

What Matters Most

by Randi Weingarten
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It's Time to Take the Politics Out of Charter Schools

Some may be surprised to learn that the teachers' union was central to creating and popularizing the concept of charter schools. Indeed, it was the late Al Shanker, one of the UFT's legendary leaders, who fifteen years ago envisioned a public school that receives public funding, is open to all children, is free from state and district-imposed bureaucratic rules and regulations, and is held to the highest standards of accountability. The concept is not ideological. But sadly, the charter school movement has been, to a large degree, co-opted by ideologues who seek to use it as a vehicle to privatize public education and rid the schools of unions, claiming that the teachers' contract is to be blamed for all that is wrong in public education. As a result, teacher unions have been painted as enemies of reform and anti-charter school.

But once you drop the politically loaded language, the simple truth is that charter schools are meant to be centers of innovation for academic excellence — a way for educators, parents, concerned citizens and others to join forces and create school communities that strive for better ways of teaching and learning. They are, in their original concept, places in which all involved are encouraged to break out of the old factory model structure of schooling, while being held to the strictest accountability. And if a school is not making the grade, its charter should be revoked, because, simply put, failure is not an option when it comes to educating our children. This is a notion that many teachers and parents strongly support.

As some studies have shown, not all charter schools work and some of our best teachers are hesitant to work in them because they do not offer the support and collaboration of a unionized school. So the United Federation of Teachers embarked on a bold experiment. We wanted to see the debate over charter schools shift from politics back to best practices in education — just as Al Shanker intended. So we opened our own charter school. We wanted to demonstrate that a school that truly values its teachers, includes them in the decision making process and involves

parents could not only work, but also be a tremendous success. We wanted a school where the resources were directed into the classroom so we could reduce class size and really let our teachers respond to each child's individual needs. We wanted a school culture that valued community, respect, achievement and citizenship. And we hoped that by demonstrating real, quantifiable student achievement, we could finally dispel the misguided and simplistic notion that the union contract is an impediment to success. Working in a collaborative environment and belonging to a union enable teachers to try new approaches and take the risks necessary to succeed.

Initially, more than 600 teachers applied for twelve positions. This astonishing demand grew when we opened a secondary charter school in the same central Brooklyn neighborhood. And over the past two years, nearly 700 students have applied for 350 seats in both schools.



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Our staff, students and parents are working hard to make these schools a success. Early test results are promising. A greater percentage of our charter school students met reading standards than did children in the neighboring schools. Our model of smaller classes, individualized attention, a structured, rigorous and well-rounded curriculum, a collaborative relationship between management and teachers, parent participation and a strong commitment to community involvement is working. Not only are students learning at a high level, they are absorbing positive values from this supportive school environment.

Charter schools like the UFT's are just what Shanker had in mind when he suggested them. Developing these schools and transferring their practices to the larger public school system is a daunting task, but one that can be achieved with hard work, adequate resources and strong cooperation among the parents, teachers, administrators and the community. As we are showing in our schools, teacher unions not only can be a part of such reforms, we absolutely should be.