

# Charter Schools in Relation to the Waldorf School Movement

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## Introduction

The introduction of publicly funded charter schools has blurred the distinction between public and non-public education in the United States. Charter schools exhibit an assortment of outer features attributable to both public and private schools, some of which previously were marks of distinction between them. So too, their rapid growth has had a negative impact on the levels of enrollment in both local public and private schools. Some people view this as simply the side-effects of necessary change as parents exercise the opportunity to express their wishes for their children.<sup>1</sup> Others take the view that charter schools are a corporate, philanthropic, and government-financed Trojan Horse whose effect, if not its intended purpose, commercializes and extends market thinking into all aspects of education.

This paper compares charter schools with traditional public and private schools and outlines their history and the reasons for their phenomenal growth. It also examines the relation of education as a whole to the realms of politics and business and offers some thoughts on what all this may mean for Waldorf education.

## Similarities and differences between local public, public charter, and private schools

The terms *private* and *independent* apply to schools that are non-public or non-state and are primarily, if not wholly, funded through their own resources rather than government tax dollars.<sup>2</sup>

An *independent school* is usually viewed as a subset of private schools or private education. However, state education agencies do not generally distinguish between private and independent schools and typically use the

terms non-public or private for any school that is not part of the public education system. What makes an *independent school* a unique subset of private schools is normally based on the legal structure of the school itself. An independent school is specifically a not-for-profit organization that has its own board of directors or trustees and its own administration. *Private schools* also include schools that are partly or wholly under the control of a for-profit corporation or a not-for-profit faith organization such as a church, parish, or synagogue. In the Catholic tradition, a private or non-public school that is part of and run by a church or parish is called a *parochial school*. Most independent schools tend to be secular, but a private religious school can qualify as an independent school if it has an independent legal structure and administration.

Although private schools are subject to varying degrees of state regulation regarding such things as graduation requirements and teacher certification, they generally enjoy greater freedom from state control than local public and charter schools. They establish their own admissions criteria,<sup>3</sup> develop their own educational goals, curricula and assessment methods, and use secular and non-secular viewpoints, or even explicit religious doctrine, in their instruction.

Public *charter schools* are a relatively new form of *public school* with features similar to traditional local public schools. Both:

- Are funded primarily by tax money collected and disbursed by multiple levels of government: local, state, and/or federal.
- Are tuition-free for parents.
- Meet the same legal requirements regarding the principle of the separation of church and state in relation to curriculum.

- Have open admission criteria similar to traditional public schools. They may not deny admission to any eligible applicant provided there is space for that student within the school's capacity.<sup>4</sup> (However, charter schools may have certain allowable admission preferences, such as for siblings of enrolled students or children of full-time faculty.)
- Are required to adhere to the same educational goals, curriculum standards, and testing requirements set by the federal, state, and/or local public school districts.

Even though charter schools are public schools, they are also distinct in several ways:

A local public school is run by a school district, which is either an independent special-purpose government (often with the powers of taxation and eminent domain) or part of a school system that is an agency of local or state government. In contrast, charter schools can sometimes, according to state law, be operated by a local school district or a separate legal entity, such as a not-for-profit organization, for-profit business, teacher union, or institution of higher learning. The applying entity negotiates a contract (charter) with a local public school district or agency authorized by the state to grant charters in order to operate as a public school.

Whereas families are required by law to send their children to a local public school based on their legal residency unless a legal alternative is found,<sup>5</sup> public charter schools are schools of choice. Enrolling a child in one is an elective decision by parents and based on space availability.

Charter schools have the option to provide a distinctive curriculum or environment not offered by the local school district, or to serve a specific student clientele. Some charter schools provide a curriculum that specializes in a certain field—for example, arts, mathematics, or vocational training—or incorporate educational methods traditionally found in independent schools, such as Montessori or Waldorf. Others attempt to

provide a better, more cost-effective general education than the nearby local public schools.

If the number of applications exceeds the number of available places, charter schools (unlike local public schools) are required to use some form of lottery selection, and children not selected can be placed on a waiting list.

Residency requirements by charter schools vary widely according to state law or the stipulations of the school's charter. They range from requiring or prioritizing residency in the local school district to allowing residency anywhere in the host state.

Charter schools may be granted freedom from certain local and state requirements such as teacher licensing, unionization, and scheduling. In exchange the schools are held to stronger accountability requirements based on student scores on state-mandated standardized tests. In theory, this means a charter school is more likely to face closure than a local public school as a result of poor student test results.

### Confusion and controversy

National opinion polls have recorded a shift in public attitudes regarding charter schools over the last three years (2012–2014), from uncertainty and confusion to polarization and controversy as these schools gain more public exposure and exert greater impact on pre-existing forms of public and private education. National polls conducted by Education Next show gains for both support of and opposition to charter schools between 2012 and 2014: From 16% to 28% among opponents and from 43% to 55% among supporters—while the percentage of adults who had not made up their mind dropped from 41% to 18%.<sup>6</sup>

Misconceptions about charter schools are not surprising, given that charter school laws vary from state to state. Moreover, the academic requirements that apply to charter schools have evolved, particularly in relation to the testing requirements attached to state and federal government funding. Adding to the

confusion is the use of terminology traditionally reserved for independent schools, including the words “independence” and “freedom.” For instance, public charter schools are often called “independent public schools”<sup>7</sup> that enjoy “freedom” from certain regulations, or they are simply referred to as being “independent schools.”

