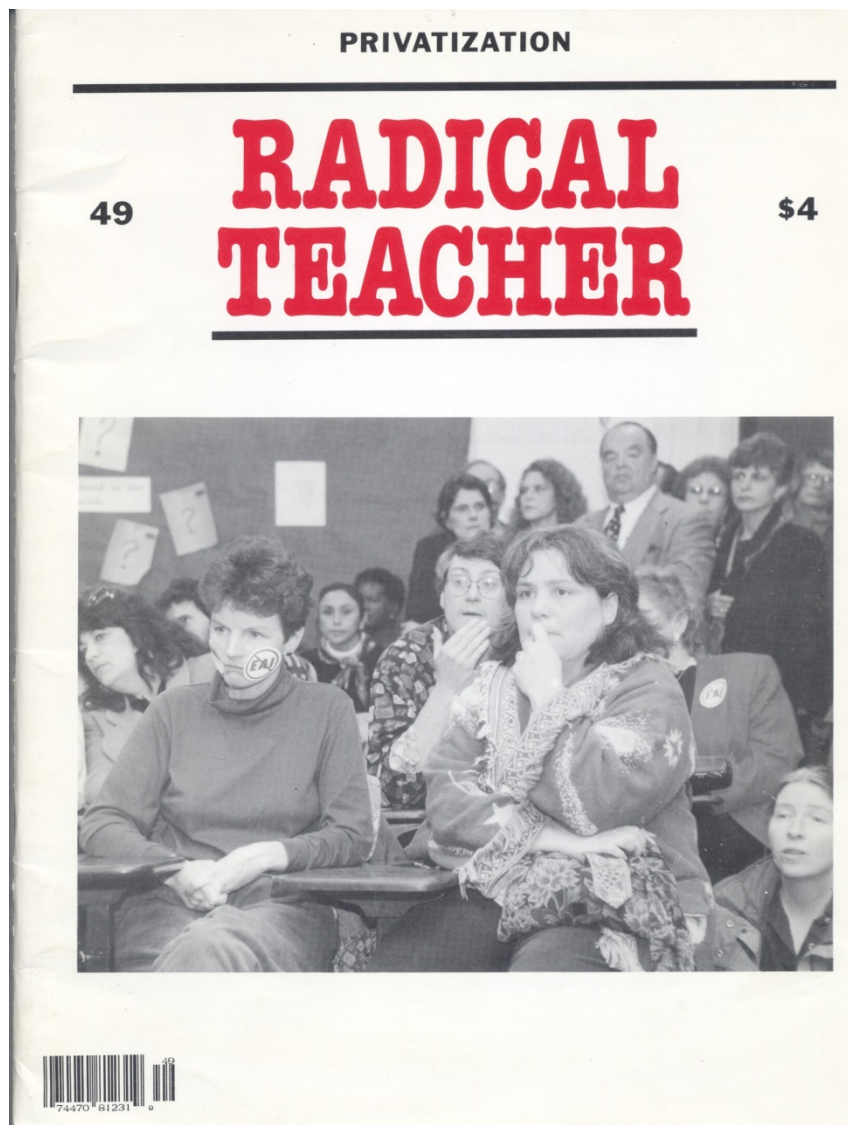


RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

The Charter School Law in Massachusetts: Analysis, Commentary, Wish

by David I. Rubin



Nowhere is the link between the right's national political agenda and the privatization of public education clearer than in Massachusetts. In November 1995, just weeks before announcing that he would run for the U.S. Senate against the liberal Democratic incumbent John Kerry, Governor William Weld unveiled a truly radical plan for reshaping K-12 education that could make Massachusetts the testing ground for every weapon in the privatization arsenal.

Weld wants to voucherize the entire public educational system, putting an educational voucher in the hand of every low-income student in Massachusetts and radically expanding the idea of school choice by including parochial and private schools in the voucher program. He wants to remove the cap on the number of charter schools (currently set at 25 by law) and let them expand without limit to increase competition with public school systems throughout the state. He wants to eliminate all forms of teacher certification. He wants to limit the independence of the Board of Education, a body that has been strongly critical of Weld's new proposals.

