

A Tale of Charter and Virtual Schools

The Pioneer Institute (www.pioneerinstitute.org) has been providing opportunities for interested people to come to the Parker House and listen to experts speak about Charter Schools and Virtual Schools for many years.

I met Lovett C. Peters, who founded the Institute in 1988, at the first STEM Summit organized by Krishna Vedula of UMass Lowell. Krishna asked me to be on a panel and so I took a seat at a table in the front of the “ballroom”, sitting down next to an older gentleman. He leaned over several times asking me who the people were on the stage (the first STEM summit was a series of panel presentations). Toward the end of day he told me his name and gave me his card.

I was invited to the Pioneer office and met with a couple of the senior staff. Among other topics I suggested that they become interested in is the intersection of higher education and K12 where educator preparation occurs. That never happened but I have been on their invitation list ever since and have attended many, if not most, of the presentations. That has enabled me to meet and re-meet many leaders in the Commonwealth.

As a faithful attendee (I enjoy the Park Plaza...they serve a mean cookie), I was often allowed to ask questions during the appropriate period.

On Feb 21, 2013 the conversation was about “Preserving Quality, Autonomy, & Choice” in Charter Schools, with Mort Orlov as moderator and Paul Toner and three other folks (head of the Mission Hill Charter School in Boston, a member of the Boston University Education faculty and the author of a book that is critical of the movement).

At the end of the presentation I did get to ask a question and in preparing for the question I remember the following:

1. When the law was passed I took the lead at the MASS in writing a position paper reflecting the Superintendents’ Association voice.

Our concerns were first, financial. We said draining the public schools was not a fair way to support an initiative that had the potential (and was designed) to innovate and then drive the rest of us to engage in similar productive changes. Many of us were trying to make changes in our school districts and facing either resistance or non-responsiveness so we understood the frustration that some parents and teachers were experiencing. We also were sympathetic to one condition they worked under which insufficient support for facilities.

A concern I had and still have is about the separation of church and state. In the beginning (and certainly with home schooling) the focus was not on students who were not succeeding in their home schools but more on providing alternative approaches to public education...some of them motivated by religious beliefs.

2. In 1995 in Acton I actually experienced both the influence and impact of a charter school. “Parker was one of the first charter schools created under the [Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993](#). It was started by area parents and teachers and received its charter on March 15, 1994, opening in Devens for the 1995–1996 year as an Essential School dedicated to the principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools. CES founder [Ted Sizer](#) (see End Notes) was involved in its founding, and he served as co-principal with his wife Nancy in the 1998–1999 school year (Wikipedia).”

Acton had five elementary schools on a continuum from a more traditionally structured approach to a team and project based learning arrangement. The junior high school had teams but had not moved in the direction of project-based learning. The other Central Office administrators and I tried to convince the teachers to create a project based team--to no avail until Parker opened its doors and drew almost the entire graduating class from the elementary school with project-based learning. The following year the junior school offered such a team and we never again experienced that kind of a student and parent defection.

End notes

1. I knew Ted and Nancy because he was the reason I was able to come to the Harvard Graduate School of Education to get my MAT. After I graduated from Cornell I worked for a year in NY as a writer for a trade magazine—another story for another time.

I was eligible for a week’s vacation and decided not to travel to Mexico by myself. A friend from Cornell who had come directly to Harvard for doctoral work invited me to visit her in Cambridge. I went to classes with her and other Cornellians I knew who had made that same decision...On one of the evenings we went to a party at the home of the Dean of HGSE...a very pleasant event which, along with a number of other factors, made me think that I should go to graduate school at that time. I went back to NY and applied. Within a week I was accepted!

The miracle was that Ted and Nancy (with whom I remained friendly until Ted died in 2009) is that their *au pere* was a corridor mate of ours at Cornell and when asked about me she said that I was worth the investment!

2. Ted and Nancy were smart enough to know that the local area superintendents would not be happy with the existence of “competition” especially from them, in the area. So they involved us in several meetings asking our opinion and cooperation.

Despite the fact that on my first visit I noticed that administrative protocols were not in place, the instruction was favorably developed...many adults in very small classes.

3. Also see the Spring 2009 issue of Perspectives for one look at the school