

**Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and
Secondary Education**

Hearing – “*Education Reforms: The Vital Role of Charter
Schools*”

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Debbie Beyer
Executive Director
Literacy First Charter Schools
El Cajon, CA 92020

Chairman Hunter, Mr. Kildee and Esteemed Members,

Among the few subjects that can get a group in serious debate quickly, how we as Americans view education is one of them. The controversy over how and what is the best way to educate the future of our country has been a raging debate since back in the 80’ when Reagan’s first report came in the *Nation at Risk Report*. I recall as a young new idealistic teacher being concerned then at the “not so good” news regarding our American way of education. While there were many factors that contribute to the success or failure of American students in school, that report of yesteryear was clear to indicate that “parental involvement” was the number one indicator of

student success. Now, some 30 years later, that fact remains a common denominator when looking at students that seem to achieve academic success and those that we continue to call “at risk”.

In 1992 California was the second state after Minnesota in ‘91 to pass charter legislation. This movement was gaining steam all across the nation: an innovative idea that initiated the idea of allowing schools within the public sector to have a little more freedom, in exchange for more accountability. That was the genesis of the Charter Schools Act of 1995. It seemed the compromise between political parties that allowed for choice within the public school market. This began the journey of each state having the opportunity to enact its own charter legislation. This in itself is unique as there is no standard model. Therefore each state has determined its own way to fund, develop and regulate charter schools. To date, 39 states and the District Columbia have charter legislation. The impetus of this movement was due to continued poor performance by many public schools and the continuing under-performance of a large population of our students, the goal was to provide opportunity where prior there had been none within the public education:

- 1) Parents would have choice about where their children attended school, regardless of geographical or district boundaries

- 2) Teachers would be provided the opportunity to develop innovative and resourceful programs
- 3) Research proven materials and programs would be developed and used,
- 4) Community would be developed that owned and embraced the learning of their children.

This grand experiment afforded parents the opportunity to seek a school that would meet their expectations and serve their children.

While there are many public schools doing great things for our children, the data is telling us that there are not enough of them, and for those seeking change, it is not happening fast enough. Our children deserve better. If we are serious about the training of our children and preparing them to be “21st Century Skills ready”, able to compete in a global market as viable candidates in the job market, we’ve got to take seriously the data that is telling us that our young adults are not making the cut. If you’ve viewed the YouTube video “ Did you know?” you’ll find that as far as global competition China and India have more honors students than America has students! These are daunting statistics for those of us committed to the education of our children.

To be realistic about what is necessary for our students to be successfully educated in ways that will prepare them to be ready for a global market place, it would seem

imperative that the paradigm of the “one size fits all” of our traditional American public education system must change. Charter Schools have been the beginning of that change.

Our culture has changed, our families have changed, and our world has changed. How can our education programs not change? How can we continue to debate whether this idea of choice is viable? There are large bodies of data as reported by the Center for Education Reform (see <http://www.edreform.com>) and others including the latest report, “*Portrait of a Movement*”, by the California Charter Schools Association, that indicate comparing apples to apples, charters are doing a better job educating the underperforming and at risk student. As one involved in this movement daily, it is obvious that we must change our view of education to one of a buffet, rather than “the everybody eats the same meal concept”. Students today don’t want the same things as students of your age or your mom’s once wanted. Every young person does not want a 4 year high school with cheerleaders and football team.

Charter schools have arrived on the scene for precisely this purpose and precisely for this moment. Small schools, run by people of vision and mission for a particular program, invested completely in the mission of their program, totally in control of not only their finances, but their staffing, allow for the most incredible opportunity

for our students across this country: the ability to “choose” a program that fits their own idea of preparation for their future.

Clearly, charters are not the panacea to all the ills of public education, and not all charters are doing a bang up job. But they are an incredible option for families that are becoming acute consumers of public education. Underperforming schools are not only a problem with charter schools, they are the very reason that charters exist, underperforming traditional public schools. The difference is that among charter schools, there is not an entitlement to exist forever, taking public dollars and continuing to do a poor job at educating children. The National Charter Schools Authorizers, along with many state charter school association, including the California Charter Schools Association, is committed to culling out the poor performing charters, so that indeed, we are doing exactly what we’ve been put into existence to do. Would it not be great if we were able to close any public school that consistently performed poorly?

As for my own personal experience with charter schools, as the founder, 10 years ago Literacy First began as a little start up school with 114 little boys and girls k – 3rd grades in their new school clothes with their back packs on their backs. Eager eyes waited as proud nervous parents stood close by anxiously looking at a rag tag, maverick group of

enthusiastic dream weavers to whom they were entrusting their children with the promise of and in the adventure of building a school that was going to prepare their children for the future.

The San Diego County Board of Education had the foresight to be our partner in this educational venture... and now 10 years down the road with 4 school sites, 1200+ students and more than rusty old desks, Literacy First has spun that dream of years past into a incredible place where all the tenets upon which charters were enabled, happen daily:

- 1) Parents do have a choice
- 2) Teachers are developing innovative and resourceful programs
- 3) Research proven materials and programs are being used, and
- 4) A community has developed that owns and embraces the learning of their children.