But Weld is too good a politician to be satisfied with "the having of bad ideas" (apologies to the title of Eleanor Duckworth's wonderful book, *The Having of Good Ideas*). He has also placed fresh horses in key leadership positions in the hierarchy of public education, from kindergarten through graduate school, appointing Boston University President John Silber as the Chairman of the Board of Public Education, insurance industry magnate George Carlin as Chairman of the Higher Education Coordinating Council, and using his influence to make sure that the UMass Board of Trustees named the Massachusetts Legislature's Senate President, William Bulger, as President of the University of Massachusetts system. All are on Weld's ideological wavelength, all wield power ruthlessly, all are white males, and none has any significant experience in public education. This leadership troika is best understood as Weld's management team for a hostile takeover of all levels of public education.

While Massachusetts under Weld may be leading the privatization charge, it's clear that this movement continues to gain momentum nationally. Privatization initiatives are underway in most states, and are especially potent in urban areas where dissatisfaction with public education is greatest. This opens the way for troubling alliances between poor people, especially in communities of color, and slick-talking entrepreneurs like the Edison Project's founder, Christopher Whittle, who seduce these communities with promises of a computer in every child's home, upscaling "hoop dreams" into "computer dreams." The lure of privatization is also great for big city mayors and school boards frustrated with failing public schools and thus vulnerable to sales pitches from entrepreneurial "ed" companies promising they can run better, cheaper schools and turn a profit for their investors at the same time.

Claims made by charter school advocates and others in the privatization movement have great appeal to people who are frustrated, angry and alienated by their sense of the multiple failures of public education; this appeal extends to progressive teachers and parent activists who

have been unable to bring about needed changes within their public school systems. Charter school movements present themselves as an extension of public school systems and argue that they combine the democratic values that gave birth to public education in this country with competition, the engine of progress beloved by every free marketeer. Advocates use familiar buzzwords like grassroots organizing, community-based coalitions, empowerment, innovative education, parental involvement in education, school-based management.

Here, for example, is language from an overview of charter schools put out by the Massachusetts Executive Office of Education in its charter school application brochure:

Unlike other popular reform initiatives which have come and gone with little lasting impact, charter school reform is a decentralized, "bottom up" approach to school reform which is fueled by local creativity and grass-roots initiative. (Charter 2)

Decentralized . . . local creativity . . . grass-roots initiatives: all familiar rhetoric to progressive educators working for change. But the next sentence in the Secretary of Education's description of charter schools slips in a new and radical idea:

Through a charter granted by the Secretary of Education, a private entity or coalition of individuals is given public authority to create and run an independent public school which is legally autonomous from the local district. (Charter 2)

How quickly the language shifts from "grass-roots initiatives" to "private entities." In this sentence the distinctions between private and public have been obscured. What is the difference between a private entity being given public authority to create a school and a private school? And what is a coalition of individuals? Would a teachers' union qualify?

The final sentence in this paragraph from the Secretary of Education's official "overview" of charter schools brings together key elements from progressive educational rhetoric and the new conservative rhetoric:

These new community-based schools have real potential not only to empower local communities, but also to unleash a sorely needed dynamic of entrepreneurship into the larger school establishment. (Charter 2)

Meant to read seamlessly, the language stitching between "community-based schools," "empowerment of local communities," and "dynamic of entrepreneurship" is about as subtle as the stitching across the forehead of Boris Karloff's version of the Frankenstein monster.

It's tempting merely to rebut the conservative educational agenda at the rhetorical level, but such an

approach falls short of recognizing how well-organized and effective these efforts have been to date. To really understand the charter school movement and other privatization initiatives, it's necessary to grasp the political, legislative and economic strategies used to further them: the realities on the ground. One vehicle for doing this is a brief analysis of key features of the charter school legislation contained in the Educational Reform Act of 1993 (M.G.L. Ch. 71, s. 89). This analysis is done from the perspective of an educator, not a lawyer; it seeks to bring out the political, economic, and, most important, the educational implications of charter school legislation.

Decision-Makers and Managers: Structural Issues of Power and Control in the Charter School Legislation

M.G.L. Ch. 71, s. 89 begins: "A charter school shall be a public school operated under a charter granted by the Secretary of Education, which operates independently of any school committee and is managed by a board of trustees. The board of trustees . . . shall be deemed to be public agents authorized by the Commonwealth to supervise and control the charter school."

