book review

Democracy in Education
America's latest voluntary organization: the charter school

Inside Charter Schools:
The Paradox of Radical Decentralization
Edited by Bruce Fuller

Reviewed by Patrick J. Wolf

The soaring popularity of charter schools among parents, education reformers, and politicians still hasn’t convinced Bruce Fuller of their worth. Fuller, a professor of education and public policy at the University of California at Berkeley, claims that the charter schooling movement is paradoxical in that it undermines the very values—of equity and community—that it seeks to promote.

Citing French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau and sociologist Emile Durkheim, Fuller holds that modern democratic societies depend on government-generated and government-enforced social cohesion. In this vein, modern governments need to resolve disputes over how children ought to be educated and then use their authority to impose a consistent standard on all. Fuller sees charter schooling as a “radical decentralization” of authority whereby decisions regarding the education of children and the allocation of public resources are improperly entrusted to groups of parents, advocates, and charter school leaders.

These groups, Fuller claims, are concerned only with their particularistic self-interests and lack a proper regard for the “common good.” The result, Fuller suspects, is the creation of public schools that are public in name only. They act as gated communities for the privileged, contrasted with the traditional common public schools where children of diverse races, social classes, and abilities are mixed and forged into responsible democratic citizens. In Fuller’s words, “The charter movement—now sanctified as the centrists’ rendition of school choice—may contribute to the dismantling of the modern state’s political foundations.”

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Fuller repeatedly accuses charter school advocates of being “tribal” and particularistic in their interests. Yet, in describing the left-right coalition that has developed in support of charters, he admits that it is unified behind a broad view of the public interest. In fact, the charter school “cabal” that Fuller considers so worrisome is precisely the sort of broad-based and cross-cutting coalition that the writers of The Federalist believed would be the proper engine of policy development and change in the United States. Unlike the Founders, Fuller wants America to be one big unitary tribe—all unum and no pluribus—with a strong central government as “chief.” Fuller views parent and grassroots advocacy groups as instruments of political fragmentation and social discord. An earlier analyst of American society, Alexis de Tocqueville, considered such voluntary community organizations the mainstay of democracy in America.

Beyond his philosophical objections, Fuller even doubts whether the supposedly privileged students who enroll in charter schools benefit academically from the experience. He is convinced that the burgeoning charter school movement is a false panacea that merely distracts decisionmakers from the kinds of social changes—equalizing education funding and eliminating poverty—that are the keys to better learning.

Fuller purports to be “concerned about the lack of dispassionate evidence” regarding charter schools, and he offers this collection of case studies (written by his graduate students, fellow UC professors, and an education writer for The New York Times) as a partial remedy. Yet Fuller’s own criticisms of school choice involve more passion than logic. The research presented here adds little to the body of credible evidence on the performance of charter schools relative to traditional public schools.

Fuller and his collaborators question the evidence that charter schooling is superior to traditional public school-
ing. Granted, as yet there is no rock-solid scientific evidence that students benefit from a switch from traditional to charter public schools. The bulk of the evidence supporting charter schools is found in surveys of parental satisfaction and in the undeniable fact that an increasing number of parents are placing their names on the waiting lists of oversubscribed charter schools. They certainly seem to believe that charters offer a better alternative. Regardless, this empirical void would seem to have given Fuller the perfect opportunity to conduct a more systematic test of charter school effectiveness. It's unfortunate that he didn't take it.

Instead, Fuller's research team merely visited several individual charter schools and described their histories, characteristics, and the opinions of their principals, teachers, parents, and students—warts and all. Such case studies are a valuable tool for generating research hypotheses or exploring how policy interventions are being shaped in the trenches. The researchers documented plenty of disappointing shortcomings in the charter schools they studied. Based on the case studies presented here, we might responsibly conclude that some, perhaps many, charter schools are imperfect. However, we cannot conclude, as Fuller does, that charter schools on the whole are undesirable alternatives to traditional public schools. We should not draw any firm conclusions from the seven cases described in this study because they are too few in number to allow generalizing to all of the nation's 2,372 charter schools, a problem that Fuller himself acknowledges.

In addition, the book provides no full-fledged case studies of traditional public schools whose strengths and weaknesses can be compared with those of the seven charter schools presented here. I am aware of no school choice advocate who claims that schools of choice are flawless—only that they are, on average, better than the alternative. Since Fuller and his colleagues give us no information on the schools that these students left behind in order to attend charter schools, their study offers no empirical foundation from which to draw general conclusions of any kind.

Fuller insists that school choice schemes, including charter schools, threaten America's "social organization" and diminish the civic values of students. But he marshals no systematic evidence in support of this assertion. And it is more likely, in my view, that students who are placed in schools of choice, rather than compelled by the government to attend a particular school, will turn out to be less authoritarian and more politically tolerant and community-spirited than their public school peers. Why would we expect, as Fuller does, that an education system that coercively assigns students to schools in ways that benefit primarily upper-income families would necessarily promote an appreciation for liberty, democracy, and equality? Why would we expect that a system that confines the residents of racially segregated inner-city neighborhoods to racially segregated government schools would somehow promote an appreciation for diversity and pluralism in America?

Fuller asks, "Is this creation of small, even tribal, public squares bounded by ethnicity, social class, or religion a viable way to enrich communities? Or is it part of a political agenda bent on eroding the larger public square, the foundations of a common good to which the modern state has been committed for more than two centuries?" Fuller answers his rhetorical questions with the claim that, under school choice regimes, "The state sanctions the pursuit not of the broad common good but of private interests."

However, a basic understanding of American history undermines Fuller's perceptions of the altruistic common school tradition and the threat to the "common good" posed by school choice. Here was no public school system 200 years ago. To the extent that formal education existed in America, it was provided by parents or private schools. Moreover, the public school system that emerged in Massachusetts in the 1840s was arguably as particularistic as the major private or charter school systems of today. Horace Mann's famous public schools promoted a distinctly Unitarian brand of Protestantism and at times were virulently anti-Catholic—reality that Fuller only alludes to in order to impugn the motives of Catholics who currently support school choice.

The work of Charles Glenn of Boston College has shown that the American public school system never truly embraced a secularized "common school" conception of the public good. Protestant prayers were recited in public schools until the 1960s. Students were assigned to racially segregated public schools in the South until the late 1950s. A majority of African-American public school students are still educated in schools that are de facto racially segregated. The truth is that grassroots organizations like a community-developed charter school are far more traditional in America than the bureaucratic structures of the modern public school system.

- Patrick J. Wolf is an assistant professor of public policy at Georgetown University and a member of the National Working Commission on Choice in K–12 Education.