

RESEARCH REPORTS

Reviews of new research at public agencies and private institutions

“Charter Schools in Action: Renewing Public Education.”

Princeton University Press, 41 William St., Princeton, N.J. 08540-5237. 288 pp. \$27.95

Authors: *Chester E. Finn, Jr., Bruno V. Manno, and Gregg Vanourek*

A dozen years ago, “charter school” was just a phrase on the lips of the late Albert Shanker, the long-time head of the American Federation of Teachers. Today—despite, ironically, the opposition of teachers’ unions—that phrase has taken on a new reality, with more than 1,500 charter schools operating in 27 states and the District of Columbia. (By contrast, there are some 86,000 conventional public schools.) Finn, a Fellow at the Manhattan Institute and former assistant U.S. secretary of education, and his colleagues visited about 100 charter schools to assess their progress.

The concept is simple enough: A charter school is a public school that is exempt from most state and local regulations, and is accountable for “results” to a sponsoring public body, usually a state or local school board. Staff and students are recruited rather than assigned. “Almost anyone,” the authors note, can launch and run a charter school, from parent or teacher groups to community organizations. The typical charter runs for five years. It may not be renewed if goals aren’t met and can be revoked for legal or regulatory violations. By autumn 1998, 32 charter schools had shut down. Arizona, with 271 charter schools in operation, now leads the field, followed by California (158), Michigan (138), and Texas (114).

It’s too early to draw general conclusions, Finn and his colleagues note, but “of the sparse outcomes data we have today, most are positive.” A 1998 University of Minnesota study of 32 schools in eight states found that 21 had “improved achievement,” while the rest did not provide enough data to permit any conclusion. Though a 1999 study in Minnesota found that the proportions of charter pupils meeting graduation requirements for math and reading were far below statewide levels, Minnesota officials pointed out that half the charter pupils came from

economically disadvantaged backgrounds, twice the statewide proportion.

The authors saw a glimpse of the future at the Academy of the Pacific Rim, which debuted in Boston in 1997 with 100 sixth and seventh graders, mostly poor and minority. In its mission statement, the school (whose founders include several prominent Asian Americans) promises to educate “urban students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds . . . by combining the best of the East—high standards, discipline and character education—with the best of the West—a commitment to individualism, creativity, and diversity.”

Students take five hour-long core academic courses each day, and the school year lasts 210 days (compared with the usual 180). Though discipline is strict, the authors note, the school “treats parents as full partners in fostering character and good conduct.” Parents also must sign a contract promising to supervise their children’s work and take part in school activities. In the academy’s first year, sixth graders gained an average of 1.7 years in math and 0.7 years in English, and seventh graders, 1.7 years in math and 1.8 years in English.

While charter schools are to be judged by “results,” critics charge that there’s no consensus on how to measure them objectively. Finn and his colleagues concede that “promising accountability systems . . . are still few and far between,” and that some charter operators have exerted political pressure to keep standards down or avoid sanctions. But the solution, they believe, is not the kind of top-down regulation used in conventional schools, but transparency and community vigilance. It “will be no secret” if test scores are sagging or the curriculum is “weird,” they say, and the resulting pressure will force the school to change its ways or go out of business.

“Mexico Transforming.”

Pacific Council on International Policy, Los Angeles, Calif. 90089-0035. 44 pp.

Free. Available on-line at <http://www.pcip.org/pub/>

Mexico is a changed land these days, its politics less authoritarian, its media more independent, its economy more open. But in part because of these advances, crime has become widespread, and pervasive corruption more evident. If these and other “deep social problems” are not subdued, Mexico’s woes will only multiply, warns a bi-national, 58-member study group sponsored by the Pacific Council on International Policy.

Francisco Labastida, the victor in the first-ever primary of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), is likely to win the presidential election this July. But the political parties now compete on “a level playing field.” The two major opposition parties currently control the lower house of the Mexican Congress, which no longer acts as a rubber stamp. President Ernesto Zedillo has inaugurated a “less interventionist” presidency, but critics charge him with weakness and abdicating responsibility. The PRI “is more divided” than in the past.

“As power becomes increasingly decentralized, the presidency has gradually lost control over key levers of government, including the police,” the study group says. A crime wave has swept over many major cities. Mexico City now has more than two million reported crimes a year—and 98 percent “result in no action by the authorities.”

The drug trade brings more than \$7 billion a year into Mexico, which sends north up to 70 percent of U.S.-bound cocaine from South America. In 1995 Mexico had an estimated 900 armed criminal bands, more than half of them made up of current or former law enforcement agents. “Street crime, kidnappings, and killings by organized gangs of former policemen, protected by corrupt officials, leave Mexicans of all classes feeling helpless and outraged,” notes the study group. Mexico’s military increasingly has been asked to combat drugs and crime. “Mexico is on the move,” the study group concludes, “but its destination, indeed its destiny, remains open.”

“The True Size of Government.”

Brookings Institution Press, 1775 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036-2188.

223 pp. \$44.95; paper, \$18.95 Author: *Paul C. Light*

Is the era of big government over? It all depends on the meaning of *government*.

In 1996, when President Bill Clinton famously waved goodbye to the era of a supersized federal work force, there were about 1.9 million federal civil servants and 1.5 million men and women in uniform—a total of 3.4 million, which was about 900,000 fewer than in 1984. But remove the downsized Defense Department from the calculations, and the federal work force shows an *increase* of 60,000 over that period. Add in 145,000 new jobs at the independent U.S. Postal Service, and the increase is more than 200,000.

But that’s not the half of it, or even close, says Light, a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution. Consider all those folks who worked (in 1996) under federal contracts (5.6 million), federal grants (2.4

million), or federal mandates to state and local governments (4.6 million). Light tallies 12.7 million people in this “shadow of government.” Though the contracts-and-grants “shadow” shrank by 950,000 jobs between 1984 and 1996, he says, contraction of the military accounts for all of the change. If the Defense Department is taken out of the picture, then the “shadow” grows by 610,000.

“The federal government may be turning back the clock on the number of civil servants,” Light says, “but it continues to need a sizable shadow.” And when the two are considered together, “the illusion of smallness” disappears. Instead of trying to perpetuate it, Light suggests, the president and Congress should take up the question of how many of the 16-plus million “federal ‘producers’” should be kept “in-house.”