

1 • Introduction

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DURING A TIME of intense interest in how to improve public education, the charter school policy innovation is among the most dynamic and hotly debated education reform issues today. Minnesota adopted the nation's first charter school law in 1991, and a decade later, thirty-six additional states and the District of Columbia (D.C.) had charter school statutes. The first charter school opened in Minnesota in 1992. In the 2000–2001 academic year, over 2,000 charter schools were in operation across thirty-four states and D.C., with a total enrollment of about 500,000 students, and continued growth was anticipated (Center for Education Reform 2001d). Interest in charter schools has also emerged north of the border, where a charter school law was adopted in 1994 for Alberta, the sole Canadian province with such legislation. Across the United States, 70 percent of charter schools report having waiting lists (RPP International 2000).

While *The Charter School Landscape* focuses largely on charter school politics and policies at the state and local levels, the reform has also received tangible and significant support from the federal government. The federal Public Charter Schools Program (PCSP) was first authorized through a provision included in the 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965 and later amended in the Charter School Expansion Act of 1998 (P.L. 105-378) (see Leal 1999). Over time, the federal appropriation for charter schools has risen swiftly: \$6 million in fiscal year (FY) 1995, \$18 million in FY 1996, \$51 million in FY 1997, \$80 million in FY 1998, \$100 million in FY 1999, and \$145 million in FY 2000 (SRI International 2000; Leal 1999). The PCSP provides funds for charter school planning and start-up and for research and information dissemination on the policy innovation. Former president Bill Clinton favored the innovation and called for 3,000 charter schools by 2002. In 2000, Congress approved \$25 million for a new Charter Schools Facilities Financing Demonstration Program to help find ways

to make facilities financing more available and affordable to charter schools. President George W. Bush also supports charter schools and proposed an increase in funding for the PCSP to \$200 million for FY 2001. Charter schools are public schools and thus also eligible for other federal education funds.

The Charter School Concept in Theory and Practice

Charter schools are publicly funded entities that enjoy freedom from many of the regulations under which traditional public schools operate. Regardless of personal opinions on this controversial and multifaceted policy innovation, readers of this volume are likely to agree that various operational and political features of charter school policy are intriguing subjects for analysis. Operationally, charter schools have been characterized as “quasi-public schools” that straddle the boundary between the public and private realms (Witte 1996, 161; Loveless and Jasin 1998). Politically, the reform has attracted support from both the left and right ends of the ideological spectrum. Some supporters view charter schools as an interim step on the way to a full voucher system of education. Others view charter schools as the best means by which to preserve public education by provoking traditional public schools to reform and thereby head off the threat of a full voucher system.¹

As originally conceived, and as expressed in many charter school statutes, the charter school concept is aimed at responding to demands for greater choice and accountability in public education and at providing opportunities for innovation in school governance, administration, and pedagogy (Nathan 1996). Charter schools are legally and fiscally autonomous educational entities operating within the public school system under contracts or charters. The charters are negotiated between organizers and authorizers. The organizers may be teachers, parents, or others from the public or private sectors. The organizers manage the schools, and the authorizers monitor compliance with the charter and applicable state and local rules. The charters contain provisions regarding matters such as curriculum, performance measures, governance, and operational and financial plans. The authorizers are public entities such as local school boards, state school boards, universities, cities, and statutorily created charter school authorizer boards in Arizona and D.C.

Charter school advocates emphasize that authorizers other than (or in addition to) local school districts should be permitted in order to break the “exclusive franchise” of school-district control over public education (Kolderie 1990a, 1994).

A majority of charter school states permit an entity other than the local school board to authorize charter schools. In addition, many charter school laws allow appeals of rejected charter school applications to the state board of education or another appeals entity (see Vergari 1999).

Charter schools may be established in several ways. An existing school might convert to a charter school, a charter school might be formed as part of an existing school (constituting a “school within a school”), or a charter school might emerge as an entirely new entity. Nearly three-fourths of charter schools in the United States are new start-up charter schools (RPP International 2000). In practice, the policy reform is quite diverse, as charter schools have adopted a variety of managerial and pedagogical approaches. Some schools are operated fully or in part by educational management companies (EMCs), and others emphasize the role of parents and teachers in school governance; some charter schools emphasize math and science, and others accentuate the arts or foreign languages; some focus on training students for an occupational trade, and others focus on preparation for university; some schools use a “back-to-basics” pedagogical approach, and others have chosen alternative curricula.