By giving all approval authority and administrative oversight to the Secretary of Education, this legislation creates a separate school system for charter schools that is for all practical purposes under the direct control of Gov. Weld. The Secretary of Education is a cabinet-level official appointed by the Governor, and the Office of Education is obviously part of the executive branch. Unlike any other public education structure in Massachusetts, which prizes local control of public schools, this is a highly centralized structure. While this approach might have been rationalized as a temporary protective structure for the first stage of an educational experiment, it's clear from other language in the law related to charter renewals at five-year intervals that the intent is to create a separate system in competition with locally controlled school boards. (Even before the first 25 charters had been granted and before any evaluation of the effectiveness of charter schools could possibly be made, Weld called for unlimited expansion of the number of charter schools in Massachusetts.)

In the charter school portion of the 1993 law . . . Weld and his allies managed to achieve the exclusion of tenure and due process protections for teachers in charter schools.

By mandating that charter schools will operate "independently of any school committee," this legislation challenges the principle of local control of public education. This is no surprise, given the attacks by charter school proponents on elected local school committees and on public school administrators and teachers. But it is profoundly anti-democratic, especially in light of Massachusetts' long tradition of local control of public

education, and funding formulas that reflect local control. Although the charter school rhetoric is grass-roots and participatory, the control structure created by this legislation is centralized, hierarchical, and subject to the whims of any governor's political ideology and influence without the check of legislative review.

Teachers' unions are also arch-villains in the script written by charter school advocates. The undermining of unions also begins in the first paragraph of this statute: boards of trustees of charter schools are "deemed public agents authorized by the Commonwealth to supervise and control the charter school." Inferentially, none of the protections for teachers won by unions apply to teachers hired under "new management." Issues such as salaries, performance evaluations, promotions and tenure, extracurricular responsibilities, length of school day and length of school year, in-school preparation time, and continuing professional education must be addressed anew, school by school, perhaps even teacher by teacher.

While the control of the charter school "system" under the Secretary of Education is highly centralized, this radically decentralized approach to school management is surely intended to free the entrepreneurial spirit of each Board of Trustees. Unfettered from collective bargaining and contractual constraints (often called union "rules"), each charter school is now free, for example, to lengthen the school day and lengthen the school year, a goal of many charter school advocates. But, absent a teachers' union, who is left to express concern about added workloads for teachers and staff, about the dangers of speed-up and exploitation, about a principle of fairness that requires added compensation for added work? From the point of view of a teacher dedicated to a career in public education, this charter school legislation looks more like a Golem about to run amok than a Prometheus unbound.

Teachers: Their Legal and Economic Status in the Charter School Legislation

Nowhere is the potential for exploitation of teachers clearer than in the paragraph of this legislation that strips charter school teachers of tenure and due process protections against firing or arbitrary dismissal: "A charter school shall operate in accordance with its charter and the provisions of law regulating other public schools; provided, however, that the provisions of section 41 and 42 (of M.G.L. Ch. 71) shall not apply to employees of charter schools." To understand the significance of what has been taken away from teachers in the charter school legislation, we need to look briefly at these two sections. Section 41 begins: "For the purposes of this section, a teacher, school librarian, school adjustment counselor, or school psychologist who has served in the public schools of a school district for three consecutive years shall be considered a teacher, and shall be entitled to professional teacher status as provided in Sec. 42." Section 42 develops a series of procedural safeguards to prevent arbitrary firing or dismissal of such teachers.

Unions fought hard to achieve these legal protections related to job security and due process. They now apply to all teachers and other professional educators in all public school systems in Massachusetts, except those who work in charter schools. There is no obvious rationale for denying teachers in charter schools these legal protections, except the claim that this too is an area of "innovation and experimentation." It is better understood, though, as part of the right-wing campaign to "liberate" public education from job security protections won by teachers' unions, thus part of the larger crusade against all public-worker unions and toward privatization in all public sectors.

Gov. Weld and his key education advisors have consistently attacked tenure for public school teachers by associating it with complacency and mediocrity in teacher performance. Weld tried to abolish teacher tenure altogether in the 1993 Education Reform Bill, but the teachers' unions rallied effectively against his effort, and he found almost no support in the Legislature. In the charter school portion of the 1993 law, however, Weld and his allies managed to achieve the exclusion of tenure and due process protections for teachers in charter schools.

