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NEPC Review: Charting New Territory: Tapping Charter Schools to Turn Around the Nation's Dropout Factories

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REVIEW OF *CHARTING NEW TERRITORY*

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Summary of Review

Charting New Territory: Tapping Charter Schools to Turn Around the Nation's Dropout Factories argues for a more prominent role for charter operators in turning around perennially low-performing high schools. However, the report's ultimate findings and conclusions are out of proportion to the strength of the research evidence on school turnarounds, charter schools, and charter management organizations, as well as to the data on which the analysis is based. As such, its recommendations are of little utility in guiding policy on charter management organizations as tools for turning around struggling schools. Further, the report fails to justify the general practice of converting chronically low-performing schools to charter status. Instead, the report reproduces familiar arguments for market-based school reforms that are grounded in little empirical evidence and that use our nation's neediest schools—those serving primarily poor children and children of color—as laboratories for educational experiments, notwithstanding existing evidence that the experiments will not succeed. In doing so, the report distracts policymakers and practitioners from more fundamental and worthwhile questions about the types of policies that can secure the necessary conditions for all students to succeed.

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REVIEW OF *CHARTING NEW TERRITORY*

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I. Introduction

Charting New Territory: Tapping Charter Schools to Turn Around the Nation's Dropout Factories, authored by Melissa Lazarín and supported by the Center for American Progress and The Broad Foundation, argues for a more prominent role for charter operators in turning around perennially low-performing high schools.¹ It highlights the experiences of two districts—Los Angeles and Philadelphia—that worked with charter management organizations (CMOs) to turn around “dropout factories,” or high schools in which the number of 12th-graders was significantly lower than the number of ninth-graders four years earlier.² The report speculates about the barriers and opportunities that exist for CMO partnerships in light of current federal policies that encourage districts to engage CMOs to restart some of the country's 2,000 lowest-performing high schools.³

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report is organized around four sets of findings. First, it finds that three conditions—a CMO's strength within a district setting, its expertise in running secondary schools, and its ability to expand to scale in order to effectively support turnaround schools—all shape the potential for successful charter-district partnerships. Second, the report finds that CMOs' experiences in Los Angeles and Philadelphia exemplify the opportunities and challenges nationally of charter-run turnarounds for high school dropout factories. Third, the report concludes that, despite the vast differences between founding a new school and transforming a chronically low-performing one, several principles of charter school start-ups are applicable to charter turnarounds, such as the use of a focused school model, a personalized learning environment, and a strong school culture.

Finally, the report posits that five steps might improve the likelihood of successful CMO-district partnerships (all of which strengthen the CMO's position in the district): 1) maximizing the CMO's autonomy over staffing, budget, curricula, operations, and pedagogy; 2) staffing turnaround schools through creative agreements among education entrepreneurs, unions, charter operators, districts, and states, such as developing “thin” union contracts; 3) ensuring district financial support for turnaround schools; 4) relaxing state and district administrative regulations around staffing, funding, and school operations; and 5) cultivating public will for

such partnerships. That is, the report's advocacy focuses on creating an even less regulated environment for these charter schools.

III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The report bases the majority of its findings and conclusions on conversations with charter school operators—including those that have not yet engaged in turnaround work—and with school district staff, researchers, and education reformers or consultants. Interview respondents included one professor of educational policy, one researcher from the Center on Reinventing Public Education, five reformers or consultants from reform organizations or think tanks that advocate for market-based education policies, and three district administrators who were associated with their districts' charter school partnerships.

Secondarily, the report cites evidence from the popular media, blogs, foundation reports, non-peer reviewed literature, charter operators' external relations materials, and ideologically identifiable think tanks.

Beyond these citations, the report routinely offers a range of unsubstantiated claims that are not supported by any evidence or that ignore existing evidence to the contrary.

At the same time, no theoretical or substantive rationale behind the report's sources of evidence is provided to justify why the particular interview respondents or literature sources were selected or how their data were evaluated. The result is a collection of weakly supported claims based on an unsystematic, unsophisticated interpretation of the knowledge base on school turnarounds, charter schools, and charter management organizations. In the following two sections, I critique the rigor, appropriateness, and comprehensiveness of the research-based evidence cited in the report. I then examine the types of unsubstantiated claims that ensue from this analysis.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

Overall, the report's use of the research literature on turnarounds, charter schools and charter management organizations is unsystematic and incomplete. This results in a crude and inadequate interpretation of the empirical evidence in these areas. It results as well in misleading implications about CMO-district turnaround partnerships.

