



PHOTO / MARTHA STEWART

## Charter Schools Survive a Biting “Rain of Terror”

Charter schools, once little more than glass miniatures, are proving to be the toughest, most enduring of all education reforms.

When Minnesota passed the first charter law in 1990, the innovation seemed precious, quaint, delicate, and certain to break. Most states told the new schools they would be subject to full-scale review every five years. Public funding provided only a fraction of the operating budget of district-operated schools. Start-up and building funds had to be secured elsewhere, and parents could walk away from a charter school at any time. Yet in 2011, nearly 6,000 charters were serving approximately 2 million students, about 4 percent of the U.S. public-school population. Many of these charter-school attendees from disadvantaged backgrounds are reaching high levels of academic proficiency, enabling them to make their way through college and beyond. If some charters produce an inferior product, the overall direction of change is steadily upward. Above all, parent demand outpaces charter supply.

Charters originally occupied only a small dwelling place within the school-reform village. While charter schools lacked clear theoretical justification, vouchers rested firmly on the impressive market-based intellectual foundation provided by Nobel laureate Milton Friedman. School accountability had widespread support among numerous governors and nearly every presidential candidate. A bipartisan Congress passed the federal accountability law, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which required every school to release information on student performance in grades three through eight and again in high school. The tests proved that some teachers were decidedly better than others, which placed performance pay and tenure limitations on state and national agendas. Meanwhile, states enacted new programs that allowed for the alternative certification of teachers, opening the school door to talented college students not willing to suffer through the mindless education courses states had mandated.

Teachers unions and school districts and a variety of public intellectuals have counterattacked with a bitter “rain of terror,” inducing flash floods and mudslides that threaten to bury the reform village. The Obama administration is granting states waivers to NCLB that all but eliminate the

school accountability provisions that law introduced. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has said that much of the criticism about testing “is merited,” and he has agreed to wait until 2017 before using test information to evaluate teachers, putting accountability on hold until the next administration comes into office. Further, little is being done to ensure that the tests being devised for the new Common Core State Standards do not introduce a break in the continuous stream of accountability information essential for the evaluation of school and teacher performance (see this issue’s *forum*, “Examining High-Stakes Testing”). Even the long-term trend version of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—the only reliable source on changes in student performance nationwide over time—has been put on hold, allegedly for fiscal reasons. Without test-score information, performance-based pay and teacher tenure reform will become next to impossible to execute. Meanwhile, alternatively certified teachers are still being asked to take state-mandated education courses, keeping discredited teacher-education programs in business. Finally, teachers unions and the Obama administration are waging, and often winning, antivoucher lawsuits on grounds so specious they raise suspicions that judges are substituting personal ideologies for reasoned analysis of constitutional constraints and federal requirements (see, for example, our latest *check the facts*, “The Louisiana Scholarship Program”).

Despite the drenching antireform downpour, charter schools are gaining in respect, numbers, and political adherents, mainly because they are digging deep roots in local communities. Three feature articles in this issue explore charter-school successes in such diverse places as Arizona, Boston, and Rhode Island and reveal the underlying strength of the movement. While other reforms have lost ground in the public eye, support for charters continues unabated (see “The 2013 *Education Next* Survey”). Unless Common Core fulfills its promise or digital learning makes a breakthrough, charters stand today as the reformers’ one best—perhaps their last best—hope.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paul E. Peterson".

— Paul E. Peterson

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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.

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