Further confusion arises from the fact that, similar to independent schools, some charter schools operate as not-for-profit entities as described in the previous section. But unlike traditional independent schools, they contract with the state to operate as public schools.<sup>8</sup>

### Sources of controversy and opposition

Controversy and opposition regarding charter schools arises from a variety of concerns and situations:

- Closure and reduction in enrollment for both public and private schools in the vicinity of charter schools
- The potential disruption of the two-party political system. This is due to the fact that most charter schools are non-unionized, and teachers unions are a major supporter of the Democratic Party.
- The increasing influence of major foundations operating from a free market viewpoint that promotes pro-charter-school public policy

### Growing charter vs. declining private school enrollment

The first public charter school in the United States was established in Minnesota in 1992. Since their inception, charter schools have experienced rapid growth. Currently 41 states have charter school laws with a total enrollment of approximately 2.5 million students. This is 4.2% of all students.<sup>9</sup> In the last five years, their enrollment has grown 80% and the number of

public charter schools has increased by 50%. In 2013–2014, charter school waiting lists exceeded one million students. In approximately the same time period, private schools in the U.S. accounted nationally for about 5.5 million students, or 10% of all students and have experienced a 9% decline in enrollment.<sup>10</sup>

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The accelerated growth of charter schools is the result of a confluence of factors that include:

- The national panic about the quality of U.S. education spawned by the 1983 report “A Nation at Risk” issued by the Reagan administration, in which an apparent decline of U.S. world dominance was portrayed as a national security issue and blamed on our failing public education system.
- The ensuing push for national educational goals, standards, and testing by the federal government, big business, and numerous think tanks following the release of this report.
- Federal funding of charter schools through the Clinton administration’s Goals 2000 Act, the Bush administration’s No Child Left Behind Act and the Obama administration’s Race to the Top competitive funding program.
- Promotion and funding of standards-based education reform and charter schools by major foundations, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Eli and Edy Broad Foundation, and the Walton Family Foundation.<sup>11</sup>
- The growing frustration of parents with the quality of public education, especially in communities of color.<sup>12</sup>
- The growing numbers of families unable to afford tuition due to a general economic decline and rising tuition costs at independent and religious schools.
- The growing number of Waldorf and Montessori educators seeking more

economically and socially diverse student bodies than is possible in tuition-based independent schools.

- The desire of corporations to open up the new and scaled-up education markets made possible by the creation of national common core learning standards and standardized testing.

### Education reform since the 1983 “A Nation at Risk” report

To understand the potential long-term impact of charter schools on both traditional public and private education, it is important to consider them in the context of federal education reform since the early 1980s.<sup>13</sup> Historically, the beginning of the current wave of education reform is rooted in the 1983 report with the alarmist title, “A Nation at Risk.”

In 1981, in response to a “widespread perception that something is seriously remiss in our educational system,” President Reagan created the National Commission on Excellence in Education under Education Secretary T.H. Bell. Mandated to identify the problems with American public education and suggest solutions, the commission published its findings eighteen months later as “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform.” It describes a national education crisis primarily in terms of economic decline, education mediocrity, and war:

Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. ...The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.... If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.

### This apparent national crisis demanded, in many people’s minds, national solutions.

This apparent *national* crisis demanded, in many people’s minds, *national* solutions. In 1989, President George H.W. Bush initiated a national education summit attended by the state governors. The first six of the current eight national educational goals to guide the reformation of American education were endorsed at that time.<sup>14</sup> Subsequent national educational summits were chaired by one CEO of a major corporation and one governor, and attended by the state governors and a leading CEO from each of the states. The summits were instrumental in developing and endorsing the framework of curricula standards and

testing incorporated into a multi-pronged and integrated strategy to achieve national educational goals. Since the federal government has no constitutional power over

education, states were “encouraged” to embrace the federally recommended standards and assessments through:

- Regulations attached to federal funding programs.
- Publicity and lobbying efforts led by the National Business Roundtable.<sup>15</sup>
- A non-government coordinating organization called Achieve, Inc.,<sup>16</sup> funded by corporations, foundations, and government.

In addition to creating “voluntary” national testing requirements linked to “voluntary” national curriculum standards and testing goals, the federal government was instrumental in coordinating an integrated, multifaceted strategy to ensure that schools used the newly developed standards for curricula and “high stakes” standardized tests. This strategy included:

- Emphasizing a performance- or outcome-based system based on student test scores, rather than simply relying on adherence to rules and procedures.
- Using a rewards and punishment approach in which teachers and schools would receive

financial incentives for students achieving testing score goals on the high stakes standardized tests and suffer penalties for failure to achieve them.

- Promoting competition between schools, placing emphasis on student test scores by publicly reporting school-by-school aggregate student test results and ranking the schools according to these results.
- Providing schools and teachers with greater control over instructional technique and local management of schools to support the achievement of the desired test score outcomes.
- Promoting technology as an essential tool to achieve these national educational goals.

