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# **Charter Schools and the Freeing of American Education**

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## **Charter Schools and the Freeing of American Education**

### ***Introduction***

The aim of this paper is to show how charter schools should play a vital role in the current movement toward school reform. Charter schools are by definition, “nonsectarian public schools of choice that operate with freedom from many of the regulations that apply to traditional public schools”, (uscharterschools, 2003). However, there are obstacles in the path to freedom. From what does American education need to break free? Consider that in a free system, educators would have the capability to innovate and creatively apply their professional knowledge to meet the changing needs and contemporary challenges in educating the nation’s youth – without the interference of bureaucrats and politicians, who are in most cases, not even educators. Schools would not be gargantuan “people factories” whose aim is to efficiently process as many children into contributing citizens as possible. Rather, schools would be small, privately owned and operated enterprises where the proprietors are professionally trained and licensed teachers – free to practice the art of education in the manner seen fit to best meet the needs of their students. If that sounds utopian, consider that if it were not for the socialist manner in which public schools dominate the landscape of teaching and learning, this would be the norm. Given freedom in education, teaching and learning would manifest across the nation in such variety as the hues and textures of

nature itself. For it would have no other limit than the unbounded infinity of the human imagination.

Some may argue that education is an altruistic endeavor and that teachers should not embark into the realm of capitalist enterprise. While I agree that there is an altruistic ideal, the fact that public school teachers still exchange hours for dollars in order to collect a paycheck only marks a distinction between employee mentality and business owner mentality. This in itself has ramifications for education in that the teacher serves as a role model for his/her students. One could argue that today's norm of working for others is almost a modern manifestation of serfdom. To what degree does our school system foster this neo-feudalism? The American dream of freedom that has always enticed people to come to America is not in working for others, but instead, in transcending indentured servitude through owning one's own economic enterprise, (Kiyosaki & Lechter, 2000), (Kiyosaki & Bennett, 1993).

Another contention is that public education ensures that schooling is available to all segments of society and that setting schools free to compete on the open market would result in disastrous inequities for the poor and working class. It is here that charter schools provide a balance. Democratically agreeing to make a collective investment in the education of every American child is vital in maintaining a thriving republic. The issue though, is that such an investment is stifled when it is monopolized by the state. Charter schools provide an avenue whereby our public commitment to education

remains firm, while allowing educators themselves to control what is offered in schools. Parents also gain the freedom to choose schools for their children that suit their family's values and preferences.

Three areas constricting modern education that are discussed in this paper include historical and political constraints, the industrial-age paradigm, and the philosophical foundations of public schooling. In response we will consider some practical aspects of opening charter schools as viable alternatives to our current dilemma.

## ***Historical And Political Restraints***

### *Historical Context*

So what prevents teachers from starting their own schools? In fact, private schools, both sectarian and non-sectarian, have been around longer than public schools in the United States. Yet these schools were not accessible to all, and in the midst of an influx of fresh immigration and the new Jacksonian democracy of the 1830's, public schools became the answer to the problems of assimilation and expanded political participation. Because public education was free, this challenged many of the existing private schools to remain open. Catholic schools were among the most resilient, surviving to this day, though no longer differing much from their state-sponsored competition. Meanwhile, most other schools that were open to varying economic classes were put out of business. The wealthy elite have

continued to this day to support their prestigious private institutions, while the remaining masses have come to accept public school as a way of life, (Spring, 1986).

So the current educational landscape consists mainly of public schools, elite private schools, and struggling sectarian (church sponsored) schools. Sprinkle this with home schooling, Montessori, and tutoring specialists (such as Sylvan Learning Centers) and we've got the general picture. Enter charter schools in 1991 when Minnesota passed the first charter school law. In the past 12 years, the number of states allowing charters has increased to 39 in addition to Puerto Rico and D.C. The total number of charter schools currently in operation is around 2700, serving approximately 684,000 students. Charter schools have enjoyed the endorsement of both current President George Bush (R) and former President Bill Clinton (D) in their proposals for school reform, (uscharterschools, 2003).

Charter schools can be put into the larger context of market-based reforms dating back to the 1950s when economist Milton Friedman argued that free-market competition would stimulate greater efficiency in schools, (Zarzour, 2003, 2002). This contrasted sharply with the Keynesian economic theory that shaped the New Deal legislation in the 1930s and is credited with stimulating the Depression economy through state-sponsored public works programs, (Owens, 2001). The idea did not actually come of age until the 1970s when Ray Budde and Albert Shanker pioneered and publicized the idea of giving teachers contracts

(charters) to explore new educational approaches, (uscharterschools, 2003).