They say that a picture is worth a thousand words, and while time is a constraint in this hearing, I would encourage you to visit our website at www.lfcsinc.org for a picture of what a great set of schools are doing in San Diego. Actually, I'd like to invite you to visit at any time. We're more than happy to share our story.

After ten years, this is the success story, while we began with a team of just 6, that team has now grown to almost 130 and of that 6/5 original team members are still standing. You might also note that while the myth exists that charters don't do special populations, at LFCS we have a very diverse student population which includes almost one third of our students being English language learners, the majority of whom are from Iraq, and our special education population is about 13% where the average in a typical school is considered to be 10%; despite these numbers, we have some of the highest test scores in the county (note the color brochure). Additionally, although we opened up a new school last fall, we continue to have a waiting list of over 800. *Waiting for Superman* is not an urban legend; it speaks to our school experience as well. Our lottery for 2011-12 was just held last Tuesday. We have lived with this disappointment for the past 7 years. At this point we feel that if we "build it, they will come", however again, facilities are such an ordeal, including over zealous building codes and anti - charter legislation in CA, that finding facilities is akin to a nightmare. Nonetheless with the understanding that "replicate-able models" should be reproduced we continue to look for new options for the families of East County.

While not every charter school operates as we do, some of the distinctives of our schools that are important factors to

many charters is that of our longer school day and longer school year. We have a unique calendar in that generally speaking we have a week off each quarter rather than the three overextended months off in the summer that originated with our country being an agrarian culture. This is no longer true. While we do have an extended summer break, we've tried to do what research says work and that is: more time on task, more time in school. We know that schools in our area have changed their behavior because of our existence. Calendars have changed, curriculum has changed and programs have changed in an effort to compete with what we are offering. Is that not great? In every other area of our lives as Americans, we view competition as a good thing...why not in education? We know that in the end children are being served better because of the pressure that our schools have placed on other schools in our local area. I know that this same impact is felt in other areas where high performing charters exist. In addition, we do not have tenure at LFCS. Our teachers understand that they are competing for their jobs every day by way of accountability. We have strong grade level teams, strong internal leadership and mentoring, and we recognize that we are only as strong as our weakest link. For that reason, everyone is invested in building the entire "team" of LFCS. While we recognize that we may not be able to compete with the traditional union owned public schools pay scale, we do have a merit pay system which is based on a set of criteria established

by our Board. This merit pay applies to everyone from the housekeeping staff to me, the Executive Director. We all recognize that the role that each plays, like Patton told his troops in Normandy, is vital to the success of the entire team. Additionally, we have what is called an “above and beyond” program. This pay incentive is an option for any staff that choose to be “entrepreneurial” in developing a new program, heading a committee, serving in leadership or a variety of innovative options that could be endless. This allows teachers that choose to be over the top to be rewarded for that extra effort. Their regular salary is for an outstanding job, not a mediocre one.

In the end, not only are our students served more effectively, but our staff is invested in the mission of what we are doing and intent on individual students’ success.

As a charter school organizer, I am always puzzled by those claims that charters hold an unfair advantage. Charters have been commissioned with one basic mission: make a difference in our education and the proof of that is higher graduation rates, higher test scores and more successful students. The trade off of our existence comes down to this: If charter schools don’t perform, they cease to exist. Performance is the bottom line. It is a brilliant marriage between business and education. It forces competition and requires serious and deliberate attention to every daily detail to justify our existence. There is

absolutely no sense of entitlement. My staff hears from me often, “We serve at the pleasure of the tax payer”.

According to the Center for Education Reform, this fall there will be almost 5500 charter school nationwide, serving over 1.7M students with the goal being to meet the needs of our children more effectively. In my state of California there are 912 charters with 115 of those opening just last fall. We serve 365,000 students. These are public schools, publically funded schools, doing school a little bit differently, making a huge impact on closing the achievement gap and giving hope to many that previously have felt abandoned by underperforming schools with no way out.

An interesting factor to note regarding charter schools is that there are as many charter schools types as there are charter school operators. This is the unique nature of charters that allow for innovation to thrive. This was the grand experiment. Find replicate-able models, and replicate them. Like most movements that go against the status quo developing a charter is not an easy task. However, despite challenges in growth, funding and facilities, charters are proving themselves to be resilient. This in itself is a testament to the strength of the movement and the need for the reform. Parents have recognized that “choice” is a great option. Finding a school that meets their needs, fits their students’ abilities

or strengths is an American ideal. It gives power back to the people in very real, tangible and powerful ways. Charters are providing a much needed sense of relief to a system that has been unresponsive for decades.

As for Literacy First, there are so many good things going on at our school it's hard to put it into three minutes, or thirty minutes for that matter, however as the founder and Executive Director of LFCS, let me say that this is a place where we recognize that what we do is more than just teach content. It's about training the future of America; it's about raising students that get what it is to be American. It's about bringing families into the process and partnering with them in these difficult times. It's a place where character counts, parents matter, teachers care... and because of that children thrive.

Thank you for the opportunity to bring my experience in charter education forward today as it pertains to their vital role to the face of American public education today.