



Charter Schools: *Innovators in Education*

It is a puzzle educators have pondered for many years. Cars don't look the same as they did 100 years ago. Businesses don't. But 21st-century American schools look amazingly like their 19th-century antecedents.

How can we get more innovation in education? Well, in other fields, an open marketplace has allowed innovative ideas to emerge and in some cases revolutionize industries. Digital cameras have transformed the photography business. Big box retailers have replaced department stores. Cars have displaced the horse and buggy. In all these cases, the big beneficiary is the consumer. In all these cases, the big beneficiary is the consumer.

Could we create an analogous kind of open sector in K-12 education where different schools could take fresh approaches? We can, and in fact, with the passage of charter school laws, we already have.

Over the last 10 years, public charter schools have quickly evolved into leading incubators of innovation. They've shown that educators, if given the chance, will deploy new approaches and combine proven techniques and best practices in innovative ways to meet the demands of the modern student.

Why are charter schools filling this role? For starters, charter schools are independent public schools. They typically operate without the constraints imposed by school districts. Their leaders are free to make nimble decisions, using common sense and new research to direct choices on curriculum, school management, teacher compensation, and other issues.

Another reason why charters innovate is because

they must. Unlike school districts, charter schools must compete to attract students just as businesses compete for customers. So they are impelled to do everything they can to "build a better mousetrap," not just imitate the one down the street.

Take the school calendar, for example. The traditional summer break originated in the 19th century, when children were needed to help around the farm. Most families don't have farms anymore, yet their schools still operate as if they do.

Free to break the mold, many charter schools have reinvented the school calendar. The Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh's Charter School provides 215 days of school instruction, and the Propel network of charter schools has added 30 days for teacher professional development. City Charter High School spreads its instruction across the entire year as well as using an extended 8 hour school day.

In many cases, school districts have responded to competition from charters by implementing emerging best practices, instituting their own innovations, or becoming more responsive to parent input. In this way charter schools push innovation beyond their own hallways.

If we like the results of innovation elsewhere in our lives, why not encourage it in our schools? And by supporting charter schools—which now enroll 1.4 million students nationwide and counting—we can.

This series is brought to you by a consortium of Allegheny County charter schools.



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