

20th Anniversary of California Charter Schools: Q & A With Jed Wallace August 2012

CALIFORNIA'S
CHARTER SCHOOLS

20
1992
to
2012

20 YEARS REINVENTING
PUBLIC EDUCATION

What does this 20th anniversary mean to charter schools in California?

Charter schools have transformed the public school system in California, and changed the lives of millions of students that have attended charters over the past two decades. Charter schools have also brought innovation, flexibility and positive outcomes. We have achieved an important milestone, and seen tremendous innovation and growth that is lacking in the traditional public school system. Charters are no longer an experiment, but a tried and true method that is not cookie-cutter, and is experiencing increasing demand by more and more families. However, it also means that we must continue to push forward with even more reforms.

Where has the charter movement faltered or failed?

Academic accountability. Even after 20 years, we still haven't been able to put into law and practice minimum performance expectations for charter schools, and closure mechanisms for those that are persistently underperforming, therefore failing not only themselves, but more importantly, the students and families that put their trust in them. CCSA continues to push for this at the Legislative level, and also with our members through our annual Portrait of the Movement and Call for Non-Renewal.

What is a major issue facing charter schools today, that was also an issue 20 years ago?

As much as charter schools have grown in California, and as much impact and momentum as we've continued to have, we also face challenges that in many ways inhibit more growth. For instance, charter schools in California are systematically underfunded, and that funding inequity must be addressed. Constant deferrals and an inability to have access to borrowing mechanisms exacerbates the situation for many charters. All public school students deserve equal treatment, even in precarious financial times. In addition, charter schools have continued to face issues in identifying and securing facilities. Many don't know this, but charter schools are not automatically given a building. They must rely on either their local district to give them space under Proposition 39, or seek non-district facilities on their own, all of which costs a significant amount of their funding. This can limit growth, and put a lot of pressure on charter schools.

What innovations can we take credit for?

Charter schools have transformed public education as it was known in our state for the past 150 years. For instance, charters have created:

- New school models
- Involvement of parents
- Longer school day at some schools
- In general, the importance of smaller schools giving greater intimacy and personal attention
- Use of technology
- Many different manners of measuring the effectiveness of educators and holding them accountable

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CCSA
California
Charter Schools
Association

- with different HR practices
- Thin contracts for collective bargaining
- College going cultures that can be achieved by ALL student populations, even those underserved and forgotten by the traditional public school system
- Specialty schools of many kinds serving niches of populations, like five keys or learning for life, etc, that simply weren't possible previously
- New teacher training models
- Establishment of whole new organizations—Charter Management Organizations, or CMOs—that are developing great capacity as the movement matures

How is the CA charter movement distinct from what has happened in other states or nationally?

California has the highest number of charter schools, and serves the most charter school students in the nation. Charter schools in California are a model that other states are luring for their own efforts, like Rocketship and Aspire.

California's Charter Schools Act has allowed communities to open great variety of kinds of charter schools that serve their students' needs in a variety of ways, like conversion schools, CMO schools, Independent Study schools, Virtual Education charters, hybrids, college-prep, to name but a few. This has led to virtually every community in California being served by charter schools, from rural to urban, to suburban. Many other states have concentrations of charters in various places. Very few have had charter schools spread into virtually every community in the state as has happened in California.

While charters do face facilities challenges, there are mechanisms in CA that other states lack that allow for at least 70% of schools to access either public buildings or buildings that are paid for with public dollars (SB 740) or through state bond programs. Other states have cities where a few operators are being given buildings. Very few, if any at all, have provisions in law giving all schools mechanisms by which they can access public buildings.

The public embraces charter schools more and more. Our polling indicates that the word of mouth in CA has led to great awareness and support for charter schools. This is out front of the rest of the country.

What's next for the charter movement?

The charter school movement is being asked to take on even greater levels of responsibility as California goes through a funding crisis unlike any that we have seen before and as parent desire for greater choice and opportunity is growing. Fortunately, the charter school movement has matured to the point where we are able to take on big levels of additional responsibility. Big emerging developments include:

Growth in enrollment, large numbers of new schools, and concentrations of charter schools emerging in areas where it is clear that charter schools will become the primary provider of educational options for all students.

Big growth in the advocacy heft of the movement as parents and other stakeholders get more involved and as policy makers realize the inevitability of charter schools serving far higher percentages of students. This will result, eventually, in moments when charter schools will be more fully embraced, rather than resisted, and this will catalyze even greater impact for charter schools.

Big changes coming through improved use of technology. We are on the cusp of big changes where the power of technology is able to both improve learning and reduce costs. These changes need to happen everywhere but are resisted in the traditional system while being embraced by many charter schools. This will lead to charter schools having even greater impact in the future as the technological revolution accelerates.

What can we learn from the charter school movement? What can be implemented in other public schools?

Virtually every innovation in public education in the last twenty years has been introduced by charter schools. The question is whether the traditional system can change to allow itself to embrace even more of the innovations that have proven successful in charter schools.

The question is whether the traditional system has the will to do so. This is one of the great questions before public education today – whether school districts prove nimble enough to start doing what parents and communities want. If so, they will begin more rigorously implementing the changes that charter schools are generating. If not, charter schools will simply keep growing because parents and communities simply refuse to miss out on having what is best for kids.

Does the charter movement show we should give school sites more autonomy from their districts?

Autonomy is key. While we have had isolated incidents of mismanagement, the vast majority of charter schools have used their autonomy responsibly. What we need is greater flexibility and autonomy for all public schools so that all are able to innovate more rapidly as the economy and the world change around us at unprecedented speed.

Are charter schools outside the system or now effectively just part of it?

We are definitely outside the traditional system and we are pushing that system to change as rapidly as possible. The traditional system, thus far, has showed itself unable to respond, and charter schools are building a parallel system that we believe over time will become the primary provider of educational options to all California students.

The charter movement started out bi-partisan and grassroots. You now have your own PAC effectively. Is CCSA now just another special interest group?

Our difference is in our design. We are not a simple special interest group because we have standards and we hold ourselves to high levels of accountability, both through high expectations and through parent choice. When the public sees that we call for closure of our own schools when they are underperforming, they see that as in stark contrast to the traditional special interests in Sacramento which will defend their own no matter how poorly they serve students. We do not attempt to protect our own turf through limiting parental power and choice. We want parents to ultimately decide where enrollment and funding go. That is fundamentally different.

As to bipartisanship, we remain one of the only sectors in public life where there is bipartisan support and cooperation at the heart of the movement. Where else do we see people like Newt Gingrich and Al Sharpton on the same side of an issue? The bipartisanship is only growing as we see heroic democratic leaders like Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villariagosa and Sacramento Mayor Kevin Johnson embracing charter schools.

Your studies have shown CMOs to often be more effective academically. CMOs are effectively like school districts. What's the take away?

The takeaway is that as the charter school movement is asked to take on even greater responsibility going forward, we need organizations with increased heft that are up to the challenge. Fortunately, in CA, we have some of the most successful CMOs anywhere in the country. Meanwhile, we see in California that many single site operators are being asked by parents to do a second school, or a third. So, while many are focused on a relatively small number of highly influential CMOs, we see a new generation of CMOs emerging which have the potential to be every bit as successful as those that have come before. In this way, California is proving to be the engine creating the organizations that we'll be needing in CA and across the country as the reinvention of public education accelerates in the years to come.