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## Charter schools build on a decade of experimentation

### Ten years later, what have we learned?

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**NEW YORK** - There could hardly have been a more glorious day for the Bronx Preparatory Charter School.

Despite numbing December temperatures, the school's chorus sang spiritedly as founder Kristin Kearns Jordan, shovel in hand, smiled for the TV cameras and then turned over a chunk of soil in an empty lot, making way for a new state-of-the-art home for her school.

This was not Bronx Prep's first moment in the limelight. Educators, parents, and state officials had already thrilled to the tale of the lively new charter school for low-income students that, within a year, had its young charges sporting crisp uniforms, playing violins in the school orchestra, and watching their math and reading scores fly upward.

But in some respects, the groundbreaking serves as a symbol for the charter-school movement as a whole. Having hit the 10-year mark in 2002, the movement is putting down roots and making plans to stay.

Across the country, a number of charters are outgrowing their original settings in church basements or storefronts and redefining themselves as established schools in more traditional school buildings.

For the moment, such clear-cut examples of forward motion remain the exception rather than the rule.

But despite a wide variety in charter schools' degrees of success, some experts say the changes they'll make to public education in the long run may be far more dramatic than can yet be imagined.

### Successes and failures

The nation's first charter school - a public school that accepts greater freedom from bureaucracy in exchange for a promise to perform at or above local standards - opened its doors in Minnesota in 1992.

Since then, the movement has spawned some exciting success stories. Particularly in urban areas - where such stories were badly needed - high-profile charters moved into low-income neighborhoods and proved that they could take the same kids and, with less public money, produce better results.

In suburban and more affluent areas, some newly opened charters have made less of a dent in standardized test scores, but they have still achieved major gains in terms of parental satisfaction.

Yet, at the same time, the movement's failures have been making plenty of headlines of their own. Some schools have been poorly run, while others have been denounced as out-and-out frauds. There have been tales of charters that abruptly shut midterm after breaking every promise they had made.

Equally discouraging have been reports such as the one released this September by the Brookings Institution's Brown Center on American Education in Washington. A survey of 376 charter schools in 10 states looked at standardized test scores and found that the charters in four

states were performing worse than the traditional public schools surrounding them. In the remaining six states, their performance was "indistinguishable" from the average.

The real truth, say some observers, is that as yet there are no absolute truths about the charter-school movement.

"I've been in tens of charters that have clear instructional intention, that communicate wonderfully with parents, and that have a real sense of what they're about," says Paul Hill, director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington in Seattle. "And I've been in some that are absolutely clueless."

Some charter schools are conservative, back-to-basics academies, heavy on discipline, character education, and learning by drill. Others are arts- focused instructional centers designed to appeal to creative teens who prefer a potter's wheel to an algebra textbook. Still others adopt a theme curriculum, such as an Afrocentric blend of Swahili and drumming alongside spelling and multiplication.

Bronx Prep (which started off in 2000 in a church rectory) relies heavily on spending more time on academics and on raising expectations. Students there attend school from 7:15 a.m. to 5:15 p.m. 200 days a year, which means they receive 50 percent more instructional time than children in traditional public schools in New York.

Bronx Prep students are held to high standards both in academics and behavior. And they are constantly reminded of the goal of admission to one of the country's top colleges.

Many of the faculty at Bronx Prep attended prestigious colleges themselves. The classes are named after these schools (one seventh-grade class, for instance, is known as MIT), and students take field trips to view college campuses.

But the vast majority of charter schools more closely mirror traditional public schools.

The key difference in these cases is that they enjoy more flexibility to adopt certain innovations, such as merit pay for teachers and better use of technology. Typically they can do more professional development and can more easily hire and fire staff.

The academic results these schools achieve range from the electrifying to the abysmal. Regulations vary greatly from state to state, making it difficult to take stock of the charter movement as a whole.

The movement began with a burst of energetic growth, with the number of charter schools jumping from zero to almost 3,000 in just 10 years. But growth appears to be slowing now, and many say the number is still hardly noticeable among the 92,000 traditional public schools in the United States.

"There just aren't enough charter schools right now to make a difference," says Terry Moe, professor of political science and senior fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University in California. Most districts that have them, he points out, have just one.

And yet, despite small numbers and wide swings in quality, other experts who follow charters say the contribution they are making to US education should not be overlooked.

### **What sets charters apart**

For one thing, charter schools and their hiring practices are benefiting the teaching profession, says Caroline Hoxby, an economics professor at Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass.