All presidential administrations since 1983 have linked their funding programs to the national goals, standards, and testing requirements. These include: G.H.W. Bush's America 2000 Act; Clinton's Goals 2000 Educate America Act; G.W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act; and Obama's Race to the Top contest.

### Charter schools and their connection to federal education reform

The origin of the charter school concept is attributed to Ray Budde. In his paper, "Education by Charter," published in 1974, Budde suggests restructuring local school districts in which "groups of teachers would receive educational charters directly from the school board" and take on the main responsibility for instruction.<sup>17</sup> Budde maintained that creative change in public education needed to come from the teachers themselves at the local level. Initially, there was no interest in Budde's charter concept, and he dropped the idea until his paper was republished in 1988 during a tidal wave of reform efforts following the release of the "A Nation at Risk"

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report. Shortly thereafter Albert Shanker, head of the American Federation of Teachers, began promoting the charter concept. In doing so, however, he extended Budde's idea of teachers taking over and running school programs to include unions creating new schools within, and sanctioned by, the local districts and utilizing their existing facilities.<sup>18</sup>

Education reformers in Minnesota took up these ideas of Budde and Shanker, envisioning a framework of state policy and the possibility of schools being authorized by the state as well as local boards.<sup>19</sup> Minnesota passed the first charter school legislation in 1991, and the first charter school was opened in 1992. Consistent with the national outcomes-based reform efforts described in the previous section, the schools were called "outcome-based schools" rather than charter schools.

California, the state with the largest number of charter schools these days, was the first to use the term *charter school* when it passed its charter school law in 1992. Introducing the law, Senator Gary Hart<sup>20</sup> stated that the primary reason for promoting charter schools was to thwart a voucher ballot initiative "that would entitle parents to send their children to any school—public or private." He also suggested that "teachers should be at the center of the charter school movement."<sup>21</sup>

In 1993, six more states passed charter school laws. And in 1994 Bill Clinton included federal funding of charter schools in the re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Goals 2000 Educate America Act, or ESEA). The Act provided for "the establishment of high-quality, internationally competitive content and student performance standards and strategies that all state and local education agencies [which includes charter schools] will be expected to achieve."<sup>22</sup> Charter schools were

seen as a way to develop innovative methods to achieve the new and evolving national goals and standards as measured by student performance on standardized tests and to spur on traditional public schools as a result of competition from charter schools.

With subsequent re-authorizations of the ESEA under the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations, hundreds of millions of dollars have been allocated to charter schools.<sup>23</sup> The Obama administration added a new funding program entitled Race to the Top, a contest in which states compete for a portion of \$4 billion in prize money by developing and committing to, among other things, innovative ways to implement federally endorsed testing standards and to increase the number of charter schools.

### Enrollment impact of charter schools on private schools

The rapid growth of charter schools within the public school system has created increasing tension between charter school and private school advocates due to the migration of private school students to charter schools. Two recent studies have now confirmed this trend.

Abraham M. Lackman, scholar-in-residence at the Albany (New York) Law School's Government Law Center, asserts that the proliferation of charter schools in New York has significantly affected the state's Catholic schools, leading to enrollment decreases, precarious finances, and closures. He estimates that each new charter school in New York will draw approximately 100 students from private schools.<sup>24</sup>

A national study on the impact of charter schools on private school enrollments, commissioned by the CATO institute and conducted by Richard Buddin, education policy expert and former senior economist at the RAND Corporation, concludes that while most students are drawn from traditional public schools, charter schools are also pulling large numbers of students from private schools and therefore present a potentially devastating impact on the private

education market. Private school enrollments are much more sensitive to the impact of charters in urban districts than in non-urban districts. Overall, about 8% of charter elementary students and 11% of middle and high school students are drawn from private schools. In highly urban districts, private schools contribute 32, 23, and 15% of charter elementary, middle, and high school enrollments, respectively.<sup>25</sup>

### Private foundation support of charter schools

Philanthropic sources provide about \$4 billion dollars a year to support education in the U.S.<sup>26</sup> "An increasing number of foundations such as Gates, Walton, and Broad family philanthropies have poured more than \$600 million into charter schooling."<sup>27</sup> They all share the same market ideology for education based on choice and competition, and the same instruments for improving education: charter schools, high-stakes standardized testing of students, pervasive use of technology in the education process, and merit pay for teachers based on student test scores.<sup>28</sup> The "echo effect" of the philanthropic priorities and market philosophy of these major foundations sways other foundations in a similar direction. Thus, funding for education research not in harmony with this mindset is exceedingly difficult to find.

### Evolution of charters

The original charter concept involved small, teacher-run schools contracting with local school districts. These semi-autonomous "incubator" public schools were to be freed sufficiently to experiment and infuse public education with innovative reforms from within the public education system so as to improve academic performance. This was seen as essentially a progressive picture of renewing public education.

In the 1990s, the charter school movement came under the influence of more market-oriented ideology through organizations such as the National Business Roundtable and a variety

of conservative think tanks, foundations, and politicians influenced by them.