The four sources cited on school turnarounds consist of the following: a blog entry; a non-peer reviewed case study of a middle school turnaround effort; consultants' frameworks for evaluating turnarounds; and an article on how to turn around low-performing schools, published by *Education Next*, a journal that advocates for reforms grounded in principles of competition, choice, and entrepreneurship. Conspicuously absent from the report are references to the few empirical studies of school turnarounds,⁴ or even an acknowledgment of the nascent state of this field and any provisional implications that might be drawn from it.⁵

The report also overlooks the research on analogous reforms that have been implemented to dramatically change school staffing, organization, and management in an effort to achieve similarly dramatic changes in student performance. While such research does not specifically examine what we now refer to as school turnaround reforms, there are substantial overlaps between the two. Overall, this research base offers only weak and inconclusive evidence in support of any such reform, including state takeovers, educational management organizations, charter schools, and reconstitution. In fact, this research frequently documents negative unintended consequences, such as racial or socio-economic segregation and organizational instability.⁶

For instance, the report omits any consideration of the research on reconstitution, which shows that firing and replacing entire school staffs has usually failed to achieve the intended effects. In San Francisco, reconstituted schools continued to show up on lists of low-performing schools.⁷ In Chicago, reconstitution resulted in staff replacements that were no higher in quality than their predecessors; teacher morale also deteriorated under these reforms.⁸ And in Maryland, reconstitution inadvertently reduced schools' social stability and climate and was not associated with organizational improvements or heightened student performance.⁹

Research on the broader field of educational management organizations (EMOs) also shows mixed results. RAND's longitudinal evaluation of the country's largest EMO, Edison Schools, concluded that any effectiveness was equivocal.¹⁰ On a larger scale, Philadelphia's experiences outsourcing 46 schools to multiple EMOs (including charter management organizations) led to virtually no differences between student outcomes in schools managed by EMOs and those that the district continued to oversee.¹¹ None of this research is discussed in the report.

Likewise, the report fails to acknowledge the mounting body of evidence on charter schools and charter management organizations. It instead selects only two empirical studies, both of which yield unusually and unrepresentatively promising conclusions. First, the report references a RAND study that found that students in charter high schools are "7 to 15 percentage points more likely to graduate and earn a high school diploma than are traditional public high school students" (p. 2) as evidence that charter high schools are demonstrating significant potential. Second, it cites a report on the interim findings from a national study of charter management organizations, conducted by the Center on Reinventing Public Education and Mathematica Research, Inc., as evidence of the organizational and managerial advantages that CMOs enjoy over single charter operators and that may position CMOs well to successfully lead turnarounds (pp. 4-7). This small, skewed selection of literature renders an unbalanced, overly positive interpretation of multiple national studies that consistently show that, at best, charter schools do only as well as traditional public schools, and sometimes do worse.¹²

Finally, the report overlooks the preliminary research evidence on Philadelphia's charter-run Renaissance schools, which presents mixed results in terms of the initial, input-related findings. While many of the schools were positively distinguished by school-wide systems for improving climate and better physical appearances, they also experienced a 21% increase in uncertified teachers, an 18% increase in White teachers (to 75%), and a decrease in average years of teaching experience to four years (compared with the nine-year district average).¹³

The upshot of these omissions is an unbalanced and overly optimistic view of the potential of turnarounds as a tactic for lifting the performance of so-called high school dropout factories, and an exaggerated promise of a largely untested strategy for dramatically altering the staffing, organization, and management of our country's neediest schools.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

While the report states up front that its findings are based largely on conversations with charter school operators, district administrators, researchers, and reformers, it is silent on the analytic techniques used to select and evaluate these or other data it cites to support its claims. The absence of any stated criteria for systematic data selection and analysis leaves the report open to the criticism that it “cherry picked” evidence to support predetermined findings and conclusions, despite its declaration that it was “not the intention of this paper to advocate for a particular turnaround model for high schools” (p. 3).