Teacher certification is another area in which the 1993 charter school legislation seems to be a stalking horse for Weld's more radical agenda. Relying on the absence of any statutory language on certification or any other set of standards for hiring teachers in the charter school law, Weld's then Secretary of Education, Pied Robertson, ruled that charter schools were exempt from state certification requirements, even though other sections of the same 1993 Education Reform Law had significantly strengthened the state's standards for teacher certification.

The Code of Massachusetts Regulations for charter schools states only that each charter school application should include a plan for "recruitment of qualified teaching and managerial staff" (601 CMR 1.05, (k) 2). What, then, does "qualified" mean? In practice, it seems to mean that the Board of Trustees for one charter school might insist on certification as a qualification for hiring teachers, while another Board might not. Charter school proponents defend this as opening the way for non-traditional educators to become teachers, but it also has the potential to undercut teaching as a *profession*, to make the exploitation of teachers easier by hiring marginally qualified teachers at lower salaries, to further obscure the difficult task of assessing effective teaching skills, and to erode teacher accountability. In addition, founders of charter schools may develop idiosyncratic criteria for membership on each Board of Trustees that controls the hiring process. Opportunities for incestuous hiring patterns and cronyism are rampant in such a structure. This is an educator's nightmare.

Students: Who Will Be Admitted to Charter Schools?

Although some selective admission takes place in public school systems through exam schools like Boston Latin, so-called magnet schools, and even ability-grouping or tracking systems within a particular school, the

underlying conception, so central to the values of democratic society, is that all children in any public school district have equal access to the schools. But the section of charter school legislation relevant to admissions creates tools of selectivity and exclusivity unheard of in public education.

The law creates the appearance of fairness when it states: "Charter schools shall be open to all students, on a space available basis, and shall not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, creed, sex, ethnicity, sexual orientation, mental or physical disability, age, ancestry, athletic performance, special need, or proficiency in the English language, and academic achievement." But the next paragraph reveals the reality of unfairness: "A charter school may establish reasonable academic standards as a condition for eligibility for applicants." What does "reasonable" mean in this context? Will the definition of "reasonable" vary from one charter school to another based on the whims of each Board of Trustees, as is the case in all other areas of the law? Isn't there a conflict between not discriminating on the basis of academic achievement and establishing "reasonable academic standards" as a precondition governing "eligibility" to apply to a charter school? Is this an educational variation on the old poll tax and literacy test obstacles to prevent Blacks from voting?

The Secretary of Education's regulatory language further exposes and deepens this contradiction. The pertinent section (601 CMR 1.05[j]) forbids discrimination on various grounds, including "special need, proficiency in English, or academic achievement," but also permits each charter school to set its own admissions standards, unlike public schools in general. It authorizes charter schools to use tests, interviews, recommendations and other admissions screening devices, in sharp contrast to the universal access to education mandated on all public school systems. How can one use tests as part of the admissions process, and not use them to discriminate on academic grounds? For what other reasons would charter schools be testing applicants? Personality traits? Loyalty?

It's still too early to know whether the first group of charter schools is indeed creaming off the best and brightest students from local public school districts, but at least one charter school, the Benjamin Franklin classical charter school, includes the professional resumes and cv's of parents as part of the application process. The groundwork has been laid here for discriminatory practices in admissions to charter schools and for charter schools, enabling some to function as special preserves for elite students and parents – essentially private schools at public expense. The admissions tools granted through this legislation create an unlimited potential for unequal access to public education.

Funding of Charter Schools: "The Full Catastrophe"

There has been more controversy about the funding provisions in the 1993 charter school law than about any other aspect of the law. The law says essentially that for

any student attending a charter school, the local district in which that student lives is required to "pay to the charter school an amount equal to the average cost per student in said district." For all local school districts this means that funds in their operating budgets already committed for a full range of educational costs (teachers and staff, school libraries, building maintenance, supplies, transportation, etc.) must now be diverted to pay for charter schools. This is completely independent of whether the local public school system needs additional schools to serve its student population, and in virtually all cases this funding formula is forcing local systems to fund unneeded schools. Charter school advocates make the counter-argument that the system doesn't have to bear the cost of educating its students who attend charter schools, but this is quite specious, since so many of the per pupil costs in education are systemic rather than unique to each student.