In the mean time, a number of variations on the theme of "school choice" manifested, including state-wide choice (primarily for rural schools to allow consolidation rather than reform), district-wide choice, magnet schools, charter schools, and voucher programs. Initially, many of these reforms were intended only to create competition (and thereby stimulate improvement) within an existing system. However, the two programs which offer the most potential toward freedom from direct government control are charters and vouchers, (Owens, 2001), (Odden & Picus, 2000).

#### *Voucher Programs*

Owens (2001) cites John Chubb and Terry Moe's 1990 book entitled *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, as the impetus for voucher programs. Vouchers allow parents to enroll their children in private schools and receive a voucher toward the cost of education. This is reasonable since, in a free society, the parent should have the right to choose what kind of education they would like their children to receive. Without vouchers, parents who choose private schools are forced to pay twice for their kids' education: tuition to the private school their child attends, and then through taxes toward the public school that their child does not attend. Milwaukee was the first state to enact a voucher program, but a tremendous controversy surrounding vouchers erupted when the Cleveland City School

District was taken to court for allowing vouchers to be applied in both religious and secular private schools. In June of 2002, the Supreme Court handed down a hotly contested decision in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, ruling 5-4 that vouchers could be used in both religious and non-sectarian private schools as long as the school meets state standards and does not discriminate, (Zarzour, 2003, 2002).

The victory for vouchers is an important step toward freedom in educational choice. But it also rallied its opponents, and the fact that there were dissenting opinions from four out of the nine justices indicates that there remains highly charged opposition to the unorthodox interpretation of the Establishment Clause, (Zarzour, 2003, 2002). There are also skeptics who worry that vouchers will bring undue attention to private school curricula, as in the case with Islamic schools that suffer under the post 9-11 microscope, (Cohler-Esses, 2003), (Thomas, 2002). Others fear increased government interference in private school autonomy and some caution against private schools developing a dependency on government once vouchers become a relied upon source of funding, (Ahmad, 2002).

In response to these concerns, Muslim educators on the Islamic Educators' Communication Network (sponsored by [www.4islamicschools.org](http://www.4islamicschools.org)) agree that though uncomfortable, the microscope is creating a catalyst for revising and improving an inadequate religious studies curriculum. As for state interference, minimum standards set by the government, as in any industry, ensure a certain level of quality without infringing

on educational practice. Inner city students in Milwaukee have been enabled to attend Assalam School, an Islamic school that reports one-fourth of its students rely on vouchers, (Zarzour, 2003).

The impact of vouchers then, is limited but growing. Their main advantage lies in not discriminating against religious schools. The impact of the court's decision on legislation has seen over 40 state proposals favoring school choice. Currently five states including Florida, Maine, Ohio, Vermont, and Wisconsin offer choice through vouchers, (Kafer, 2003).

#### *Vouchers vs. Charter Schools*

Though charter schools still cannot offer parents the choice of religious orientation in schooling, there are still more states that allow charter schools than vouchers. Further, charter schools may prove to offer parents more accountability from their school than existing private schools with vouchers, (Kafer, 2003). It also should be noted that while charter schools receive the same amount of funding for students as public schools, vouchers provide only a fraction of the amount, (Amri, 2002). According to Zarzour (2003), vouchers only bring in up to \$2250 per student. While this is obviously a big help to schools struggling to survive on out of pocket tuition from parents, this pales in comparison to the \$4000 - \$10,000 per pupil expenditures of public schools across the country, (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Vouchers may

allow for religious orientation, but they still do not level the field for fair economic competition with public schools.

*Charter Schools: Contracting for Educational Quality*

The reason charter schools can compete with public schools is because technically they still are public schools. The difference is that parents, community leaders, businesses, teachers, or any other group can submit a charter school proposal to their state's charter authorizing entity. This is often the local school board, but also may be state universities, community colleges, and the state board of education, depending on the state, (uscharterschools, 2003). The most apparent advantage this brings is circumventing the huge bureaucracy that reformers would have to endure in public schools in order to enact change. Change is inevitable and schools must be structured in such a manner so as to be flexible enough to keep up with the evolving needs of students. We have also discovered that while every student can learn, not every student learns the same way. Charter schools operated by a variety of groups will bring a variety of educational options.

