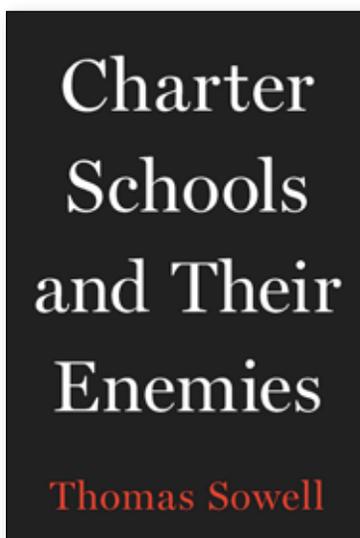


Enemies of Innovation

Thomas Sowell explains why even triumphant charter schools spark resistance

By Andy Smarick



The acclaimed economist and public intellectual Thomas Sowell has penned a short but forceful defense of charter schooling. The first two chapters (and 60 pages of data in the appendix!) make the case that charters in New York City are providing top-notch education to disadvantaged students. That should thrill social-justice activists, right? Alas, the rest of the book is the frustrating tale of why many of the people who ought to be embracing charters are instead resisting them.

Charter Schools and Their Enemies details the myriad ways opponents seek to undermine charters and, therefore, the educational options available to low-income families in America's cities. Nearly all of the maddening examples Sowell cites have been well documented and widely discussed for years. Yet the political attacks on charters haven't stopped, and policy obstacles continue to be placed in their path.

Seasoned donors and experienced education-reform advocates won't find much new in Sowell's book. He's not offering some novel understanding of the charter alternative or making fresh points about the role of pluralism and choice in schooling. What his book does provide is a highly readable primer on the political antagonism to chartering—which is never-ending, nearly 30 years after the advent in Minnesota of this educational inspiration.

Sowell does present the crucial arguments in a fresh structure. Plenty of scholarly books about charters walk through the academic literature on results. And plenty of case-study books present boots-on-the-ground reporting on a specific school or network. Sowell, however, takes a different tack. He focuses on politics and public policies—specifically, those that are detrimental to charter-school success. He shows how ideology and the self-interest of public officials drag down the national charter movement and complicate the local conditions that parents and school operators must navigate.

The book relies heavily on newspaper accounts of decisions made by state legislatures and district administrators, and how those decisions play out in real life. In less capable hands, this could easily turn into a book-length collection of anecdotes. But because Sowell ranks among today's most experienced and accomplished social analysts, the final product is a concise, coherent brief against the institutional opposition to school choice.

The book begins with Sowell's recollection of a dinner he attended in the early 1970s. A group of intellectuals wondered aloud what could be done to improve the educational outcomes of America's black students. Sowell explained to those assembled that they shouldn't treat this as a mystery, or imagine that successful approaches would have to be invented from scratch. They just had to look to the famous Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C.

A racially segregated all-black school from 1870 to 1955, Dunbar accomplished astonishing results. It produced America's first black federal judge, general, and cabinet member. It sent a higher percentage of students to college than the city's all-white high schools. The first three black women to earn Ph.D.s in America came from Dunbar.

Sowell returns throughout the book to what he sees as the lessons of Dunbar: First, we shouldn't see race, income, or I.Q. as destiny—the quality of schools matters a great deal. Second, disadvantaged populations, like others, need access to demanding, high-standard, high-performance schools. Third, the traditional “education reforms” of the last half century (more funding, busing, teacher credentialing) have not produced the results we need.

Sowell sees an important similarity between high-performing charters and Dunbar: Both prove great things are possible even in schools where students arrive with serious burdens. The key word, though, is “possible.” Just because something can be done does not mean it will be. Sowell acknowledges that plenty of charters don't excel. But just as the Wright Brothers' first plane didn't go very far, and lots of post-Kitty Hawk innovators failed, the viability of

Successful charter schools pose an uncomfortable question: Why aren't traditional school districts accomplishing the same?

