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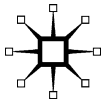
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CHARTER SCHOOLS
FROM REFORM IMAGERY TO REFORM REALITY

JEANNE M. POWERS

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To the teachers, parents, and
students at Hilltop Charter School,
Hearts and Hands Community School, and
Inspiration School.

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SERIES EDITORS' FOREWORD

Jeanne M. Powers's book *Charter Schools: From Reform Imagery to Reform Reality* is an important addition to research on charter schools, which for the most part has been ideological and often simplistic. The charter school debate, exemplified by the controversies surrounding the American Federation of Teachers study, which argued that traditional district schools outperform charter schools, revolved around methodological issues concerning research design, selection bias, and other empirical questions. Although these methodological debates are crucial to understanding differences between charter schools and district schools, too often these discussions have been driven by ideological rather than social scientific criteria. Moreover, these discussions usually define success by student and school achievement data, without analyzing the historical, sociological, and organizational contexts of different types of schools.

Powers has provided a corrective to much of this literature through a detailed analysis of the ways in which organizational context, school processes, philosophy, and mission affect the ways in which charter schools function. More importantly, she demonstrates how tensions between mission, capacity, and implementation provide keys to understanding the ways in which charter schools develop and to what degree they are able to implement their goals.

Through detailed and theoretically and methodologically rigorous case studies of three different types of charter schools, Powers demonstrates the complexities of charter school reform. She reminds us that school reform is locally situated and that charter schools, like district public schools, are not monolithic, but rather must be understood in relation to their specific organizational contexts. Nonetheless, drawing upon her rich ethnographic insights, she teases out a number of important themes that these schools have in common.

Powers uses a variety of existing data on charter schools to provide a larger context for her case studies. Her book supports previous research that shows charter schools are similar to district public schools, as there are excellent ones, good ones, mediocre ones, and truly abysmal ones. Her

conclusions indicate that the simplistic arguments on both sides of the charter school debate—for advocates that charter schools, freed from the bureaucratic constraints of the district bureaucracy, are more effective in improving student achievement, especially for low-income children—for critics, that charter schools drain necessary resources from district schools, “cream” their best students and most involved families, and are part of a larger school choice movement to privatize education and weaken the power of teacher unions—are just that, inadequate analyses of far more complicated processes.

We are at a crossroads in educational reform, particularly in urban districts. We write this on the morning of the Presidential election. In the coming year, No Child Left Behind will be reauthorized in some form. Race- and social class-based achievement gaps that characterize urban schools and whose elimination has been an important goal of NCLB continue to be difficult to reduce. Numerous reforms, including standards-based reforms, school finance reforms, and continuing attempts to expand charter schools and voucher programs will continue to be points of contention about how to most effectively solve problems of educational inequality. As critics of school-based reform, such as Jean Anyon and David Berliner, correctly point out, such reforms will be limited in the absence of larger political and economic reforms. Nonetheless, as numerous studies demonstrate, teachers and schools can and do make a difference, and school level policy must also be a part of improving urban schools. This book reminds us of the complexities of school-based reforms and the differences between rhetoric and success. It is an important addition to the Palgrave Series on Urban Education, the literature on charter schools in particular and urban school reform in general.

ALAN R. SADOVNIK AND SUSAN F. SEMEL

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