A Decentralized “Marketplace” of Public Education

Public choice theorists apply economic principles to politics and favor the marketplace over government as the central institution in society (A. Schneider and Ingram 1997). Reflecting public choice tenets, charter school advocates maintain that a market-based approach to the delivery of education can produce better-performing schools. When parents exercise their exit option and send their children to charter schools rather than traditional public schools, they issue powerful market signals (see Hirschman 1970). When a student exits a traditional public school, the public funds allocated for that student now belong to the charter school rather than to the school district. Thus, the opportunities created by attracting new students and the threats associated with losing students due to competition are expected to make all schools more responsive to the demands of their “customers”—local families.² In remarks prepared for an address before the 2001 annual meeting of the National Education Association, U.S. education secretary Rod Paige mentioned charter schools and avowed: “It’s tempting to pretend public schools are exempt from the law of supply and demand. They are not. This pretension will destroy our system” (Paige 2001). However, if the hypothesized benefits of competition in public education are to occur, a supply of schools sufficient to meet

consumer preferences is as important as demand. Statutory caps on the number of charter schools, for example, prevent the operation of a competitive marketplace (Cibulka 1999).

Market theory assumes well-informed consumers, yet in practice, consumer information “can be scarce, costly, and unevenly distributed” (Henig 1999, 74). This means that some families may lack ample access to accurate information about charter schools.³ When producers have more or better information than consumers, the problem of asymmetric information impedes a healthy marketplace, and government regulation may be used to address the market failure (see Munger 2000; Weimer and Vining 1999). Thus, Kemerer (1999, 176) asserts that the state has an important role to play in disseminating information about school choice opportunities. Finn, Manno, and Vanourek (2000, 128) propose a system of “accountability-via-transparency,” in which so much is known about a charter school that it can be “regulated” by observers (including authorizers) through market-style mechanisms, rather than by bureaucratic “command-and-control structures.”

Some analysts argue that the political and bureaucratic factors that constrain effective governance in school districts can be avoided through the decentralized governance embodied in school choice reforms such as charter schools (Chubb and Moe 1990). The charter school idea is rooted not only in market principles but also in theories of direct democracy (Cibulka 1999). Critics of the traditional public school system assert that intrusive school boards, stringent teacher certification requirements, collective bargaining rules, and various regulations pertaining to curricula and other facets of school operations obstruct innovation and excellence in education. Charter schools enjoy the freedom to make their own decisions on issues such as personnel, curricula, and contracting with nonprofit or for-profit entities. This autonomy allows charter schools to implement new methods of education delivery that may prove more effective and efficient than those commonly used by school districts. In practice, however, some charter schools have struggled with decentralized management (Griffin and Wohlstetter 2001). In theory, operational and pedagogical practices that prove successful in charter schools can be replicated in traditional public schools. Moreover, the publicity enjoyed by successful charter schools is expected to place increased pressure on the traditional public school system to reform, thereby improving accountability throughout public education.

Charter schools must abide by federal and state regulations pertaining to health and safety, disabled students, and civil rights; they may not charge tuition,

and admissions policies must be nondiscriminatory. Nonetheless, Ted Kolderie, a founder of the charter school concept, asserts: “Charter schools are schools of choice. Most regular schools aren’t. Some things that would raise questions at a school to which students are assigned might be perfectly OK at a school where enrollment is voluntary” (Kolderie 1995, 6). The fact that families and teachers choose a charter school—as opposed to being assigned to it—means that the school has the potential to promote a productive sense of community among teachers, parents, and students. In addition, teachers might play a direct role in school decision making and enjoy flexibility to use their preferred instructional methods. However, as indicated in this collection, teacher empowerment may not be a common practice in charter schools operated by EMCs.