According to Owens (2001), the idea of contracting is not new to public schools. Typically called outsourcing, public schools already contract for a variety of needs including food, janitorial, and transportation services. Thus, for school districts to outsource the management and operation of each school to professional educators is not such a far-fetched idea. In fact, trends toward **site-based management** in school reform

make charter schools the next obvious step. Charter schools are also required to specify their mission statement [**clarity of purpose**] in the charter application, the basis of their curriculum and supplementary materials [**standards**], what measures will be utilized to demonstrate their effectiveness [**accountability**], and may typically use an **effective schools** model for an easily recognizable definition of what alternative approach they offer. Combine these with the merit of offering **school choice** and charter schools encompass nearly every aspect of today's trends in education reform, (Odden & Picus, 2000).

#### *Political Opposition to Charter Schools*

Despite these advantages, charter schools are still met with fierce opposition. Ironically the biggest opposition comes from teachers' unions - ironic because their purpose is to represent the interests of teachers. The objections have little to do with educational quality either. Rather, unions see the empowerment that charter schools offer to teachers as a threat to their own existence. After all, if teachers held charters themselves, of what use would be the union? Unions have contributed hundreds of millions of dollars to campaign and lobby against charter schools over the past decade. As is always the case, powerful lobbying has given unions a strong edge with politicians over individual parents calling for school choice. Many school boards and even teachers themselves have also opposed charter schools. Again, this is not because of quality concerns, but personal

concerns over fears of losing the security offered by government jobs, (Brouillette, 1999).

Despite the support of both the Democratic and Republican Presidents in recent years, opposition to school choice also stems from partisan politics. This may explain why the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union), a left-wing advocate for individual civil rights, actually opposes school choice. The Democratic Party then, under the influence of interests such as the ACLU and teachers' unions opposes school choice as well, (Brouillette, 1999). Republicans tend to advocate school choice because they are purportedly opposed to big government. But they also fall under sway of the interests of Christian right-wingers, who allege moral decrepitude in public schools and already operate private sectarian schools. This makes for strange bedfellows between the Christian Right and Catholics, Jews, and Muslims who operate private schools and stand to gain from school choice, (Catholic News Service, 2003), (Amri, 2002), (Agudath Israel of America, 1999).

In fact, Blaker (2003) argues that the harm inherent in school choice stems from the fact that fundamentalist religious groups are threatened by history and science that are in conflict with their beliefs. She believes school choice will be used for religious indoctrination rather than pioneering innovative ways to teach. While there are legitimate grounds for caution in her warning, Kirkpatrick (2000) cites several examples of Democrats, minorities, and civil rights advocates

who have favored school choice through the years because of the inherent merits of ending the government monopoly on schooling.

### *Money Matters*

Economic interests may also play a role in Republican support of charter schools. Owens (2001) provides some rather alarming data demonstrating that corporate interests see charter school reform as a lucrative investment opportunity. Such corporate interests range from educational media producers, virtual online schools, cable and media outlets, and charter school management companies some of which are interrelated through complex business relationships. Among those cited are Michael Milken of Knowledge Universe, Productivity Point International, and the University of Phoenix (online university); Paul Allen (co-founder of Microsoft) of Charter Communications [cable company that he envisions as part of a "wired world" offering instruction]; Lamar Alexander (former Republican Governor of Tennessee and Presidential hopeful); William F. Weld (former Republican Governor of Massachusetts) of Leeds Equity Partners III, which raises money for investment in for-profit schools and also aims to harness the internet for higher education instruction; Christopher F. Whittle, media tycoon and founder of The Edison Schools, Inc. supported by Paul Allen's Vulcan Ventures, Inc., the Rothschild family, and a J.P. Morgan affiliate; to name a few. The point is that such big money investors intend to transform a "cottage industry of

independent, non-profit institutions" into consolidated, corporate-run, for-profit school systems, (Owens).

Sahin (2003) clarifies the ways in which corporations have already begun to see a return on their investment in schools. She cites examples of school ads, ads in classroom materials and programs, corporate-sponsored educational materials and programs, and corporate-sponsored contests and incentive programs. Some of the specific examples include Pizza Hut Reading, the Campbell's Soup Label campaign, supermarket exchanges of gifts for receipts, ads on school buses, Channel One (owned by Primedia, Inc. but having ties to Edison Schools), which runs commercials in schools between its news programs. The most poignant example is that of Weekly Reader, owned by Kravis Roberts and Company (K-III) the nation's second largest cigarette maker. Apparently, such programs have proven quite profitable for corporations vs. the amount of consumer spending they elicit from students and their families. A combined figure of approximately 260 billion consumer dollars is raked in between children and teens directly, along with what their parents spend on them as well. Just how insidious advertisers are when it comes to marketing targeted at children can be evidenced in terminology such as "owning kids younger and younger" or the concept of "surround marketing" where advertisement is intended to bombard kids every waking moment of every day, (Sahin).