"A slightly different kind of person is being drawn to and staying in charter schools," Professor Hoxby says. Her research shows that charter schools are more likely than traditional public schools to hire teachers from selective colleges, and also more apt to attract teaching candidates with better-than-average academic records.

In addition, charter-school teachers tend to work differently. A survey that Hoxby administered shows that charter-school instructors spend more hours on academics - tutoring, preparing lessons, grading homework - than their peers in regular public schools.

Charter schools also have more flexible pay scales. Traditional schools must adhere strictly to pay schedules that honor length of service. But a charter is free to simply offer more to the teachers it most wants to keep.

Kathy Christie, policy analyst for the Education Commission of the States in Denver, agrees that charters have had an effect on the relationship between teachers and schools. But perhaps even

more dramatic, she says, has been their effect on the relationship between schools and the public they serve.

Public schools generally have not thought of themselves as required to provide much customer service to their clients. But charters must, and their willingness to do so is making a difference.

Even if the number of charters is still small, "at least they've planted that little seed of recognition that we do have to be cognizant of the customer," Ms. Christie says.

### **Competition changes the landscape**

In a few districts where charter schools have clustered, there have been signs that the surrounding schools have suddenly begun listening more to parental requests.

One Minnesota district opened a public Montessori grade school. Officials had long said that would be impossible, but they made it happen after a group proposed opening a charter school using the Montessori method.

In a Michigan district, the public elementary school trimmed the size of its classes and began offering Spanish, art, and computer science - all innovations parents had clamored for - when local charters began draining enrollment.

And a Connecticut district, also threatened by new charters, began writing to parents, asking for feedback on how to better meet their needs.

This new eagerness to please may be limited so far, but its potential to change the system in broader ways, says Christie, "is huge."

Perhaps the most positive contribution charters have made so far has been to offer up a handful of success stories that hint at what innovation can produce (See examples below).

"We've proven schools can do it," says Ms. Jordan of Bronx Prep. Every time a charter school accepts students who lag behind the average academically, and then turns their performances around, that school "makes the case that the problem is not the kids," she says.

Such successes "boost morale [and] introduce hope," says Jack Jennings, director of the Center on Educational Policy in Washington.

Yet many perils still lie ahead for charter schools.

As they receive more scrutiny, overregulation may push them back into the same bureaucratic maze from which they were designed to be liberated.

There's also the question of scale. Their numbers need to grow more quickly if they're to have a larger impact.

But innovative schools are so difficult to start that they're unlikely to multiply with much speed. Charters that follow a more traditional model - usually conversions from regular public schools - grow faster, but are less likely to foster change in the system.

Money for facilities is not easy to come by. Some charters are eligible for federal start-up grants, but few are able to survive without extensive fundraising. Bronx Prep, for instance, put together a multimillion-dollar package of grants and low-interest loans, but still falls \$5.5 million short of what it needs to complete its new \$18 million facility.

### **Can they go the distance?**

All such challenges are to be expected, Jordan says, as a movement this new struggles to find its place in a field not exactly noted for openness to change.

Of course the first decade was hard, she says, and the second decade will be challenging, too, although in different fashion.

"We've all been running the marathon; we've all been sprinting to reach certain milestones," she says of the charter-school movement as a whole. "Now we need to figure out how to sustain it as we go the distance."

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### **A sample of successful charter schools**

#### **Academy of the Pacific Rim**

**Boston, Mass.**

A challenging curriculum that seeks to combine the best of Eastern education and tradition (discipline and character education) with the best of Western learning and culture (individualism and creativity). All students must study Mandarin Chinese and Tai Chi and read a play by Shakespeare every year. The school's test scores are among the highest in the Boston public schools.

**New School for the Arts****Tempe, Ariz.**

The combination of a college-preparatory curriculum with serious arts training. Despite the school's early days when it was squeezed into storefront space in a strip mall, NSA grads have gone on to some of the country's most prestigious arts schools, as well as Ivy League colleges.

**Minnesota New Country School****Henderson, Minn.**

There are no courses. Learning is self-directed, with a heavy emphasis on communication, technology, and service learning. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation was so impressed by this school, its students, and its learning philosophy that it has offered a \$4.5 million grant to help create 15 similar schools.

**North Star Academy****Newark, N.J.**

A school with a challenging curriculum that incorporates an eclectic mix of educational philosophies. The school year lasts 11 months: In July, students attend school in the mornings, and teachers spend the afternoons sharpening their own skills. The school selects students randomly by lottery. On state tests, North Star students score twice the district average in language arts, and almost triple the average in math.

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