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Despite Success in New York City, It's Time for Charters to Guard Their Flanks

Mayor Bill de Blasio pretty much lost the charter school fight in New York City. When the *New York Times* summarized Hizzoner's "proud recitation of campaign promises kept" during his first 100 days, the paper criticized the mayor's silly proposal to disband the Central Park carriage horses. But the charter school debacle is a better example of mayoral horse sense gone awry. Outmaneuvered by Governor Andrew Cuomo, the mayor conceded, at least for now, unfettered charter access to public school space.

Still, charter enthusiasts should not rest on their laurels. School districts and teachers unions across the country are fighting charters with renewed energy. The counterattack has been especially fierce in Chicago ever since new union leadership in 2012 led a weeklong strike against Mayor Rahm Emanuel. In Los Angeles, charters enjoyed a growth spurt during the mayoral tenure of Antonio Ramón Villaraigosa, but now that he has left office, the school board is putting the brakes on. In Ravenswood, California, the school district shuttered a Stanford-sponsored charter, allegedly for poor performance. Yet other factors seem more important. The school's financial officer told the board, "If we could pull back 200 or 300 kids to our district, that could offset the [district's] entire deficit."

For two decades, charters have quietly spread, and today about 2 million students are attending more than 6,000 charter schools. In some cities, including New Orleans and the District of Columbia, more than one in five pupils attend a charter school.

Charter schools have been embraced by Presidents Clinton, Bush, and Obama, and they have gained strong support in African American and Hispanic communities, where students are benefiting the most from charters. Yet charters have never had to make much of a case for themselves. In 2013, an *Education Next* poll found that even though half the public supported charters, and just a quarter opposed them, another quarter had no opinion at all. Half the public had no idea whether charters charge tuition, and another quarter

incorrectly thought they do. More than 60 percent didn't know whether charters can hold religious services.

The conventional wisdom on charter schools nationally is that their performance is "mixed." More specifically, studies show outstanding successes in urban settings such as New York City and Boston, but plenty of mediocrity—and worse—in the nation's heartland. Why is there so much unevenness? Partly, it's baked into their very design. Charters are granted significant autonomy over their operations, so they have the freedom to innovate, to move nimbly, and to take action. In the hands of smart educators who know how to run great schools, that can lead to success.

But the autonomy afforded to charters also means that they don't have much of a safety net. Like other small nonprofits, charters are at risk of falling into financial trouble. Wrong-headed ideas around curriculum and instruction also lead more than a few charter schools to falter. Then there are the outright financial shenanigans.

Such problems aren't new—they emerged in the early days of charter schooling—but some states have been more willing than others to address them. How have those states done it? First and foremost, they've paid attention to the regulators that oversee charter schools—the "authorizers," in charter-speak.

Today, we read of Gotham charters bravely defying teachers unions and politicians. But tomorrow's headlines could as easily be dominated by tales of charter irresponsibility. The one thing we know for sure is that sharpshooters have set their sights on the charter bulls-eye.

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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.