What happens then, when corporations actually control an entire school or school system? This is actually beginning to

take place under the auspices of for-profit charter school management companies. This means that corporations actually gain access to public funds to operate schools. The majority of the money goes toward "education", while a percentage goes back to the management company. This percentage covers the operating costs of the management company and pays back investors who own the company's stock. But one could argue that the real pay-off is derived from direct control over creating new generations of life-long consumers, (Sahin, 2003), (Owens, 2001).

The most successful of these ventures is Edison Schools, Inc. (formerly The Edison Project) whose CEO is Christopher C. Whittle (formerly of Whittle Communications and Channel One). Its Chief Operating Officer is Christopher Cerf, former associate counsel to President Clinton. Edison Schools Inc. has also invested in Paul Allen's APEX Online Learning, Inc. to develop online courses for Edison Schools. Apex already sells online AP courses and AP exam review courses for high school students. Edison contracts to manage schools for both public and charter school boards and consists of teaching teams for the same students through the years, integrated technology, extended school day and year, and a broad rigorous curriculum. The majority of Edison students qualify for Title 1 funds and 67% are minorities. Other prominent management entities include: Tesseract, based in Eagan MN; Nobel Learning Communities, based in Media, PA (and claims to be the largest chain of private schools); and Advantage Schools, based in Boston, MA (having an emphasis on discipline), (Owens, 2001), (Carvin, 2003).

Owens (2001) is critical of market-based reforms, but particularly of privatization. Privatization would cut what he terms "democratic control" out of education altogether in favor of economic controls that he considers too insensitive to the human element in transforming an enormous existing public school system. As shown above, the reality of special interests at work in the political system leave little room for the belief that parents or community members have much "democratic" control over schooling. Odden and Picus (2000) argue in favor of market-type mechanisms within school systems that allow successful schools to thrive and unsuccessful schools to fail and "go out of business". The charter school concept (minus the management entities) would seemingly offer both democratic control (by giving parents, teachers, and community members contractual control over their public schools) and a market-style mechanism (to keep the charter, they must attract students and achieve the goals set forth in their contracts).

Yet management companies are a reality and can provide an important service to parents and educators who are not familiar with the legal, political, and financial challenges of operating a school, (Hamadeh, 2003). While the ethics of profiting from such endeavors remain questionable, there are also non-profit educational management organizations that provide the benefit of a management entity without consuming more than what is necessary of school tax-dollars. FREE, (Financial Reform for Excellence in Education), is just such a non-profit entity that manages six charter schools in North Carolina. They reportedly

only require up to 3.5% of a school's gross income, in contrast with their for-profit competition that charges up to 12%. It also apparently can purchase real estate, which can then house the schools it manages. Most charter school laws prevent the schools themselves from purchasing real estate with government funds. It also offers its expertise in providing a proven framework within which a school may be established and submit its application to the state, (FREE, 2000). Non-profit management entities are the obvious solution to the threat of a corporate takeover in education. It does not make much sense to free schools from government control, only to have them dominated by big corporations.

### *Efficacy*

Amidst all of the preceding debate, one important question remains. Just how effective have charter schools and school choice been thus far in bringing about school reform? Given the fact that school choice legislation has only emerged in the last decade, sporadically, and with a variety of restrictions that vary from state to state, it is difficult to make a proper assessment. Depending on whether one is an advocate or an adversary, research is cited to support either case. Amri (2002) cites evidence that voucher programs in Wisconsin have improved test scores. Owens (2001) calls the track record of "corporate excursions into K-12 schooling...thin at best". Kafer (2003) says "the body of research supporting choice has grown considerably". While Blum and Mathews (2003) report that results are mixed and

that D.C. charter schools do not show any considerable improvement. In fact, they point out that students at charters have even displayed a slightly lower range of performance on standardized tests than those at regular schools.