The City of Boston provides a clear example. Five charter schools opened in Boston in 1995. During the first year, approximately 1,200 children will attend these schools. Assuming most or all will be students from the Boston Public Schools, and using the per-pupil tuition figure of approximately \$7,000 established by the Secretary of Education, the Boston Public School system will have to pay approximately \$8.5 million out of its already committed operating budget in per-pupil tuition costs to charter schools. In addition, it will have to pay transportation costs for these students, and benefit costs for teachers from the Boston Schools who take leaves of absence to teach in any of these charter schools, bringing the real total closer to \$10 million. Facing a rebellion from Boston and other cities, the state provided some short-term funding to cushion the impact, but as enrollments at charter schools increase to meet projections, the real costs to the Boston Public Schools will soon reach \$20 or \$30 million per year.

If this approach to funding continues, and especially if the number of charter schools is allowed to grow without limit as Weld is demanding, it will certainly damage the quality of education for students remaining in the Boston Public Schools. It will lead to a two-tier system with high quality charter schools for a small minority of students and inferior public schools for the great majority of Boston's children. The driving force behind this approach to funding public education is punitive rather than innovative. Public school systems, teachers and teachers' unions are declared failures, they are blamed for everything that doesn't work well in public education, and they are punished for their misdeeds by having the costs of charter schools deducted from their operating budgets.

A Special Case: The Renaissance Charter School as Run by Chris Whittle's Edison Project

One particularly insidious aspect of charter school funding relates to the question of for-profit education companies running charter schools. The current law

forbids private and parochial schools to apply for charters, but it permits "a business or corporate entity" to apply for a charter, thus opening the door to profit-making companies like Chris Whittle's Edison Project to become involved in the charter school movement in Massachusetts. Whittle is of course a near-legendary, highly controversial figure. To some, he is a guru of privatization for all of American education, a captain of free enterprise with a dream vision: America's young people shaped by Edison Project schools to become lean, mean, and entrepreneurial (with good traditional values and good taste in the arts). To others he is a huckster seducing public officials with his sales pitch that his Edison Project can create schools that are better, cheaper, and profitable to investors all at the same time. What is not in dispute, though, is that Whittle Communications lost nearly \$400 million in investor funds and defaulted on \$100 million in bank loans between 1992 and 1994. During this time, Whittle did some serious "downsizing" himself, selling off all his enterprises, including Channel One, until the only venture he had left was the Edison Project, which failed to land any major contracts during this same time period.

If a public school were given the same resources to work with that the Renaissance School has been given, it too would be successful.

So he downsized his ambitions for the Edison Project from managing a chain of for-profit schools all across America to a player in the charter school movement in several states. This was based on a political and economic assessment that in most American communities charter schools would be seen as a compromise vehicle between public education and the privatization of education that would bring much-craved innovation to education, and would thus draw far less opposition than Whittle's straight-ahead for-profit school model. Enter Governor William Weld, with a little help from Whittle's friends at the Pioneer Institute, credited by Weld's Secretary of Education as "a private, non-partisan research group (that) played a central role in advancing charter school reform, providing personal assistance to applicants and serving as a charter school advocate and resource" (Charter 2). Weld likes charter schools; Weld likes Chris Whittle's Edison Project. Once the charter school law was passed, Weld personally invited Edison Project to apply for school charters. Edison applied for five; three were given preliminary approval by the Executive Office of Education's screening committee, in Boston, Lowell and Worcester. For reasons of its own, Edison then withdrew all but the Boston school proposal.

This application went forward with the legal sponsorship of a newly-formed non-profit group called, with painful irony, the Horace Mann Foundation. Formally, the non-profit Horace Mann Foundation has been granted the charter to run the Renaissance Charter School in Boston, and its Board of Trustees (which of course includes a high-ranking Edison Project executive) has contracted with the Edison Project to run the school. The contract

gives the for-profit Edison Project \$6800 of every \$7000 in per-student tuition. This relationship between non-profit and profit-making education may seem like smoke and mirrors mystification, but using a non-profit "front group" has a number of legal and strategic advantages for Whittle's operation, including tax exempt fund-raising, the ability to negotiate low-rate building lease arrangements with the state, and a complex financial management structure which makes it difficult to audit how the Edison Project turns public monies into investors' profits. It also gives the appearance of local control, even though a New York corporation is running the show.

Once the charter school law was passed, Weld personally invited Edison Project to apply for school charters.

