

Charter Schools Turn 24, What's Next?

By Tom Vander Ark in Getting Smart (<http://gettingsmart.com>)

Minnesota lawmakers passed a bill in 1991 to allow teachers to start schools. The first public charter school opened the following year. In 1993, Doug and Dee Thomas opened the innovative teacher-led project-based Minnesota New Country School which became the anchor of the **Edvisions** network.

Writing the first law was a collaboration including Ember Reichgott Junge, Elaine Salinas, Ted Kolderie from **Education Evolving**, Joe Nathan from the **Center for School Change**, and public school teacher Terry Lydell.

Leading up to that collaboration Kolderie wrote a seminal 1990 memo, " **The States will have to withdraw the exclusive**". Ted's post built on a Nathan's 1983 book "Free to Teach" which led to the 1985 NGA report "Time for Results" which recommended the autonomy for accountability trade-off.

The inaugural charter school law embraced two important ideas. Open enrollment and authorization by a sponsor responsible for reviewing proposals, and monitoring performance, and deciding whether they should be renewed.

As a board member of the **Colorado Children's Campaign**, I visited Gov. Roy Romer in 1992 to advocate for a charter bill. He signed a charter school bill in 1993. Now, 43 states authorize nonprofit organizations to operate schools under a performance contract with a state approved authorizer.

Looking back at the last two dozen years, 10 trends and developments are notable:

1. Steady growth. There are **6,724 public charter schools** serving 2.9 million students. About a quarter are part of a managed network (nonprofit **CMO** or for-profit **EMO**). About 400 open every year, and it's been that way for more than a decade. The declining growth rate reflects that it has become harder and more expensive to gain approval and open a school (see #3).

2. Progress in outcomes. While results vary, Stanford's **CREDO reports** that "Across 41 regions, urban charter schools on average achieve significantly greater student success in both math and reading, which amounts to 40 additional days of learning growth in math and 28 days of additional growth in reading. Compared to the national profile of charter school performance, urban charters produce more positive results." Last year's CREDO report found that, "Charter schools provided seven additional days of learning per year in reading and no significant difference in math."

3. Urban progress. Charter schools outperform traditional schools significantly in seven urban areas including Boston, Bay Area, DC, Memphis, Newark, New York, and New Orleans. They have been less helpful in western cities including Fort Worth, Las Vegas, Phoenix, and El Paso. (Bolding is mine)

4. Authorizing has shifted from quantity to quality. The **National Association of Charter School Authorizers** launched a quality campaign, **One Million Lives**, to encourage

authorizers to close failing schools and opening more great schools, “We want to see children in 3,000 more higher-achieving schools by the end of the 2017-18 school year.” With a focus on prior performance of teams and models, authorizing in most states demands high quality proposals but can screen out innovative models and applications that can’t afford the lengthy and expensive process.

5. Limited innovation. In addition to rear view mirror authorizing, most charter schools aren’t very innovative owing to restrictions of the same accountability framework of standards, assessment and accountability as traditional public schools. With a smaller federal role going forward a few states will adopt new measurement systems that are more conducive to innovative learning models. ...With recent success in Alabama, Oklahoma, Wisconsin, and Indiana, [The National Alliance of Public Charter Schools](#), launched 10 years ago, is supporting charter school laws that support fiscal equity, quality and innovation.

6. Sustained mission-focused board matters. More important than school model innovations, charter schools are a governance innovation. Nonprofit charter schools recruit board members that support their mission. Purpose-driven rather than political leadership makes it possible to sustain a mission over time, it avoids the disastrous impact of revolving door leadership of most urban districts. Good governance, supported by groups like [Charter Board Partners](#) (where I’m a director) gives schools a chance to thrive.

Leading charter networks including Aspire, KIPP, Rocketship, Summit, are expanding across state lines demonstrating the ability not only to sustain a mission, but the ability to bring it to scale.

7. Blended learning is a big wave. While most charter networks were slow to adopt blended learning, a dozen networks are now sector leaders (and well represented on our [100 Schools Worth Visiting](#) list). Every school and network that hasn’t already will build or adopt a blended model. Boards will be asked to consider alternative staffing approaches, device and platform purchases, and competency-based practices and policies, another reason that boards will need technical assistance over the next five years.

8. Variation. Adoption and implementation of the charter idea vary tremendously from state to state and even within states. In some states, most charter schools resemble district magnet schools. In other states, management by for-profit companies dominates while in other states those companies are not present at all. In some places, charter schools are part of the new normal; in other places they are still fiercely resisted.

9. Portfolio cities. Most cities are developing a portfolio approach with multiple school operators. School districts have adopted systems of tiered support and earned autonomy with many district schools gaining charter like autonomy (e.g., [Philadelphia’s SLA](#)). Our new book, [Smart Cities](#), outlines key elements of portfolio cities: sustained leadership, productive partnership, equitable funding, regional talent development, and support for new tools and schools.

10. Next. The growth of district options including online learning as well as rapid growth of low-cost private schools will dampen charter growth (see [The Microschool opportunity](#)).

Fast path authorization for high performing networks will result in networks growing from a quarter of charters to a third of charters by 2020. And, by that time we may see a state adopt performance contracting as its primary accountability system.

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