With this shift, charter schools were posited as alternatives to and in competition with traditional public education rather than as a stimulus for innovation. This market-oriented view of charter schools was favored by both Republican and Democratic administrations at the federal level.

A third phase of the charter school movement came with the transition from the Bush administration to the Obama administration and its \$4 billion Race to the Top competition in which states would compete for multi-million dollar grants from the federal government. The grants favor states that will pass charter school legislation and those that will remove any cap on their limit.

### The charter landscape

*Stand-alone non-profit charter schools* make up nearly two thirds (64%) of the charter school landscape, with the remaining 36% divided between for-profit Education Management Organizations (EMOs) and non-profit Charter Management Organizations (CMOs). The number of students attending for-profit EMO-run schools is about the same as those attending non-profit CMO run schools: 463,000 and 445,000 respectively (2011–2012).<sup>29</sup>

*Stand-alone non-profit charter schools* vary in philosophy and intent, serving a special focus such as art, business, a particular cultural group, or an underserved population. These schools are initiated in a variety of ways by former public school educators frustrated with bureaucracy, former independent school educators seeking to serve a more economically or culturally diverse student population, or private school parents seeking an alternative to local public schools and relief from the burden of paying tuition while paying taxes to support public schools.

*For-profit EMOs* strive to take advantage of the education market afforded by charter schools for the benefit of their investors. Since their

driving motivation is to generate a profit for their investors, they often own and operate several or even dozens of charter schools in order to reach a profitable scale of business using the same business model for all of them. In addition to operating and managing their own schools, they sometime provide administrative services for school districts on a fee-for-service basis.

*Non-profit CMOs* typically work on a franchise basis, rather than owning their affiliates. They tend to be inspired by educational theory or method rather than employing a market rationale or profit motive in the educating of students and administering of schools.<sup>30</sup>

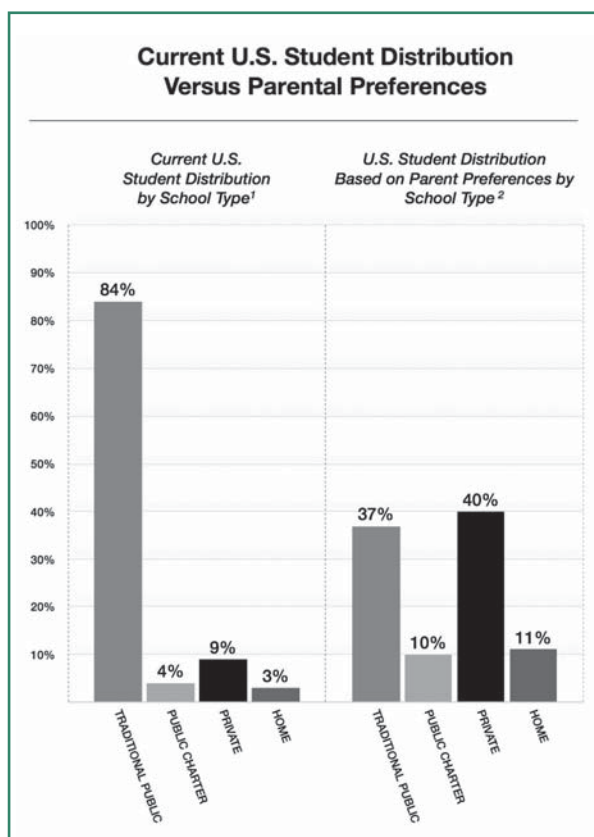
### Charter school growth in the context of parental preferences

As previously mentioned, charter schools experienced an 80% enrollment growth rate during the same time period in which private school enrollment declined by 10%. As already mentioned, the charter school waiting list is estimated at one million students. Recent studies indicate that charter schools are draining significant numbers of students from both traditional public schools and private schools. These facts suggest that charter schools may be on a trajectory of rapid expansion while traditional public schools and private schools are facing significant declines.

However, there is another side to this story. In a recent study on school choice, common core, and standardized testing by Braun Research, one of the questions posed to over 1000 adults across the United States was: "If it were your decision and you could select any type of school, what type of school would you select in order to obtain the best education for your child?"<sup>31</sup> The preferences expressed by these respondents are radically different from current K-12 enrollment rates. Based on these surveys, the extrapolated enrollment distribution in the U.S. would be:

Private schools would *increase* from 9% to 40%, Charter schools would *increase* from 4% to 10%, Home schooling would *increase* from 3% to 11%, and Traditional public schools would *decrease* from 84% to 37%.

In the scenario where all parents are given the equal opportunity to choose any type of schooling for their children, charter schools would more than double, *but this would be in the context of even greater increases in home schooling and private education.* This situation, however, is possible only when all families have the financial resources to choose from among them.



<sup>1</sup>U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics

<sup>2</sup>Based on a national survey conducted by Braun Research of 1007 adults in response to the question: *If it were your decision and you could select any type of school, what type of school would you select in order to obtain the best education for your child?* (2–3% of adults were undecided.) Paul DiPerna, “2014 Schooling in America Survey: Perspectives on School Choice, Common Core, and Standardized Testing,” Indianapolis: The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, June 2014

Instead of this much more diverse landscape of education under equal opportunity, a very different landscape is beginning to emerge under current education funding practices in the U.S —namely, one in which charter schools continue to gain favor among politicians, corporations, and philanthropists and rapidly increase as a result, while private schools are for the most part priced out of existence, homeschooling remains a fringe, outlier activity (or becomes absorbed into the charter school network), and the traditional local public schools are largely shunned in favor of charter schools.