The tragic cost of protecting ineffective incumbents: dimmer life-prospects for disadvantaged children.

powered flight was no longer in doubt after the events of December 17, 1903.

And many charter schools have unquestionably soared. Although this has been demonstrated in numerous studies, Sowell concocts a different way of proving the point. He identifies charter schools in New York City that are housed in the same building as a traditional public school, serving the same grade levels, and having similar student demographics. He then compares the student-achievement results of these co-located schools. This is not the empirical method generally used to assess charters (which utilizes the lottery-based admissions of over-subscribed charters to compare children from families that are similar in all ways except that some got lucky in the lottery while the others were unable to enroll in a charter). But Sowell's approach leads to the same conclusion—famous charter networks like Success Academies, KIPP, Achievement First, and Uncommon Schools are able to launch poor children of color into the academic stratosphere.

The obvious question, then, is, “Why don't we create more of these types of schools?” Hence the book's primary focus on charters' enemies.

Sowell explains why particular groups work relentlessly to stop the expansion of charter schooling: Most charters are non-unionized, charters take power away from government bureaucrats and hand it to parents and social entrepreneurs, children and the funds that follow them are redirected away from government-run schools when charters blossom. Perhaps the most important objection to charters from the educational establishment is that charters embarrass traditional school districts. By proving low-income, inner-city kids can achieve

at the highest levels, they pose an uncomfortable question: Why aren't you accomplishing the same? That, Sowell points out, is why the charters attacked most fiercely are those that perform best and have the longest waitlists, not the laggards who it would make more sense to criticize. Successful charters are a rebuke to teachers' unions, colleges of education, district leaders, and other institutional defenders of the traditional system—so those interests have declared war on them.

The aspect of Sowell's book that will be most interesting—and exasperating—to experts and novices alike is its detailing of the tactics used to constrain the growth and limit the effectiveness of great charter schools. Sowell pulls examples from California, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Detroit, New York, Tucson, and more to demonstrate that there is an anti-charter playbook which is implemented assiduously across the nation.

For example, new charter schools aren't given a building to operate in, so they have to secure space themselves. Charters are typically launched in cities where the flight of families has left lots of unused classrooms in public-school buildings. It would seem a no-brainer to allow charters to rent this empty space. But no. District administrators find countless ways to keep them out of those facilities, in order to slow charter growth.

A more direct anti-charter strategy is the legislated “cap.” In a number of states, opponents have pushed through laws that strictly limit the number of charter schools allowed to operate. Even when a charter network is popular with parents and successful on concrete measures of performance, it can be prohibited by law from expanding to serve more kids.

There are also policies that force charters to follow the same teacher-licensing rules as districts, even if such licensing rules aren't associated with improved student achievement. There are policies that allow districts to essentially veto an authorizer's approval of a new charter if the district believes that the new school could hurt the district's finances. Sowell quotes jaw-dropping statutory language from California that prohibits charters from suspending students who disrupt school activities or willfully defy their educators. It becomes clear that conventional public schools have found a remarkable array of strategies to encumber their competitors.

Any time government entities or businesses or nonprofits gain monopoly powers, poor performance and resistance to competitive pressure becomes common. Monopolists use all means at their disposal to fend off consumer alternatives. The tragedy when it comes to charters is that the cost of protecting ineffective incumbents is dimmed life-prospects for disadvantaged children.

Close to 8,000 charter schools have now taken root nationwide, serving over three million kids. In cities like Camden, Dayton, Detroit, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Newark, New Orleans, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C., more a third of all public-school students attend charters. Yet for nearly 30 years, charter schools have been under constant assault. And no matter how well they prove themselves, their opponents will never relent.

It's quite likely that charter operators, funders, and advocates will always have to battle through the opposition of jealous institutions. The big story of these inventive, mold-breaking schools isn't that they have enemies. The miracle is that their backers have been so determined, and their classrooms so resilient.

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