In the end, the report puts forth numerous assertions that are either weakly supported by evidence or completely unsubstantiated, which severely undercuts the rigor of the analysis. It also results in multiple gross generalizations about the cases under study and the general evidence base on turnarounds and charter schools. Below, I highlight the types of generalizations that are representative of the report's claims and show how each is analytically misleading:

Claim #1: “A majority of Locke [Senior High School] teachers—frustrated with the school’s mediocrity—petitioned to allow charter management organization Green Dot Public Schools to transform the school,” (p. 1) and “Green Dot Public Schools in Los Angeles leaped into the school improvement business when teachers opted to allow Green Dot to assume leadership...” (p. 8). Neither of these claims is supported with references to interview or any other forms of data. They both mislead readers by implying that teachers voluntarily supported Green Dot’s takeover of their school. They discount the available evidence on the experience, including multiple accounts of strong resistance to and deep skepticism about Green Dot’s efforts on the part of teachers, district administrators, and union officials.¹⁴ These claims also simply ignore the political tactics to which Green Dot resorted in order to sway individual teachers to change their votes to favor the takeover.¹⁵ Such sweeping generalizations considerably discount the political upheaval caused by such takeovers and mislead readers by glossing over what was in reality a heavily contested reform.

Claim #2. “Locke’s performance on state assessments is not where it needs to be, but it is headed in the right direction. More Locke students are participating in the state’s portfolio of assessments, and the percentage of students performing at the proficient and advanced level has inched upward since Green Dot’s restart of the school” (p. 9). This assertion, based on Green Dot’s own press release, understates Locke’s continued dismal performance. The proportion of students scoring proficient or above after the takeover increased a mere 2.9 points to only 14.9% in English, and 4.1 points to a total 6.7% in Math. These scores are still remarkably low in both absolute terms and relative to state and

national averages, and only the most liberal interpretation might conclude from these data that Locke is “heading in the right direction.”

Claim #3. Successful turnarounds in various sectors offer examples of how charter operators can turn around chronically low-performing schools (p. 23). While the turnaround concept is traceable to the dramatic turnarounds attempted for decades in the business sector,¹⁶ research shows that corporate turnarounds rarely yield the positive results that reformers expect.¹⁷ The report supports this claim with evidence published in *Education Next*,¹⁸ yet it overlooks the broader research base that shows how turnarounds in the corporate sector have fared little to no better than less dramatically reformed organizations.¹⁹ Staw and Epstein, for instance, find that such popular management techniques are associated not with greater economic performance, but with greater perceptions of innovation.²⁰ Likewise, Hess and Gift, from the American Enterprise Institute, find that the most popular turnaround approaches successfully improve organizational performance in only about one quarter of the cases.²¹ By omitting this evidence, the report not only overestimates the promise of turnarounds as a documented effective practice for schools, but also fails to confront the fundamental question of whether corporate-style practices can be transferred to public entities like schools—a claim for which the evidence base is quite thin.

Claim #4. A great deal of animosity toward charter schools, mostly fueled by misconceptions or a lack of understanding of these schools, remains despite the charter school sector’s growth. This blanket claim is unsupported by any reference to data or prior research. Further, it is grounded in the unsupported assertion that animosity toward charter schools could be eradicated if only people were more adequately informed. The dubious premise is that the growth of the charter school sector ought to be matched with growing support by the public. Besides the lack of any evidence to warrant such sweeping claims, this statement illustrates the lack of analytic precision that is characteristic of the report.

In fact, repeated, unwarranted claims like these constitute the bulk of the report’s findings and conclusions. Each claim undermines the report’s overall argument as well as its specific claims about the conditions that influence the success of CMO-district partnerships, its two highlighted cases, and the steps it offers for improving the likelihood and success of such partnerships in the future.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The validity of the report’s findings and conclusions is minimal. It bases the majority of its judgments on an assortment of telephone conversations; media, foundation, and think tank reports; blogs; and a small number of unrepresentative research reports. It lacks an explicit theoretical or substantive rationale, and it does not divulge what methods, if any, were used to generate analytically robust conclusions. As such, the report lacks the methodological rigor necessary to justify its claims. The report is designed and presented in a manner more consistent with political propaganda than as a research document.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

Given that the report's ultimate findings and conclusions are both inconsistent with, and out of proportion to, the strength of the evidence base on school turnarounds, charter schools and charter management organizations, it is of little utility in guiding policy on charter management organizations as tools for turning around U.S. dropout factories. It is also limited in its potential to guide the general practice of converting chronically low-performing schools to charter status. Instead, the report reproduces familiar political arguments in support of market-based reforms that are grounded in little empirical evidence. The reforms advocated by the report seek to use our nation's neediest schools—those serving primarily poor children and children of color—as laboratories for educational experiments, notwithstanding existing evidence that the experiments will not succeed. In doing so, the report distracts policymakers and practitioners from more fundamental questions about the types of policies that can secure the necessary conditions for all students to succeed.

Notes and References

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