The language of the law fits the Horace Mann-Edison Project match remarkably well, suggesting strong involvement of Edison and Pioneer Institute lobbyists in drafting the legislation. It states that a charter school is, "a body politic and corporate with all powers necessary or desirable for carrying out its charter program, including . . . [the power] to make contracts and leases for the procurement of services, equipment and supplies; provided, however, that if the [charter school's Board of Trustees] intends to procure substantially all educational services under contract with another person, the terms of such contract must be approved by the Secretary." Amazingly, Weld's Secretary of Education had no objection to the contract made between the Horace Mann Foundation and the for-profit Edison Project. Thus are differences between non-profit and profit-making, public and private, thoroughly fuzzed.

In the case of the Renaissance School, through a mixture of conservative ideology, political power, and skillful legislative drafting, the way has been opened for huge amounts of public money raised through state and local taxes to flow directly or indirectly to Chris Whittle's Edison Project: nearly \$20 million dollars just for the first year of operation, and more than \$100 million over 10 years, far more than what has been made available to other charter schools. Weld located the school in a prime downtown Boston building owned by the state and gave it a sweetheart lease worth at least \$10 million in state subsidy over its ten-year life; he fronted \$12 million in state money for a bond issue to renovate the building; and the school will receive about \$81 million in per-student tuition reimbursements set generously by the state at \$7,013 per student, about \$1,000 higher than is paid for students attending the Boston Public Schools. This money will be paid from the Boston Public Schools' budget through the Horace Mann Foundation to the Edison Project. Not a bad day's pay for one charter school run by a company that until September 1995 had never operated a single school anywhere in the United States.

There is no doubt that Whittle wants the Renaissance School to be a showcase for the Edison Project, and to use it to market Edison-run schools nationally. Starting with

about 650 students in grades K-5, it is scheduled to expand to about 1200 students in grades K-12 within three years. That will make it by far the largest charter school in Massachusetts, and a high-profile point on the national charter school landscape. The Edison Project has provided the Renaissance School with a ready-made curriculum and with teacher training and school management programs which Edison claims it spent \$40 million to develop. These ambitions of the Edison Project coincide nicely with Weld's political ambitions for national office. His newly minted agenda for public education plays well to the Republican right at a national level, and will no doubt help him in fund-raising efforts for his campaign. This extraordinary confluence of political and economic power will almost certainly help the Renaissance School to succeed on some set of educational terms.

But its success will not provide replicable models for public education or teach us anything that we don't already know from vast amounts of research. Smaller schools, smaller classes, better student-teacher ratios, current texts and related learning materials, appropriate use of technologies, support staff sufficient to deal with individualized student needs, in-service training and professional development opportunities for teachers and staff, parental involvement and community orientation, school-based management, effective leadership and role models in school personnel: all of these make for better quality education. All cost money. If a public school were given the same resources to work with that the Renaissance School has been given, it too would be successful. So what gain is there for public education as a whole by putting forward a model such as the Renaissance School that is too expensive to replicate? Is it anything more than a costly, cruel and cynical bait and switch strategy devised by Whittle and Co. to further their entrepreneurial adventure into education, and with which Weld has colluded because of his own ideology, values and national political ambition? Thanks, Guv'nah!

Final Thoughts

Why should we think that the forces of competition will behave more equitably in education than in industry, or that innovation can take place only *outside* public school systems, as though every effort toward improvement from inside the public schools is damned to failure in advance? By insisting on the ideological fiction of an exclusive and privileged zone as the only place within which meaningful change can take place, the charter school initiative engenders anger, fear, hostility, and defensiveness among supporters of public education. Still, we must understand that many fine teachers, students, parents and community activists are frustrated with seemingly insoluble problems in public school systems, that they have become deeply alienated from these systems, and that they are responding to the possibility of starting charter schools as the only chance they have to create alternative educational models. It's not enough to criticize the weaknesses and dangers in charter school legislation; we must also understand the needs and aspirations that are emerging in the form of proposals for charter schools, even while we

reject the political and economic strategy of the right that is channeling creative energies for change in education toward charter schools and away from public school systems.