Yet among the factors to be noted in evaluating the efficacy of charter schools is the fact that some schools in an open market are expected to do poorly and close. This is part of the reform process. In the context of individually operated charter schools with varying challenges and approaches, generalizations cannot be accurately justified from a research standpoint. While the Edison schools actually tend to do quite well, other schools without the same level of organization and experience are floundering, (Blum & Mathews, 2003). While opponents may like to assess the entire school choice movement on such failures, proponents will point out that at least in an open-market context, bad schools are able to fail and close rather than operate at substandard quality indefinitely as is the case within the traditional public school system. One must also take into account the fact that if charter schools are finally meeting the needs of students who were falling through the cracks in regular schools, some catch-up is also to be expected. Considering the relative youth of such endeavors, it is far too early to make a sound judgment. And as Owens (2001) concedes, entrepreneurs are willing to spend money in order to make money and are thus determined to have the time that is necessary to develop the project and make it work. This undermines the

bureaucratic inefficiencies present in public schools that invest little and expect immediate results.

Finally, it could be argued that even if school choice does not demonstrate drastic improvement, it should still become the norm on principle. Parents have a right to choose the style and philosophy of education that they think is best for their children. Educators should have as much right to compete and innovate in their field, as do experts in any other profession. The basic fiber of this country rests on progress and the spirit of free capitalist enterprise. Why should schools, the single most important institution in the formative years of every American youth, be a socialist endeavor?

### ***Industrial-Age Paradigm***

As stated above, a government monopoly on education has seriously limited the form and fashion of schooling in this country. Many can hardly imagine any type of school other than the typical public school model. It is important to remember that the typical public school emerged in early 1800s from the rural schoolhouses whose schedule revolved around farm life, and was gradually replaced by an urban model that developed in accordance with ideas about mass production in vogue during the industrial revolution. The school became a factory where children moved through the age-grade assembly line of subject matter. This is from whence comes huge schools, large class sizes, and formalized instruction. Kiyosaki and Bennett (1993)

believe the failure of modern schools is evidenced by the fact that they still have not yet adapted to modern times.

Charter schools have already begun to use new models as alternatives to the industrial-age paradigm. Magnet schools, which are designed to offer new choices within a public school district have done the same. Both will often use an *effective schools* model such as Accelerated Schools Project, ATLAS Communities, Co-nect Schools, Different Ways of Knowing, Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound, The Leonard Bernstein Center for Learning, Modern Red Schoolhouse, The National Institute for Direct Instruction, Turning Points, Urban Learning Centers, as well as others in the making, (New American Schools, 2003).

Other educational alternatives could include virtual online schools, foreign language immersion, single-sex schools, international schools, college preparatory, leadership, business, practical arts, apprenticeships, and Montessori - all of which have appeared with limited application already, but would have a more equitable chance of demonstrating effectiveness if given fair grounds to compete. Parents would also benefit from having this range of choices. Furthermore, educators should be creative and develop new models of schooling. As the social landscape evolves, new models will be required to address the changing needs of the future. A free education system will make school reform a natural ongoing process.

## ***Philosophical Foundations***

### *The Establishment Clause*

Thus far we have considered the historical, political, and economic obstructions to freedom in American education as well as the limits placed on the manner and method of schooling. It is equally important to consider the monopoly public schools have on American thought. As public schools shape the developing young minds of our nation, it is not without warrant that we should call into question the philosophical underpinnings of this institution.

If we recall the debate over vouchers, the controversy surrounding the Supreme Court decision had less to do with school choice in general than it did with extending that choice to religious schools. Somehow through the years, the notion that any government endorsement of religious thought violates the first amendment's Establishment Clause. The Supreme Court, in this case, ruled that it did *not* as long as one religious institution was not favored over any other, (Kafer, 2003), (Zarzour, 2003). Unfortunately, the logic of this ruling does not apply to charter schools. But it was not always this way.

Another inquiry into the history of schooling in the United States reveals that secularism did not come to dominate the philosophy of public schools until the very late 1800s at the turn of the century. In fact, Horace Mann, the father of public schools considered religion an essential part of schooling. The

Bible was an integral part of the curriculum, intended to be the foundation of a non-sectarian moral education! (Spring, 1986).

New York Governor William Seward, (later to become Lincoln's Secretary of State, and the purchaser of Alaska), attempted to make public schools more inclusive of Irish Catholic immigrants by allowing Catholic Bibles and Catholic educators to administer schools in areas with Catholic populations. His proposal was met with such fierce opposition that riots erupted across the country, church burnings, and a even a few deaths! What is interesting to note is that the issue was not the Establishment Clause, rather, it was the necessity for Protestant controlled public schools to maintain their monopoly on the moral values being taught in schools, (Spring, 1986).

