Why Some Charters Care Less About Learning

Urban charter schools have shifted their mission from excellence to social justice

EDUCATION NEXT senior editor Paul E. Peterson recently spoke with Steven Wilson, senior fellow at the Center on Reinventing Public Education and a founder of the Ascend Learning charter-school network, about how some urban charters have changed their educational mission.

Paul Peterson: The tentative title of your forthcoming book is *The Lost Decade.* We had school closures for a year or two. Why do you say a "lost decade"?

Steven Wilson: I would point to a change in what schools in the reform movement are driving toward. For a long time, the essence of urban charters in the KIPP mold was to do whatever it takes to advance student achievement—to attend to what was called the 101 percent solution, because there's no silver bullet for raising achievement. Internally, the test for every decision in the network or the school was "Does this advance student achievement?"

But now, that has really changed, as what I would call social-justice education has begun to substitute for the focus on an academic education. The new test of decisions is to make them as anti-racist as possible. So, in the largest sense, academics are less of a focus, and the new focus is on social justice.

You mentioned that everything was done with student achievement in mind. At Ascend Learning and other schools like it, what were you doing to maximize student learning?

The essence is an operating system that was much more favorable to student achievement than district schools. That operating system is the charter bargain. In starting a charter school, you have a degree of authority and autonomy to do things that really matter, like being able to hire and fire the faculty of your choice, being able to choose the curriculum that works best, control your budget—all things which principals in traditional, large urban schools have relatively little control over. The charter bargain was this fundamental change in the operating system on which we could build good schools.

But then you need an effective program, and that was a much more rigorous curriculum, enormous attention to who was in the classroom, an outsized investment in teacher professional development, a degree of internal accountability, frequent assessment, unalloyed conviction that testing matters and is our guide to whether students are actually learning—all of those things.

These schools, beginning with KIPP, put a focus on having an orderly, engaging classroom where students can achieve a little bit of academic success reliably every period. And those little successes add up academically, but also in terms of student motivation and commitment to the learning project. Those were some of the big drivers.

Given the success story, why is there a change developing within this very sector? Is it being forced upon them by some kind of external pressures, or is this coming from within the charter sector?
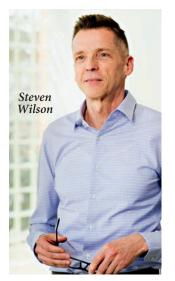
No, it's not coming from within so much as from new employees. If we think back to 2008 when Teach for America was at its peak of popularity, 11% of the graduating class of Yale applied. Teach for America was thought of as a very sexy, exciting thing to do. Well, that changed. It began with a change in the culture on campus, a turning away from a liberal education. There was a new progressive left that emerged that was wary of traditional liberal arts commitments. The idea of exposing students to multiple competing points of view to have them spar with different ideas shifted.

Now, the focus was on eradicating racism, which was identified as the cause of the disparities in educational outcomes. That's a very different premise. In the previous premise, the cause of the disparities that everybody laments and views as intolerable is that they're getting a bad quality education. The new school of thought was that the cause of the disparities was racism. This gathered further steam, of course, with the murder of George Floyd and the racial reckoning, when the ideas of Ibram Kendi and Robin DiAngelo took on enormous force, both on campus and in these networks. And those ideas are in very substantial tension with the traditional commitments of no-excuses schooling.

Allegedly racist dimensions included things that we would take as absolutely ordinary, if not admirable: the notion of excellence, urgency, objectivity—all those things were now

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Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) align to achieving your district's mission, vision, goals, and values?" This isn't a rhetorical question. The answer may be no.

The risks here are great. Far too often, districts base edtech questions on a search for technology for its own sake. School systems should not frame their efforts as an "AI initiative" unless the focus is how to prepare students for a world with AI or to make sure that schools know how to safeguard against its downsides. Instead, leaders should follow a tried-and-true design thinking process to successfully innovate and put AI to its best use.

That means starting with the problem the district needs to solve and the goal it seeks to achieve. Leaders should ask if what they've identified as a problem is a priority. Some problems relate to serving mainstream students in core subjects, while others arise because of gaps at the margins, such as not offering a particular elective. Both areas are worthy of innovation. But schools shouldn't embrace a classroom technology unless it's saving teachers time, extending their reach, or deepening their understanding of their students.

With the problem or goal identified, school systems then

> **In a recent survey of district technology leaders, 52 percent said their teachers were independently incorporating AI into their practice, but only 9 percent said they were doing something systematic with AI.**

need to be specific about what success would look like. How would they know if they had made progress? What's the measure they would use?

From there, the focus should be identifying the student and teacher experiences needed to make progress toward the goal. And only then should schools consider the physical and virtual setup to deliver those experiences. In other words, the "stuff"—the content, curriculum, analog and digital technologies, including those powered by AI—should come at the end of the process, not the beginning.

By considering a potential role for AI within this greater context, schools can avoid succumbing to a short-lived fad without sitting on their hands and watching the world pass them by. In these early years of our AI-powered futures, the goal should be measured investments that will stand the test of time.

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SCHOOL LIFE

deemed to be symptoms of white supremacy culture.

I'm aware of this argument, and I know that it's being articulated on college campuses. But how does it penetrate into charter schools?

It penetrates very deeply. This list of supposed characteristics of white supremacist culture are in circulation, both in elite higher ed institutions like Harvard, but also in community college s. In New York City, educators were trained in that very same dictate. So it's very pervasive. And when you introduce that into these kinds of high-performing school networks, you can imagine it introduced a tremendous amount of rancor, because long-standing staff members did not conceive of themselves as racist. They had extraordinary results in their own classrooms, in the schools that they ran as principals, but suddenly they were being called out as effectively racist.

I want to be careful. Equity is a very, very good thing. But that's what we all thought we were doing. We were advancing equity by offering children an exceptional education. And the results were stunning. KIPP students who attended both a KIPP middle school and a KIPP high school were achieving four-year college graduation rates just about equal to white non-disadvantaged students. Really a remarkable record.

Is there evidence that these schools have in fact become not as effective? Do we see anything in terms of student achievement that suggests this is all that harmful?

What we are beginning to see anecdotally is that very high-flying, no-excuses schools are starting to turn in results that have often plummeted to the level of the surrounding district. You might say, "Well, they had closures; there was Covid." But why would they have fallen so much more than the school systems that they compete with? Both institutions suffered from school closures and the other pandemic effects.

Let's turn to the future. You say in the tentative subtitle of your book "returning to the fight for school reform." Returning sounds optimistic. You are saying we can return?

Yes. It will take time to turn back to a focus on excellent academics. A lot of people of all kinds of ideological predispositions are beginning to question what has happened. We can say all children, not just the privileged, should have a super engaging liberal arts education where they grapple with different ideas, competing ideas, other cultures—that is the most stimulating place you could possibly be. That's the classroom you want to be in. We can absolutely return to that. And that is, I think, what we need to do.

This is an edited excerpt from an Education Exchange *podcast. Hear it in full at educationnext.org.*