Charter School Laws

State governments have displayed an increasingly active interest in education policy over the past two decades (Mintrom and Vergari 1997b; Wirt and Kirst 1997; Lewis and Maruna 1996). The adoption of charter school laws in a majority of the states (see table 1.1) and the frequent adoption of amendments to these statutes are salient examples of this interest. Moreover, the adoption of robust charter school laws over the opposition of traditionally powerful education interests, such as teachers unions, demonstrates that the power of an idea sometimes prevails over the power of established political interests (see Kingdon 1995; Majone 1989; Reich 1988; Derthick and Quirk 1985).

Nearly all of the charter school laws examined in this book lean toward the “strong” or “permissive” end of the spectrum, and such laws generally promote the proliferation of charter schools. Indeed, the states with permissive charter school laws typically offer the most fruitful and dynamic settings for analysis of the charter school movement. The relatively restrictive Alberta law provides an instructive contrast: the province had just ten charter schools in 2000–2001. Examination of the Alberta case yields useful findings on the types of factors that can inhibit the growth of charter schools.

Charter school laws differ significantly across the states (RPP International 1999a; Vergari 1999).⁴ Political exigencies of the legislative process have resulted in enabling laws that diverge in various ways from the charter school ideal (Hassel 1999a). In practice, therefore, charter schools exist along a continuum of autonomy (Wohlstetter, Wenning, and Briggs 1995). Certain features of the laws have had a major impact on the extent to which charter schools have proliferated

Table 1.1

Diffusion of a Policy Innovation: Charter School Laws in North America

1991	1992	1993	1994	1995
Minnesota	California	Colorado	<i>Alberta</i>	Alaska
		Georgia	Arizona	Arkansas
		Massachusetts	Hawaii	Delaware
		Michigan	Kansas	New Hampshire
		New Mexico		Louisiana
		Wisconsin		Rhode Island
				Wyoming
1996	1997	1998	1999	2001
Connecticut	Mississippi	Idaho	Oklahoma	Indiana
D.C.	Nevada	Missouri	Oregon	
Florida	Ohio	New York		
Illinois	Pennsylvania	Utah		
New Jersey		Virginia		
North Carolina				
South Carolina				
Texas				

in given jurisdictions and on the overall nature of the charter school movement within these jurisdictions. For example, some charter school laws permit only school districts to authorize charter schools. Other laws permit additional types of charter school authorizers, such as the state board for charter schools in Arizona and university boards in Michigan. Over 80 percent of charter schools are located in states with multiple authorizers or “strong” application appeals processes (Center for Education Reform 2001a). Alberta, Minnesota, North Carolina, and Texas are among a dozen jurisdictions that permit private schools to convert to charter status; most charter school laws permit only public school conversions (RPP International 2000). Massachusetts, Florida, and New York, among other states, have caps on the number of charter schools permitted, while Wisconsin is among several states without such caps.

Political battles over charter school legislation have not concluded with the adoption of charter school laws. In states with charter school laws, both supporters and opponents of the reform have pressed state legislators to keep charter schools on the policy agenda. Across the states, lawmakers have adopted signifi-

cant amendments to charter school laws. To date, the amendments have typically been aimed at creating more fertile ground for the growth of charter schools. A notable exception is Michigan, where some of the amendments have served to create a more restrictive environment for charter schools.

Differences in charter school laws reflect different facets of the political context in each jurisdiction. Across the United States and Alberta, there are some instructive patterns in the political dynamics that have shaped the adoption and implementation of the charter school policy innovation. State politics scholars Bernick and Wiggins (1991, 73) assert that “the governor is the major policy actor in state government . . . no other individual has the potential to play as important a role.” When it comes to education policy, governors are now much more likely to take political chances and commit themselves to reform agendas than they were a couple of decades ago (Lewis and Maruna 1996). Indeed, a common pattern across the United States is that governors have often championed the charter school policy innovation.

For any given jurisdiction, the adoption of a charter school law is not a sufficient condition for the viability of reform. The content of the law matters, of course, and so does the political context for policy implementation. Consider the extreme examples of Arizona and Alberta. The charter school movement in Arizona has enjoyed a constellation of political forces that has fostered a proliferation of charter schools in the state. On the other hand, the charter school movement in Alberta suffers from a dearth of politically powerful allies, and as a result, there are few charter schools in the province.