Over the years the nation's ideas about religion in schools have changed to the point that many feel it is a violation of the Constitution for the government to support any religious institutions, regardless of whether they are all honored and respected equally by the government or not, (Blaker, 2003). However, the history of public schools as well as the long-time existence of faith-based initiatives contradicts these assumptions. Although Bush seemingly revived the rhetoric about them by establishing a White House Office for giving them Executive attention, The Red Cross, The Salvation Army, and other organizations are examples of faith-based initiatives that have been around for decades, (Ramadan, 2003).

*Secularism as a Worldview*

What is most naïve about this discussion when it comes to schools is that every person and institution operates under some philosophy or worldview. Secularism, though esteemed to be neutral by its advocates, is in fact, a worldview that contravenes other modes of thought. It is more appropriate to regard the requirement that public institutions be secular as more of a violation of the Establishment Clause than allowing state support for religious denominations on a non-discriminatory basis.

Dominating educational enterprise with a socialist school system and then mandating that all public schools be secular in orientation is a bias against religion that developed as an integral part of socio-evolutionary thought of the late 1800s. The idea that humans were progressing on an evolutionary scale implied that ancient thought, especially religious conceptions, were inherently flawed, being as they were a byproduct of the substandard mental capacity of men in the past who were less endowed than those in modern enlightened times. Secularism was regarded as enlightened thinking for Western man who envisioned himself at the pinnacle of social evolution. Secularism removed the spiritual element from everyday life, desacralizing nature, politics, and even moral values, thereby allowing for the relentless subjugation and abuse of nature and fellow man. As secularist thought took hold, so too did the religious debates amongst the Christian authorities over its compatibility or contradiction with religion. Secularism as a worldview

eventually overcame and compromised any holistic dimensions of Christian thought, (Al-Attas, 1978).

*Case in Point: Islamic Schools*

Muslim Americans are one example of a religious group grappling with the problem of secularism in modern education. Islam is defined as "submission to God" which permeates every aspect of life and creation. Muslim American educators in Islamic schools are troubled by the influence of secularism on the Muslim American youth, not just in public schools, but in Islamic schools as well. Islamic schools themselves have thus far failed to provide curricula, texts, and other resources that are free from a secularist orientation. Sahin (2003) cites plenty of evidence that commercialism is fast becoming the next major philosophical influence in modern schools, both public and private, securing consumerism as the new American way of life for generations to come. She insists that because of Islam's holistic approach, Islamic education should offer a spiritual alternative that is more consistent with healthy human nature.

Despite their secular requirement charter schools may actually provide the solution to this philosophical dilemma. Tauhidi (2003) pioneer of the first (and thus far only) holistic model for Muslim American schools, (called the Tarbiyah Project), is vehemently against charter schools. Ironically, it is in just such a holistic model as the Tarbiyah Project that Muslims may be able to offer a viable alternative to secular education in America.

Hamadeh (2003), a Muslim who is the executive director of Hamadeh Educational Services, Inc. manages two charter schools that primarily serve Muslim students in the Detroit area. She explains that while her schools comply with all legal requirements, the families and students who make up the school's constituents bring Islamic culture as a way of life into the school. Being fully state-funded, as any other public school, they do not have to compromise on quality because of cost, and they still offer an "Islamic" environment by virtue of the students they serve. What they cannot offer are religion classes or overt religious instruction. Yet, as is the case in any public school, the school must reasonably accommodate students' beliefs. Thus a place and schedule accommodation for prayer is made, lunches comply with Islamic dictates, both public and Muslim holidays are observed, Arabic language courses may be offered, Islamic dress is voluntarily observed without any stigma, and student expression of religion in assignments and artwork is routinely initiated by the students because it is in the outlook that they bring with them from home, (Hamadeh, 2003).

Some would argue, that such an environment would be more Islamic than schools that mandate Islamic dictates as part of school policy. In fact, Tauhidi (2003) even views the teaching of Islam as a distinct subject as a modern aberration. His Tarbiyah Project provides an Islamic philosophy of education that combines integrated thematic instruction with a holistic religious worldview. Though the school where Tauhidi's ideas are

being put to use is a private religious school, like many Muslim schools, it still employs non-Muslim teachers. He explains that the effect of the Tarbiyah approach is so pervasive, that even non-Muslim teachers have been able to successfully contribute, (Tauhidi, 2003).