There is genuine diversity among the 15 charter schools in Massachusetts that opened in September, 1995. Some seek to resemble private schools, emphasize high academic standards, and are located in affluent, mainly white suburban areas. Some, such as the City on A Hill School in Boston, design a curriculum around a particular focus and set of values, such as democratic processes and involvement in public service. Others, especially those in working-class and poor urban communities, have designed schools for under-served student populations, and also function as social service and community centers. It's especially important to recognize that charter schools in poorer communities are attempting to respond to needs that the public school systems currently are unable to meet. As described in "Mass. Charter Schools Approved in 1994," the Youthbuild Charter School in Boston teaches building trades skills to "disenfranchised youth who have dropped out of high school" (4). The Atlantis Charter School in Fall River includes a "Family Learning Center that . . . will serve as a Total Family Support Center, coordinating health, nutrition, social, day care, and parent (adult) educational services. The Center's mission is . . . to merge family needs and participation with the child's educational experience" (5). The Boston University Charter School at Ft. Devens will serve students who are "homeless or wards of the state" (5).

Clearly, some of the new charter schools want to expand the range of services they offer so that they can become central, stabilizing institutions within troubled communities. Such goals have great appeal for progressive educators, but they may result in nothing more than another form of co-optation, drawing these grassroots efforts outside public education systems and neatly deflecting critics of privatization with a few examples of genuinely community-based charter schools, thus providing liberal window dressing for the underlying entrepreneurial objectives of the charter school movement. Still, supporters of public education must recognize that some charter schools, especially those in poorer communities, are responding to real community needs. The task for public schools is to become equally or more responsive by reintegrating themselves into local communities and serving not only the learning needs of their students but the social and economic needs of the community.

For better or worse, public education has become a national battleground. The right, energized by the collapse of the Soviet Union and other socialist experiments, is determined to remake American education in its own image. It is eager to privatize public education because it wants an educational system that will reflect its values and, more practically, prepare young people for their roles in the drive toward an American-dominated capitalist global economy. This is not an easy challenge for progressive educators to confront, especially when we are few in number, less than perfectly organized, underfunded and certainly outgunned. But we should be working hard

in at least two critical areas: academic research and activist initiatives.

The start-up of charter schools in Massachusetts creates opportunities for a wide range of needed research. While some of it will no doubt be designed and controlled by advocates of charter schools both inside and outside the state's education establishment, there is ample room for schools of education and public policy programs to conduct research on charter schools. Also, teachers' unions and citizens' groups could sponsor research. Among a very long list of possible research projects are: admissions policies and practices in charter schools; student demographics (including migration from private and parochial schools) and academic ability profiles; hiring practices for teachers, with special reference to certification standards; salary structures, working conditions and job security for teachers and other charter school employees; charter schools' responses to affirmative action and desegregation mandates for both students and staff; impact of loss of funds on local school districts. There will also be a great need for disinterested professional evaluations of the quality of teaching and learning in charter schools, along with the question of whether educational models developed in charter schools can be replicated elsewhere in public education. The most ambitious and perhaps most important research would be comparative studies of innovations taking place in charter schools and in public school systems (yes, Virginia, some educators really are trying to improve education in the public schools).

The single most important thing that progressive educators can do is to become active in the fight to save public education. We should be "out there" as advocates for and participants in public school systems at all levels:

*Teachers in public schools should increase the momentum for innovation in public education and press for needed reforms.

*Faculty members in higher-education should make common cause with public school teachers in every possible form, from teacher training and professional development, to shared research agendas, to direct involvement in the public schools.

*Teachers' unions should publicize successful innovations and just plain good teaching and learning to remind citizens of the centrality of good public schools. They should develop and support organizing strategies to counter charter school initiatives at the local level. And wouldn't it be fun if teachers' unions started an organizing campaign to unionize teachers in the charter schools, beginning, say, with the Renaissance School (the law says that charter school Boards of Trustees "shall be considered the public employer . . . for collective bargaining purposes").

*School superintendents and principals need to become more visible leaders within their local communities, making their schools truly responsive to community needs.

*Elected representatives at the state and local levels must summon the political will and moral strength to fully fund public education; they will need strong constituent backing to reject the initiatives of Weld & Co. to privatize public education.

If the right has its way, it will continue to shift resources away from public schools toward the full array of privatization initiatives that Weld and others like him are now touting. Those who continue to teach and learn in public schools will be punished by the steady impoverishment of those schools; those who move to the fertile fields of charter schools and the like will be rewarded. It will require an enormous amount of dedication and hard work to retake the initiative on behalf of public education in America, but that is what must be

done. We need to rekindle a progressive vision of public education as a way toward a more just society, and the kindling may be found in any little organizing act.

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