### Comparing charter school and traditional public school student test scores

According to the National Education Policy Center’s review of the most recent national charter school study (2013), the difference in student test scores between traditional public schools and charter schools is “trivial,” showing a difference of less than one hundredth of one percent.<sup>32</sup>

### Summation

The following is an abbreviated summary of charter school developments outlined in this paper. It will serve as preparation for some concluding thoughts, which will be directed primarily to those familiar with Waldorf education:

The original concept of public charter schools focused on locally authorized, teacher-run schools that empowered teachers to find ways to bring innovation into public education.

There was no interest in the charter school idea until a national education reform effort, encouraged by the federal government and heavily influenced by corporate CEOs, took root in the 1980s and 1990s.

Backed by federal, state, and philanthropic funding, charter schools have experienced phenomenal growth, while drawing significant numbers of students from both private and public schools.



Charter schools (originally called outcome-based schools because of their emphasis on student outcomes measured by standardized test scores) are an integral component in a national education reform strategy that is based on standardized high stakes testing, common core learning standards, the pervasive use of computer technology, and merit pay for teachers tied to student test scores.

A large amount of philanthropic funding of charter schools is for franchised-based, not-for-profit education management organizations that oversee numerous schools as a way to standardize and replicate useful practices on a large scale (commonly called *scaling up*).

Charter schools are held to equal or greater accountability standards than local public schools based on student test scores.

Even though there is some evidence that charter schools outperform local public schools in certain geographic areas, overall there appears to be little evidence that charter school students have significantly surpassed local public school students on standardized tests.

While charter schools are enjoying significant growth and large waiting lists under current public policy conditions, there are studies that indicate that most parents, if they had the financial resources to do so, would prefer to send their children to private schools or have them home schooled.

The major philanthropic foundations, led by the Gates Foundation, operate out of an economic market ideology, channeling virtually all of their education funding into the dominant national education reform efforts, which they have been instrumental in creating.

### Additional observations and concluding thoughts

For the purposes of this paper, we will provide some additional observations and concluding thoughts pertaining to the Waldorf

school movement and its struggle to find a balance between educational opportunity for all families and educational freedom for schools and educators. Most of the observations in this section are based on my own experiences as a parent, teacher, administrator, consultant, and researcher within the Waldorf school movement over a 20-year period.

### *The challenge of charter schools for the Waldorf school movement*

The first foray of Waldorf-based education into the U.S. public school system started in 1991 with the opening of the Milwaukee Urban Waldorf School. It started with 350 students, about 90% of them African American. It was launched with considerable help from veteran independent Waldorf school educators and received generous donations of classroom supplies from numerous independent Waldorf

school communities. In 1994, the first public charter school, Yuba River Charter School, employing methods inspired by Waldorf education, was established in Nevada City, California. There are now approximately 40 public charter schools employing

methods inspired by Waldorf methods in the U.S.<sup>33</sup>

Relations between charter schools using methods inspired by Waldorf methods and independent schools belonging to the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America (AWSNA) have been strained. There are a number of controversial points: the migration of students and faculty from independent Waldorf schools to public charter schools; the conversion of independent Waldorf schools to charter schools; AWSNA's decision to limit its membership to independent schools and teacher training institutes; the protracted negotiations over the use of the term "Waldorf" between the Alliance for Public Waldorf Education and AWSNA, which holds the service mark rights for

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the use of the names “Waldorf” and “Steiner”\*; and the question of whether the public charter school movement in general is a step toward, or a major threat to, educational freedom as outlined in Rudolf Steiner’s ideas on a threefold social organism.<sup>34</sup>

### *Parent perspectives*

The financial strain of paying tuition has become unbearable for a growing number of independent school families, and consequently they have withdrawn their children. Many families avoid applying to an independent school due to concern about rising tuition costs. For some, a charter school incorporating the Waldorf approach is an attractive alternative in such situations. Though some parents may feel the Waldorf curriculum and its methods are compromised in a public school setting, nevertheless they will view a charter school as offering a more attractive option than a traditional public school devoid of any Waldorf educational ideas. For many new parents, whose only schooling reference point is a traditional public school, a charter school inspired by Waldorf methods is often perceived as a great improvement over the local public school.

Occasionally, a group of parents at an existing independent Waldorf school tries to convince the school leadership to convert the institution to a charter school or simply shut down the existing independent school and replace it with a charter school. Another option is to leave the independent school and open a charter school inspired by Waldorf methods in the same locale. The initiative to explore various charter school options in times of financial stress may also come from the independent school’s board of trustees.

\*On March 22, 2015, the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America and the Alliance for Public Waldorf Education announced in a joint letter that a license was signed by the two organizations, which “empowers the Alliance to use the mark ‘Public Waldorf’ with acknowledgment that it is a service mark owned by the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America and used pursuant to a license.” In addition, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed “that affirms and articulates some of the many ways the two organizations and our respective members can collaborate.”