While religion cannot be an overt aspect of a charter school's philosophy, certainly Muslim educators could work to develop an approach to education grounded in Islamic thought and combine that with the cultural atmosphere that would be inherent in any charter school that serves a predominately Muslim population. Curriculum and instructional materials could even be tailored to match such a culturally appropriate context. For example, Benameur (2003) offers suggestions on how to incorporate Islam into history, while Shamma (2003) offers a curriculum for integrating Islam with English and literature classes. Uddin (2003), Qadri and Qadri (2003), and Al Zeera (2001) all advocate a transformational approach as being an Islamic form of educational practice.

Charter schools opened by practicing Muslim educators would, no doubt, carry with them the seeds of Islamic thought regardless of the educational model employed. It is simply impossible to remove the Islam from the Muslim. A deliberate, well-planned model rooted in Islamic values, but tailored to pass state requirements, could also be employed to overcome the materialistic and spiritually void worldview of secularism in any charter school - those intended to serve Muslim and non-Muslim students alike. Perhaps other religions could employ

similar methodologies to overcome the dominance of secularist thought in education.

### *Threat of Consumer Culture*

The alternative is to allow schools to continue on their current path of instilling a valueless, materialist worldview into our youth. Sahin (2003) points out that non-Muslim education reformers such as Michael Apple, Thomas Moore, and others are also concerned about the effect of neglecting the soul of the child in schooling. She offers Moore's use of Greek mythology to address the issue from a non-religious perspective.

The threat of for-profit corporations using charters to take over our schools completely is encroaching, as shown in the discussion above. Gatto (2000) argues that this has been the agenda of public school engineers all along. The reason why public school reforms have met with little success thus far is due to the ingenuity of the system's designers who sought to break children away from their families and spiritual beliefs in order to create a compliant workforce and consumer culture. While this may sound conspiratorial, he makes a strong case that can be witnessed in the mantra "do well in school, get a good job, and be successful in life". Meanwhile public school curricula offer nothing in the way of teaching the basics of finance or economic success. And the idea of getting a "good" job working for someone else's company is so ingrained that the spirit of entrepreneurship and independence that this country

was founded on is actually now discouraged! (Kiyosaki & Bennett, 1993).

Instead we are duped into thinking we are being free and individualistic by simply spending our paychecks on overpriced sports gear because we are bombarded with commercials that dare us to "Just Do It"! As shown above, the same media conglomerates that dope us with entertainment 24/7 are now planning to take over our school systems - systems that have thus far paved the way in both philosophy and methodology for this transition. Those who are successful in school get cubicles in the corporate farm. Having little or no financial skills, they live paycheck to paycheck regardless of salary, consuming houses, cars, electronics, entertainment, tons of food, clothing, and intoxicating beverages. Those who are not successful in school eventually wind up in the nation's prison system - the dark brother of the school system - consuming nearly as many tax dollars and equally ineffective at achieving its intended aims.

Effective schools would break this cycle by teaching the spiritual value inherent in all of God's creation. It would mold human beings who are attuned to a higher purpose in life than self-saturation with physical pleasure. It would teach financial skills and independence as well as self-discipline and create conscientious consumers who spend with wisdom out of real necessity. It would restore the balance between humans and the natural environment. It would foster an attention span that finds little stimulation in the current offerings of television programs, instead reinvigorating a love of reading and the

development of meaningful human relationships through conversation. Heroes and role models would not be actors, singers, and athletes because people would be able to recognize their own talents to engage in these pastimes themselves, thereby discovering free, clean, and fun community entertainment. Real heroes would be recognized for standing up for something worth believing in and sacrificing for, like healing the sick, helping the poor, and offering one's talents and skills for the benefit of others. People would smile more, take pride in their work, and stop referring to life after school as "the rat race". Respect for the opposite gender would be cultivated so that mothers would be restored to their rightful position of honor and marriages would be once again be considered life-long commitments so children would not grow up in broken homes. How can the success of schools be measured? Through the character of the American people they produce. And if our standards in reading, writing, and arithmetic are not even being met, and moral education is considered a violation of the Constitution, then there is no excuse left for the continued support of our outmoded monolithic socialist school system.

### ***Practical Considerations***

After making the case for charter schools in education reform we would like to conclude with some practical considerations worth heeding when establishing a charter school. As shown above, charter schools can encompass the full range of school reform through enabling school choice, site-based

management, smaller schools, smaller class sizes, employing an effective schools model, and measuring for standards, (Odden & Picus, 2000).