Organization of the Book

The dynamics of the charter school movement merit careful attention from scholars, policy makers, school administrators, teachers, students of policy reform, and others interested in education reform. The twelve jurisdictions examined in this volume are diverse in terms of geographical location, the year that enabling legislation was adopted, the key features of the charter school law and amendments, the number of charter schools, and the political and technical dynamics of policy adoption and implementation. In short, these eleven states and Alberta are rich sites for analyses of how the charter school idea has been interpreted and implemented across North America.

The chapter authors are well-qualified experts on their respective jurisdic-

tions. The authors include academics in the fields of public policy, political science, and educational administration and researchers with direct experience in the charter school arena. The public discourse regarding charter schools is often passionate, normative, and politically motivated. There is a need for more reflective and scholarly discussion of the charter school innovation, its performance to date, and its implications for public policy. Readers of this volume may identify pro- or anticharter tones in some of the chapters. However, the authors have taken care to back up their claims with sound logic, data, and references, and the chapters complement each other in both tone and content. Thus, the relative enthusiasm for charter schools apparent in the chapter by Joe Nathan, a policy entrepreneur who helped launch the charter school movement in the United States, is counterbalanced by the comparatively reserved assessment of Michael Mintrom, a professor of political science who has tracked the reform over the past decade.⁵ Overall, then, the chapters provide readers with a collection of credible data and assertions such that the volume cannot be neatly categorized as either pro- or anti-charter schools.

The chapters to follow include analyses of Minnesota (the state with the first charter school law) and of such other early charter school states as California, Michigan, Massachusetts, and Wisconsin; of states with charter school laws that were adopted in the mid-1990s, such as Florida and North Carolina; and of New York, which adopted its law only in late 1998. As indicated in table 1.2, during the 2000–2001 academic year, the number of charter schools across the twelve jurisdictions examined here ranged from twenty-three in New York to more than four hundred in Arizona, and growth was expected in virtually every case.

Each of the chapters focuses on one of the jurisdictions and systematically addresses several common items for analysis: the charter school law in the jurisdiction, the politics of policy implementation, charter school accountability, controversies and trends, and prospects for the future. Within these common parameters, each chapter emphasizes significant issues specific to the state or province under study that offer lessons for analysts and policy makers across all jurisdictions. Different issues are prominent across the jurisdictions due to their different stages in the implementation process and their respective legal, technical, and political contexts. In both theory and practice, the charter school innovation is multifaceted. Implementation of charter school policy has led to multiple outcomes and implications for how we think about public education. *The Charter School Landscape* illuminates the nature of this diversity and complexity by identifying and systematically analyzing key patterns that have emerged a decade after

Table 1.2
Charter Schools in Operation, 2000–2001

State	Number of Charter Schools	State	Number of Charter Schools
Alaska	16	Mississippi	1
<i>Alberta</i>	10	Missouri	21
Arizona	402	Nevada	7
Arkansas	4	New Hampshire	0
California	314	New Jersey	54
Colorado	76	New Mexico	11
Connecticut	16	New York	23
D.C.	33	North Carolina	92
Delaware	7	Ohio	68
Florida	149	Oklahoma	6
Georgia	38	Oregon	12
Hawaii	6	Pennsylvania	65
Idaho	11	Rhode Island	3
Illinois	22	South Carolina	9
Kansas	13	Texas	192
Louisiana	21	Utah	8
Massachusetts	40	Virginia	2
Michigan	183	Wisconsin	87
Minnesota	64	Wyoming	0
Total, North America	2,086	Total, United States	2,076

Sources: Authors of this volume; Center for Education Reform, Washington, D.C.

the first charter school law was adopted. Following is a discussion of several key issues that are addressed throughout the volume.

The Public Bargain: Accountability in Exchange for Autonomy

The charter school policy innovation is one of several recent education reforms aimed at altering the accountability mechanisms in the delivery of education (Mintrom and Vergari 1997b). The “new accountability” in public education refers to a performance-based system of evaluation, as distinguished from one that is compliance based (Fuhrman 1999; Tucker and Clark 1999; Cibulka and Derlin 1998; Cohen 1996; Elmore, Abelman, and Fuhrman 1996; Ladd 1996). Accountability measures are focused on the outputs of the educational system, rather than

on the inputs. With the exception of high-stakes testing, the charter school policy innovation is perhaps the most prominent performance-based education reform strategy in the United States today.