The ensuing discussions frequently lead to deep divisions within the independent school community, which can become polarized around issues of freedom and affordability. Opposition to such changes often comes from the faculty who do not want to compromise the creative freedom and individual accountability they enjoy in an independent school.

All of these options result, at a minimum, in a number of families withdrawing from an independent school and enrolling their children in a charter school. In addition, independent schools, should they remain in existence, face ongoing competition from local charter schools for future enrollment while remaining at a significant financial disadvantage.<sup>35</sup>

If parents had the financial circumstances to choose between a charter school and an independent school—that is, to make a decision based on the school’s individual merits, not on the cost of attending it—the school most valued would be the one most likely to thrive. As previously mentioned, recent studies suggest that, if a variety of schooling options were within financial reach of all families, the landscape of U.S. education would change dramatically in favor of private education.

### *Teachers’ perspectives*

Public charter schools can be appealing to independent schoolteachers who would prefer working for a higher income and more employee benefits than what most independent schools can offer. Even so, some former independent schoolteachers, who switch to teaching in a charter school, find the pressures of standardized high stakes testing and common core state standards challenging. And in the end they leave. For others, the benefits outweigh whatever compromises may be necessary. Another factor that influences some teachers in choosing to teach in a charter school is the possibility of implementing what they consider to be the ethical and social ideal of offering government-supported tuition-free Waldorf education.<sup>36</sup>

For those who value both Rudolf Steiner's views on education and social life, it is important to note that he spoke of the destiny relations between teachers and students as being of the highest spiritual order.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, the decision about where and for whom a teacher offers his or her services is a highly personal one, and cannot be the subject of other people's judgments. This is equally true for parents in choice of school for their children. Steiner also stated that it is a necessity for education to gain freedom from the control of the state, which is heavily influenced by political and economic interests. Not to do so, he warned, would mean humanity would suffer grave social consequences.

### *Long-term perspective for independent education*

Although there will be legitimate personal reasons why parents and/or teachers choose a charter school for their child or their profession, in the long term there must be grounds for concern, not merely for the long-term viability of independent Waldorf schools or traditional public schools, but also that the field of education will become completely dominated by political coercion, economic thinking, and moneyed interest groups to the detriment of students and social life as a whole.

Charter schools are appealing from a certain perspective and may offer some parents a viable alternative for their children's education. However, they are embedded in a massive attempt at reforming American education that has been strategically designed and systematically implemented since the early 1980s. This reform effort is led by a collusion of powerful political, economic, and philanthropic interests spearheaded by people with the best of intentions. Nevertheless, this effort is based on a materialistic view of education and

**... [T]his reform effort is based on a materialistic view of education and child development and dominated by market-orientated thinking and methods.**

child development and dominated by market-orientated thinking and methods, including standardization of learning goals and testing, the collection of personal data for marketing purposes (data mining), and business-like efficiency through a pervasive use of technology with little or no concern for potential health effects on the rising generation.

Previous education reform efforts were not coordinated at a national level and therefore left considerable room for pockets of resistance. Many simply waited until the reform efforts inevitably proved ineffective and were tossed aside in favor of a new round of reforms.

The current national reform effort, which features charter schools as a key vehicle for change, is totally different. Presidential administrations, Congress, state education departments, governors, CEOs, media, and major philanthropists are now working in concert to a large degree. To be sure, there is considerable resistance to these education reform efforts, including parents who are protesting the implementation of common core state standards, school administrators' who are creating petitions condemning state standardized testing, and state law suits that are being launched against the federal government.

In the long run, to simply support or oppose charter schools on a personal basis is a distraction from much larger issues, which involve the cultural evolution of humanity and even the very survival of our planet. The same powers and types of thinking that stand behind the current education reform efforts are the very same powers and types of thinking that have brought on the multiple crises that we are now facing: financial, environmental, and political.

Most of the complaints about the current reform efforts are quickly characterized as being mainly problems of implementation or inadequate preparation. But more preparation

and better implementation will not fix the real problem at hand. Our education reform efforts are in the hands of people who have little or no experience in education and have other priorities and agendas than the education of children.

A study of recent Gallup polls reveals that the very professions in which the public has the least trust and which have the least experience in education are the professions that are now directing education policy—namely, politicians, CEOs, and lobbyists.<sup>38</sup>

While it is important to do everything possible to resist and counter the more harmful effects of high-stakes testing, common core state standards, and student data mining, it is also an urgent matter to create forums for educators, parents, and students—regardless of school affiliation—to develop a new imagination and to work together to develop alternatives.<sup>39</sup>

A good starting point for building this imagination can be found in a talk given by Heinz-Dieter Meyer, Associate Professor of Education Administration and Policy Studies at the State University of New York at Albany, entitled “Managerial Accountability and the Misrecognition of Educational Knowledge.”<sup>40</sup> Meyer argues that education is being driven by a managerial model of accountability used by industry, in the belief that education is a well understood technology. In contrast, he maintains that education is a highly complex practical art, the knowledge and skill of which can be best transmitted by experienced practitioners. From this idea he develops a common-sense vision of experienced educators elevated to a position of “pivotal authority for education. This would allow building a self-governed, professional accountability system on the basis of collegial self-government and peer review.”

