissive stance. These laissez-faire positions have netted them mediocre ratings from organizations like the National Association of Charter School Authorizers that favor a more-regulated approach to charter growth. But could it be that the conventional wisdom reflected in those ratings, if not wrong, is too narrow?

Matthew Ladner weighs in on this debate through the lens of charter school policies in the “Four Corners” states—Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah—where rapid growth in K–12 enrollment since 1990 has inclined lawmakers to adopt a hands-off approach to charter growth (see “In Defense of Education’s ‘Wild West,’” *features*). Charter schools now serve 19 percent of public-school students in Arizona, 11 percent in Colorado, and nearly 10 percent in Utah (in contrast to about 6 percent nationally). Early evidence suggested that quality control was indeed a concern: The achievement gains made by charter students in Arizona, in particular, often lagged that of their district peers through 2012. But today, as Ladner shows, charter students across the four states are performing at impressive levels.

This promising pattern of performance may well reflect the fact that a surprising number of charter schools in these states serve suburban students, bucking the national trend of charters concentrating in big cities. But that may be a feature, not a bug, helping charter schools amass a broader political constituency than commonly prevails elsewhere. Viewed from *Education Next*’s offices in Massachusetts, where efforts to lift the state’s cap on charter growth in urban areas have failed despite the sector’s excellent track record, the contrast is striking.

So, yes, let’s continue to ensure that districts share resources equitably with charter schools; charter leaders like Moskowitz should be able to focus on instruction, not real estate. But let’s resist the temptation to insist that there is one best set of policies to promoting charter growth nationwide. What appears to work in Massachusetts may not be best for Arizona. It may not even be best for Massachusetts.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Martin R. West". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Martin R. West

MISSION STATEMENT In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.
