

Note: This essay was originally published as Smagorinsky, P. (2010, June 8). Make every school a charter school. *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Available at <http://blogs.ajc.com/get-schooled-blog/2010/06/08/uga-professor-make-every-school-a-charter-school/>

Since then, the AJC has cleared out its archives, so it is now only available in the form in which I originally submitted it to Maureen Downey's Get Schooled education blog.

Make Every School a Charter School

Peter Smagorinsky

Charter schools have been offered as one way of invigorating public education by excusing them from many of the rules that bind ordinary public schools. In exchange, they provide charters that outline their mission and means of accountability. They therefore act somewhat like private schools, without the problem of charging their students tuition.

Charter schools are criticized by their doubters on several grounds. One is that they divert resources and high-achieving students from existing neighborhood schools and so undermine the overall quality of public education. Another is that some masquerade as public school alternatives while encouraging (perhaps deliberately) de facto segregation by writing the charter to accommodate privileged white students. In terms of their success in meeting their charters, they are further criticized by failing to produce significantly greater results than the resource-depleted schools that the charter movement is designed to out-perform.

I have recently written (June 1) about my concerns with Arne Duncan's Race to the Top agenda and its effects on the teaching profession. I would like to offer one solution to both the charter school debate and the overkill of Race to the Top in one sweeping educational reform: Make every school a charter school, rather than only those presently designated.

This change would have a number of positive effects. Teachers in the present accountability era have become deeply discouraged because decision-making has been taken out of their hands and placed under the authority of people with little experience in schools. Test-developers, policymakers, and politicians believe that endless batteries of standardized tests will make both teachers and students accountable. The more tests, they seem to believe, the more accountable the schools will be, and the clearer it will be who is teaching well and who is not.

In the present climate, teachers are treated like children, and bad children at that. And yet teachers are the lifeblood of schools. Over the years, everyone else comes and goes: students, principals, parents, and politicians. What gives a school its character and continuity is the teaching force, those who commit to the institution and carry out its most important work over years and decades.

Race to the Top is designed to identify and punish teachers whose students perform poorly on tests, even if those students are also hungry, abused at home, discouraged by peers from studying, living under dangerous circumstances, unloved, and otherwise in need of much more than today's math or grammar lesson. Race to the Top has centralized decision-making so as to

erase such differences in students, making them all appear to be well-fed, emotionally healthy, school-ready, and equally fit to fill in blanks on tests designed for generic children. Yet the teachers who are never consulted are responsible for driving their diversely prepared and talented groups of students through the same narrow assessment chute.

Imagine a different situation, however, one in which every school is a charter school that defines its own mission and assessment practices. Adopting this plan would require every faculty to discuss its students, community, beliefs, views of students' social and professional futures, and other concerns in order to determine what sort of education its students deserve. I think that any faculty charged with the responsibility to determine its own goals and assessment practices would be highly energized by the process and the confidence invested in them by the system. Faculty morale, which has been battered in recent decades, would inevitably improve given the faith placed in their local knowledge and the respect accorded them as authorities on students and teaching.

I suspect that most faculties given this opportunity would not choose to subject themselves and their students to endless batteries of standardized tests. Perhaps to satisfy those who believe that we do need some form of standardized assessment to make cross-school comparisons of "achievement"—and I am not among them—faculties would be required to administer at least one such test over the course of the year. But they would be given the latitude to choose that test, which would require them to examine the various assessments to see which provides the greatest degree of authenticity relative to their curriculum and teaching. The competition would also force test-makers to continually refine their assessments so that teachers, not policymakers and psychometricians, regard them as authentic, which I think would produce better tests.

Race to the Top considers "merit" to be a function of teaching to standardized tests. I see meritorious teaching very differently. I find merit in trying to become a better teacher. A plan proposed long ago by Temple professor Michael W. Smith would have merit pay distributed to teachers who study their own teaching in order to improve it. A school's charter could include a component that assesses effective teaching through teachers' participation in action research teams in which they identify a local teaching problem or challenge and systematically study it to come up with instructional or programmatic solutions to experiment with. Again, the goal is to improve teaching in part by vesting teachers with decision-making authority. In this system, a principal would be less of an overlord looking to keep ill-behaved teachers in line, and more of a collaborator in helping teachers think of how to teach more effectively toward the charter's mission.

Of course, the teaching force, like any other professional group, does include people unfit for the job. I don't pretend that my proposal would completely remove all dead wood. On the whole, however, I think it would help make schools more energetic, dynamic, and satisfying places for students and teachers who seek out the classroom for intellectual, emotional, and practical rewards.

Peter Smagorinsky teaches at the University of Georgia. He voted for Barack Obama but not Arne Duncan.