With such contemporary words we can experience ideas based on real educational

phenomena and a glimmer of what must be, regardless of personal opinion, regarding schools. Otherwise, the Waldorf school movement will be continually distracted by internal conflict, while the political and corporate forces in education become all the stronger.

### **The very professions in which the public has the least trust and which have the least experience in education are the professions that are now directing education policy – namely, politicians, CEOs, and lobbyists.**

#### **Endnotes**

1 Whether the migration of students from traditional public schools to charter schools has a positive or negative effect on the children who migrate and the children who are left behind is the subject of much debate both philosophically and in practice, typically along political lines.

The political left portrays local public schools as egalitarian and culturally diverse, and argues that the rapid growth of charter schools draws significant financial resources from them. Furthermore, commentators

of this persuasion point to studies that show that students on the whole do not perform better than students in traditional public schools. (“Charter Schools Are Improving, a Study Says,” Motoko Rich, *New York Times*, June 25, 2013, p. A15)

In contrast, defenders of the political right refer to studies that show students in charter schools doing better than local public schools, and argue that competition forces the traditional schools to improve. (“No Child Left Behind: New Evidence That Charter Schools Help Even Kids in Other Schools,” <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703574604574499592392782438>, Nov. 4, 2009).

- 2 With the growth of government-funded voucher programs in various states, this may change. For a list of state voucher programs, visit <http://www.edchoice.org/School-Choice/School-Choice-Programs>.
- 3 A private school admission procedure is based on a non-compulsory, mutually accepted agreement between the school and the parents of a child admitted to a school. Typically, this agreement is for one school year.
- 4 There are claims that some charter schools exclude certain types of students. See, for instance, Stephanie Simon, “Class Struggle—How Charter Schools Get the Students They Want,” *reuters.com*, 2013.
- 5 In addition to charter schools, other options for families, if they can afford them, are home-school programs, private schools, public magnet schools,

- or a move to another school district. Occasionally adjacent school districts allow transferability between them.
- 6 Source: Education Next polls (2012 and 2013) administered under the auspices of the Harvard Program on Education Policy and Governance (PEPG), [http://educationnext.org/files/EN\\_PEPG\\_Survey\\_2012\\_Tables1.pdf](http://educationnext.org/files/EN_PEPG_Survey_2012_Tables1.pdf) and <http://educationnext.org/the-2013-education-next-survey/>.
  - 7 A recent Google search for “independent public schools” yielded 55 million results.
 

A specific example of blurring the distinction between a traditional independent school and a public charter school at the government level can be found in Florida’s Department of Education, which lists charter schools under the Office of Independent Education & Parental Choice.
  - 8 Another layer of confusion seldom mentioned has to do with the term *chartered* schools vs. *charter* schools. The term “chartered schools” can refer to what are commonly called public charter schools, or it can refer to non-public or private schools. For example, former Minnesota State Senator Ember Rehgott Junge, author of *Zero Chance of Passage: The Pioneering Charter School Story*, uses the term “chartered school” throughout her book in describing the history of the first “charter” school law passed in Minnesota in 1991. Interestingly, the law itself did not refer either to charter or chartered schools, but to “outcome-based” schools. In contrast, the New York State Board of Regents uses the term “chartered school” when referring to a non-public private school, and the term “charter” when referring to a public charter school: NYSED: Frequently Asked Questions about Charter Schools in New York State, <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/psc/charterfaq.html>.
  - 9 Source: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.
  - 10 Sources: National Center for Educational Statistics, and capenet.org.
  - 11 Michael Fabricant and Michelle Fine, *Charter Schools and the Corporate Makeover of Public Education*, New York: Teachers College Press, 2012, p. 29.
  - 12 Ibid., Chapter 2.
  - 13 For more federal education reform following the “Nation at Risk” report, see Gary Lamb, “Alliance of Government and Business Seeks to Mold American Education,” Philmont, NY; *The Threefold Review*, The Margaret Fuller Corp., 1992–1993, No.8; and Gary Lamb, *The Social Mission of Waldorf Education*, Part II, Fair Oaks, CA: AWSNA Publications, 2004.
  - 14 The eight national goals published in the Goals 2000: Educate American Act in 1994 were:
    - 1) All children in the U.S. will start school ready to learn.
    - 2) The high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90%.
    - 3) All students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, the arts, history, and geography, and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our nation’s modern economy.
    - 4) United States students will be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement.
    - 5) Every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.
    - 6) Every school in the United States will be free of drugs, violence, and the unauthorized presence of firearms and alcohol, and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning.
    - 7) The nation’s teaching force will have access to programs for the continued improvement of their professional skills and the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to instruct and prepare all American students for the next century.
    - 8) Every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children.
  - 15 Gary Lamb, *The Social Mission of Waldorf Education*, Fair Oaks, CA: AWSNA Publications, 2004, Chapter 9. See also the website [www.businessroundtable.org](http://www.businessroundtable.org).
  - 16 [www.achieve.org](http://www.achieve.org).
  - 17 Ted Kolderie, “Ray Budde and the Origins of the ‘Charter Concept,’” *Education Evolving*, Center for Policy Studies and Hamline University, St. Paul, MN, June 2005. Kolderie is referred to as the godfather of the charter(ed) school movement in the early 1990s.
  - 18 Shanker and the American Federation of Teachers withdrew support of charter schools when it became clear they were going to compete with the existing public schools rather than becoming a mechanism of inner renewal headed by teachers.
  - 19 Ember Reichgott Junge, *Zero Chance of Passage*, Edina, MN: Beaver’s Pond Press, 2013, Chapter 3.
  - 20 Not to be confused with the former presidential candidate of the same name from Colorado.