A key component of the charter school concept is the notion that accountability for rules is replaced by accountability for performance. Charter schools engage in a bargain with the public: in return for relief from the bureaucratic rules and regulations imposed on traditional public schools, charter schools are supposed to be held to a higher standard of accountability for results (Nathan 1996). If a charter school does not meet the provisions of its charter, fails to uphold applicable state and local statutes and rules, or lacks support from parents, teachers, and students, it is to be closed.

The trade-off between autonomy and accountability may sound straightforward in theory, but observations of practice across jurisdictions suggest a more complex picture. The ultimate power to revoke a charter is politically tenuous and likely to be “too crude a tool for true accountability” (Fiske and Ladd 2000, 299; Hess 2001). As of December 2000, eighty-six charter schools (about 4 percent of the total charter schools ever opened in the United States) had closed due to failure. An additional twenty-six charter schools had been consolidated into their local school districts for a range of reasons (Center for Education Reform 2001c). Diversity in charter school accountability systems across jurisdictions, and even within jurisdictions, results from differences in the political contexts of individual charter schools, state standardized-testing requirements, the contents of individual charter documents, charter school authorizer philosophies and practices, and the workings of market-style mechanisms of accountability such as parental oversight (Vergari 2000, 2001). That said, a consistent finding across jurisdictions is that the same dilemmas that confront those who seek to engineer greater accountability in the traditional public school system similarly confront the charter school movement. Charter school accountability systems are complicated by technical challenges, capacity limitations on the part of both charter schools and authorizers, and political factors (Vergari 2000; Hassel and Vergari 1999).

Some analysts place a great deal of faith in the ability of market mechanisms to address accountability concerns (see Finn, Manno, and Vanourek 2000). However, Arsen, Plank, and Sykes (1999, 85) avow that the market in and of itself does not hold schools accountable: “The choices of educators and parents may not always correspond to the purposes of public education.” The findings presented in this volume are consistent with the recurring thread in previous research that finds that charter school accountability in practice has yet to meet the robust per-

formance standards of the charter school concept as expressed in theory.⁶ Yet there is evidence that charter school authorizers are learning from direct experience and each other and are working to develop feasible frameworks for holding charter schools accountable (Vergari 2000, 2001). Massachusetts is widely recognized for having developed a “model” charter school accountability process. Instructively, this model is not without expense. The chapter by Paul Herdman suggests that the model may not be feasible in other states or even over the long term in Massachusetts.

In theory, charter schools are autonomous educational entities. However, charter schools are fundamentally public schools and therefore subject to public-sector oversight. Regarding practice, then, Priscilla Wohlstetter, Noelle C. Griffin, and Derek Chau demonstrate how charter school autonomy has evolved over time and has been limited in significant ways in California. Similarly, Michelle Godard McNiff and Bryan C. Hassel review several regulatory issues, including the contentious issue of special education, that have presented challenges for charter schools in North Carolina.

Charter schools are bound by federal statutes and regulations pertaining to students with disabilities, and analysts have raised questions about the extent to which charter schools are providing ample access and services to special education students. The federally funded National Study of Charter Schools and evidence at the state level indicate that charter schools overall are serving fewer special education students than public schools are in charter school states. According to RPP International (2000), charter schools in the United States have consistently served a lower percentage of students with disabilities than all public schools in charter school states. In 1998–1999, 8.4 percent of charter school students were disabled, while the percentage of students with disabilities in all public schools in charter school states was 11.3 (RPP International 2000, 36).⁷