Non-profit school management organizations can prove immensely helpful in handling the non-educational aspects of establishing a school at minimal cost without violating any ethical concerns by profiteering from taxpayers' education dollars. Applications may vary, but such entities can assist in assembling a package that details the school's introduction, governance, mission and purposes, organization chart, LEA impact statement, education plan, business plan, (including enrollment projections, commitment to exceptional children, projected budget revenues, expenditures, capital and assets, audits, health and safety requirements, liability and insurance, transportation plan, facility description, and marketing plan), resumes, approval of non-profit status, articles of incorporation and bylaws, and letters from community leaders, (FREE, 2000).

Religious organizations can also form non-profit management organizations, though they may have less experience in providing the necessary services. Such entities can also purchase real estate for the school to lease, thereby allowing the community to invest in the school facilities and be reimbursed through charter funds in the long run. Furthermore, because the organization owns the facility and not the school, they would be free to offer a completely separate, unaffiliated religious education program in the same facility, either concurrently or

after hours, as long as there is a clear distinction between the two schools, (uscharterschools, 2003).

Charter schools are technically public schools and cannot discriminate against students on the basis of religion, special needs, or any other factor. However, in the case of special needs students, they are entitled to receive the necessary resources normally supplied to public schools to assist in such cases, which is of dire necessity to religious communities who fail to meet the demands of their special needs students due to lack of adequate resources, (uscharterschools, 2003).

Charter schools must have a fair and open admissions process, conducting outreach and recruitment to all segments of the community they serve. When more students apply than can be accommodated, many charters use a lottery to randomly determine which students are accepted. Many charter schools also have waiting lists, (uscharterschools, 2003).

Charter school laws vary from state to state. Some states still do not allow them, while others have restrictive laws that make opening them very difficult. The Center for Education Reform (2003) publishes a scorecard that grades and ranks states on the feasibility of their charter school laws. States receiving an "A" were Arizona, Minnesota, D.C., Delaware, Michigan, Indiana, and Massachusetts. States that received an "F" were Iowa (which just passed the law this year), and Mississippi that has failed to see a single charter school open in the six years since the law came into being. Reviewing the websites cited here and becoming familiar with the particular

laws of the state is the first place to start the process of establishing a charter school.

#### *Other Resources For Schools*

There are a few other noteworthy avenues by which schools, whether charter or private, religious or secular, may gain resources and funding. First, there are funded programs available under the No Child Left Behind Legislation provided by the LEA (local education authority or school district) in which the school is located. These include reading programs, professional development, assessments, technology integration and implementation support, limited English proficiency (LEP) instruction, safe and drug free schools, before and after school programs, and gifted and talented programs. A school can find out what exactly is available in a given state by going to [http://bcol02.ed.gov/Programs/EROD/org\\_list\\_by\\_territory.cfm](http://bcol02.ed.gov/Programs/EROD/org_list_by_territory.cfm), click on the state, locate a link on the state's page denoting "Federal Programs" or "No Child Left Behind" and call the office given, (Amri, 2003).

Faith based initiatives are another source of assistance that could bring resources to a private school. The real practicality of these initiatives lies in the availability of offering a school the chance to host a training seminar in grant writing offered by the government. There are a host of grants available that faith and community based organizations can take advantage of if they learn how to tap into them. It is also possible to learn further by signing up to become a grant

reviewer. The reviewer will be trained and paid for reviewing grants per assignment and learn the grant process from the inside out. One avenue for doing so is to contact [www.grantreview.net](http://www.grantreview.net) and apply, (Ramadan, 2003).

### ***Conclusion***

This paper investigated and reviewed the obstacles and benefits of using charter schools as a mechanism for school reform. In some ways it seems a necessity to do so in order to offer private schools a way to compete with public schools in a level playing field and to avoid an imminent corporate takeover of our schools. A brief discussion was entertained on the potential for creative educational alternatives when given the open climate and empowerment for the ideas of educators to prosper. We have also discussed the implications that secularism and materialism hold for our nation's youth if these are allowed to continue to prevail as the philosophical foundation of our schools. In the end some practical concerns were addressed as well as some additional sources of school resources. It is the author's hope that this paper will create dialogue and inspire the courage in fellow educators to take advantage of the possibilities that charter schools offer. For we are not just talking about freeing American education - we are talking about freeing America itself through the developing minds of our youth.

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