- 21 “We were convinced that the voucher initiative should not be taken lightly. It was almost like playing Russian roulette with public education, except instead of having a one-in-six chance of being hit by a deadly blow, the odds were closer to 50-50.” Sue Barr and Gary K. Hart. “The Story of California’s Charter School Legislation,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, 78.1 (Sept. 1996), p.37.
- 22 See *The Social Mission of Waldorf Education*, p. 65.
- 23 The EASA (No Child Left Behind) expired in 2007 and was never reauthorized under the Obama administration, due to contentious debate of what was of value in it. Since then, implementation of the No Child Left Behind has simply been extended without amendments and subject to the interpretation of the Obama administration.
- 24 Herb Lackman, “The Collapse of the Catholic School Enrollment: The Unintended Consequence of the Charter School Movement,” Albany, NY, *Albany Government Law Review*, 2012, [http://www.albanygovernmentlawreview.org/Articles/Vol06\\_1/6.1.001-Lackman.pdf](http://www.albanygovernmentlawreview.org/Articles/Vol06_1/6.1.001-Lackman.pdf).
- 25 Richard Buddin, “The Impact of Charter Schools on Public and Private School Enrollment:” Washington, DC, Cato Institute Policy Analysis 707, 2012. <http://www.cato.org/publications/policy-analysis/impact-charter-schools-public-private-school-enrollments>.
- 26 Source: [c.news21.com/katie-big-education.html](http://c.news21.com/katie-big-education.html) (University of Southern California).
- 27 Op. cit., Fabricant and Fine, p. 29.
- 28 Joanne Barkin, “Got Dough? How Billionaires Rule Our Schools,” *Dissent Magazine*, Winter 2011, <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/got-dough-how-billionaires-rule-our-schools>.
- 29 “Profiles of For-Profit and Nonprofit Education Management Organizations: Fourteenth Edition, 2011–2012,” National Policy Center, School of Education, University of Colorado Boulder.
- 30 Examples of for-profit EMOs are: EdisonLearning, National Heritage Academies, and Mosaica Education. CMOs include Green Dot and Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP). Stand-alone charter schools include those that use Montessori and Waldorf methods.
- 31 Paul DiPerna, “2014 Schooling In America Survey: Perspectives on School Choice, Common Core, and Standardized Testing.” Indianapolis, The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, June 2014.
- 32 These statistics are cited not because they deserve greater attention than other valid and important evaluation metrics, including parent and student satisfaction, but rather because they are used as the main yardstick by which charter schools are evaluated.
- 33 Source: [www.allianceforpublicwaldorfeducation.org](http://www.allianceforpublicwaldorfeducation.org).
- 34 Rudolf Steiner, the founder of the Waldorf school movement, maintained that a healthy social life includes three independent sectors: cultural, political, and economic. Each one is vitally important, and no one of them should dominate the other. Education, in this view, is part of an independent cultural life.
- 35 As a consultant, I have been contacted by independent Waldorf schools in California, Arizona, and Wisconsin to help them work through such situations. In all these cases the primary factor for parents’ choosing a charter school was financial.
- 36 See, for example, Liz Beaven, “Independent or Charter School? Study of Teacher Choice: Part 1,” *Research Bulletin*, Vol. 18, #1, [http://www.waldorflibrary.org/images/stories/Journal\\_Articles/rb18\\_1beaven.pdf](http://www.waldorflibrary.org/images/stories/Journal_Articles/rb18_1beaven.pdf) and “Independent and Charter School? Study of Teacher Choice: Part 2,” *Research Bulletin*, Vol. 18, #2, [http://www.waldorflibrary.org/images/stories/Journal\\_Articles/rb18\\_2beaven.pdf](http://www.waldorflibrary.org/images/stories/Journal_Articles/rb18_2beaven.pdf).
- 37 See Gary Lamb, *Wellsprings of the Spirit*, Fair Oaks, CA: AWSNA Publications, 2007, pp. 44–55.
- 38 See “Education Renewal Based on Trust and Experience,” a blog article by Gary Lamb posted on the Avalon Initiative website on January 13, 2015, <http://edrenewal.org/education-renewal-based-on-trust-and-experience/>.
- 39 See the mission statement of the Avalon Initiative at <http://edrenewal.org/mission/>.
- 40 Heinz-Dieter Meyer, “Managerial Accountability and the Misrecognition of Educational Knowledge.” Paper presented at the Conference on Philosophy of Education, Azim Premji University, Bangalore, India, May 14, 2014.

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