Charter school advocates Finn, Manno, and Vanourek (2000, 159) acknowledge that some charter schools do not adequately serve special education students and that “this situation needs fixing.” They suggest that, prior to the issuance of a charter, the authorizer should ensure that the proposed school will have the necessary staff to do what it says it will do and that no student will be denied admission due to disability. They assert that just as parents of nondisabled students must evaluate a charter school carefully, parents of disabled students should also “be careful school shoppers. If they want the full panoply of government-imposed procedures and services, they may be happier elsewhere” (2000, 158). They further maintain that just as a traditional school district might send a disabled stu-

dent to a school across town that is better able to meet the student's needs, every charter school need not accommodate the need of every disabled student. Finally, the authors note that many school districts do not provide adequate services to special education students and contend: "The real special education issue is not whether charters are adequately serving disabled youngsters but whether they are able to serve them *differently* than conventional schools. . . . Charter schools are *meant* to be different, even in special education. To insist that they model themselves on conventional schools in their treatment of disabled youngsters is akin to saying that every hospital must perform every operation in exactly the same way" (2000, 160). These positions are not without controversy. Ted Kolderie has noted: "It's unfair to expect the charter system to be perfect; it is fair to ask that it improve on the present system or show the potential to improve over time" (1995, 7). Indeed, when public dollars are at stake, it is important to analyze whether a policy outcome that is *different* than the norm is actually *better* than current policy or other policy options. Importantly, the conclusion of such an evaluation will depend largely on the core value(s) (e.g., choice, equity, efficiency, excellence) favored most strongly by the analyst.

Technical and Political Issues Faced by Charter Schools and School Districts

Finn, Manno, and Vanourek (2000, 110) observe that "most charter schools get off to a late, rushed, and hectic start." In addition, since precious public funds follow students who leave traditional public schools to attend charter schools, school districts in which charter schools are located are often less than enthusiastic about their development. In my analysis of New York, I review challenges and controversies pertaining to one of three charter schools that opened just months after the passage of the charter school law. In their examination of Florida, Tracey Bailey, Carolyn Lavelly, and Cathy Wooley-Brown discuss political tensions and technical difficulties that have arisen between charter schools and their authorizing school districts.

Courts and Public Policy

Interest groups regularly turn to the courts after attempts at legislative and administrative remedies are exhausted (Heineman et al. 1997). Courts are major agents in policy making and implementation, and in recent decades, the judiciary has had

a significant impact on public education (Wirt and Kirst 1997). In many states, charter school opponents have engaged in court-based strategies for containing or reversing reform. As indicated in several chapters here, a number of state-level court decisions have affected the charter school arena. The category into which a policy issue is classified determines the design of the policy intended to address the issue (Kingdon 1995). In at least one state, the question arose as to whether charter schools must be classified as public schools. In her discussion of several legal questions surrounding charter schools in Wisconsin, Julie F. Mead reviews an attempt by the city of Milwaukee to have charter schools classified officially as private rather than public schools.

Equity and Democratic Values

Charter school opponents lament the diversion of public funds from traditional public schools to charter schools and express skepticism about adequate public oversight of charter schools. Critics also point out that charter schools operate under certain favorable conditions not enjoyed by traditional public schools, such as relief from state and local regulations, low student-teacher ratios, high levels of parental involvement, and the ability to cap enrollments. Observers of charter schools and other school choice initiatives have also suggested that charter schools may foster greater social and racial stratification, fail to uphold democratic values, and undermine the socialization functions of public education in a diverse democracy (see Bosetti 1999; Henig 1994, 1999; Guttman 1987). Critics also suggest that students whose parents or guardians are relatively uninvolved in their educational development will be left behind in a market-based system of public education. School choice proponents respond that “there will always be some parents who are more informed, more alert, and more aggressive at finding the best schools for their children” and that the imperative is to design a choice system that alleviates rather than exacerbates existing inequities (Viteritti 1999, 13).

Charter school proponents point to the inequities evident in the traditional public school system and suggest that charter schools enhance equity by offering new options for underserved populations. Indeed, charter schools are aimed at providing low-income families with the types of educational options that were previously available only to wealthy families able to afford the tuition of private schools or the expense of residing in neighborhoods with good public schools. Equity advocates emphasize that the charter school policy innovation does not address the broader socioeconomic, structural causes of disparities in student

achievement between children from wealthy and poor families (Fuller 2000). Nonetheless, Nathan (1996, xiii) notes that “acknowledging enormous problems *outside* schools does not mean that educators cannot do a much better job at helping youngsters *inside* schools.”

