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CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE FLOURISHING ON THEIR SILVER ANNIVERSARY

The first one, in St. Paul, Minn., opened in 1992. Since then they've spread and proven their success.

By David Osborne
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On Sept. 8, 1992, the first charter school opened, in St. Paul, Minn. Twenty-five years later, some 7,000 of these schools serve about three million students around the U.S. Their growth has become controversial among those wedded to the status quo, but charters undeniably are effective, especially in urban areas. After four years in a charter, urban students learn about 50 percent more a year than demographically similar students in traditional public schools, according to a 2015 [report](#) from Stanford's Center for Research on Education Outcomes.

The American cities that have most improved their schools are those that have embraced charters wholeheartedly. Their success suggests that policy makers should stop thinking of charters as an innovation around the edges of the public-school system – and realize that they simply are a better way to organize public education.

New Orleans, which will be 100 percent charters next year, is America's fastest-improving city when it comes to education. Test scores, graduation and dropout rates, college-going rates and independent studies all tell the same story: The city's schools have doubled or tripled their effectiveness in the decade since the state began turning them over to charter operators.

More than 80 percent of their students are African-American, and an equal percentage qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. But on the most important metrics – graduation and college-going rates – New Orleans became the first high-poverty city to outperform its overall state in 2015 and 2016.

Or consider Washington. In 1996 Congress created a Public Charter School Board for the capital. After 20 years, its 120 schools educate 46 percent of the city's public-school students. As in New Orleans, the board closes charter schools in which kids are falling behind, while encouraging the best to expand or open new schools.

The competition from charters helped spur Washington's mayor to take control of the failing school district and initiate profound reforms. The district is improving rapidly. Yet my analysis of available data suggests the charter sector still performs better. The difference with African-American and low-income students is dramatic, even though charters receive between \$6,000 and \$7,000 less per pupil annually than district schools do.

This new model's effectiveness has inspired other cities. A decade ago, Denver Public Schools Superintendent Michael Bennet, frustrated by the traditional bureaucracy, worked with the school board to embrace charters. They gave them space in district buildings and encouraged the successful ones to open new schools. Then they began creating "innovation

schools,” with some of the freedom to operate that helps charters succeed. Last year 42 percent of Denver students attended charters or innovation schools.

When these efforts began, Denver had the slowest academic growth of Colorado’s 20 largest districts. By 2012 it had the fastest. Today its students – almost 70 percent of them qualifying for subsidized lunch – are approaching the state average on standardized tests in elementary schools and exceeding them in middle schools.

New Jersey is hiring charter operators in Camden, where the state took over the failing district. In central Indianapolis, more than a third of students attend charters and around 20 percent attend 16 “innovation network schools,” which are operated by nonprofit organizations and have performance contracts with the Indianapolis Public School District.

Memphis has embraced charters but also created a vibrant “innovation zone,” where schools have significant autonomy. In Massachusetts, the state Department of Education and Springfield Public Schools have created an “empowerment zone partnership” with its own nonprofit board, which treats ten schools much like charters. And three other states have copied Louisiana and created their own recovery districts.

A century ago reformers reinvented our public-school systems to cope with the new realities of the Industrial Era. They created the centralized, bureaucratic school systems most of us grew up with. Today reformers are creating a post-bureaucratic system, in which schools have autonomy but are held accountable for performance. Parents have choices among schools with a variety of learning models, and authorizers steer the system but do not operate schools.

The teachers unions hate this model, because most charter schools are not unionized. But if someone discovered a vaccine to cure cancer, would anyone limit its use because hospitals and drug companies found it threatening?