One of the early concerns of charter school opponents was that charter schools would engage in cream-skimming—in other words, that their student populations would have disproportionate numbers of White, wealthy, academically talented students. This phenomenon has not generally materialized, since many charter schools are serving large numbers of minorities and students “at risk.”⁸ According to RPP International (2000), in 1998–1999, charter schools enrolled a larger percentage of students of color than all public schools in states with charter schools. The percentage of White students served by charter schools declined slightly over the preceding three years. In addition, charter schools served a slightly higher percentage of students eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch than all public schools in charter school states (RPP International 2000). However, in their review of Alberta, Lynn Bosetti and Robert O’Reilly note that charter schools there are largely products of a middle-class movement. Similarly, Eric Hirsch reports that the charter school movement in Colorado is largely a suburban phenomenon. Lance D. Fusarelli also raises questions about equity and diversity in the Texas charter school system.

Diverse Uses of the Reform

The charter school concept means different things to different interests (see, e.g., Wells et al. 1999). Its multifaceted quality explains the broad political appeal of the idea and makes it an intriguing subject for analysis from a variety of perspectives. For instance, in some districts, charter schools have eased overcrowding. Joe Nathan notes that the Minnesota charter school law has provided a new option for small rural public schools that were facing the prospect of being closed by their districts.

Public Education for Profit

One of the most controversial features of the charter school landscape is the presence of for-profit EMCs. The literature on public-private partnerships suggests that conflicts of interest between the two sectors are a key obstacle to successful partnerships. Most notably, the profit motive may conflict with public-policy ob-

ligations to society (Rosenau 2000). Indeed, the public and private sectors have different orientations. For example, the private sector is focused on reaping returns on investments and achieving corporate goals, while the public sector is oriented toward democratic decision-making processes and the achievement of social goals (Reijniers 1994). In his chapter on Michigan, Michael Mintrom discusses the increasing presence of EMCs in the operation of charter schools in that state.

Systemic Change

While opponents of the charter school concept might prefer to view the measure as a distraction or as confined to a marginalized series of niche schools, advocates hold fast to the tenet that charter schools have the potential to provoke systemic change. As noted earlier, a competitive public school marketplace is hypothesized to encourage accountability from traditional public schools as well as charter schools. Thus, Kolderie (1995, 7) avows that “the real purpose” of charter school reform is “to cause the main-line system to change and improve.” Similarly, Hassel (1999a, 129) asserts that “the *full* promise” of the charter school reform includes systemic change. However, highly successful, highly experimental ideas do not diffuse rapidly in public education (Hassel 1999a; Elmore 1996). In addition, district responses to the introduction of competition may not lead to systemic reform. School districts may turn to the courts or the legislature for relief from the competitive threat; use the alleged costs of a charter school as a basis for threats about cuts in popular programs; or choose to ignore charter schools, viewing them as “pressure valves” for the welcome exit of disgruntled parents (Hassel 1999a, 136–41). Rofes (1998) found that school districts in which charter schools were located had not typically responded with swift, dramatic improvements. However, federally funded research on the impact of charter schools on school districts found that about half of the forty-nine districts examined in the five-state study reported that they became more customer-service oriented, increased their marketing and public-relations activities, or increased their communications with parents. All forty-nine districts made changes in education and/or operations that district leaders attributed to the presence of charter schools (RPP International 2001). In their chapter on Arizona, Frederick M. Hess and Robert Maranto provide various examples of how charter schools there appear to be spurring responses from the traditional public school system.

In total then, the chapters offer the opportunity to draw useful comparisons

across twelve diverse jurisdictions, to become more aware of the political and policy issues that have shaped the contours of the charter school landscape, and to contemplate the key policy questions raised by the charter school concept as implemented. In the concluding chapter, I synthesize the findings and perspectives presented in this volume, highlighting key similarities and differences across jurisdictions and raising questions for further inquiry and reflection. Are charter schools just “another flawed educational reform” (Sarason 1999), a “dismal failure,” and a “wasteful experience” (Good and Braden 2000, 176–77)? Do these schools signal the “reinvention of public education” (Finn, Manno, and Vanourek 2000, 16–17)? Or are they something in between these extremes? We shall return to these questions in the concluding chapter.