

How Did Charter Schools Lose Their Luster? Our Reporter Explains

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[Reader Center](#)|How Did Charter Schools Lose Their Luster? Our Reporter Explains

Eliza Shapiro, an education reporter, and Dodai Stewart, deputy editor of the Metro desk, recently discussed the backlash against charter schools with New York Times subscribers.



Image





A KIPP charter school in Harlem. The schools have been criticized for how they discipline students. Credit: CreditChang W. Lee/The New York Times

Charter schools were once hailed by supporters as a way to save public education in big urban districts. Founders presented them as a way to offer low-income minority families safe, orderly schools with rigorous academics, and they were embraced across the country as a hopeful alternative.

But charter school executives have recently started to acknowledge shortcomings, as questions about whether they are fulfilling their mission have mounted. Democratic presidential candidates have turned away from the charter movement. Last month, Gov. Andrew Cuomo said the New York State Legislature would not raise a cap on the number of charters in New York City, halting the growth of the model in the country's largest school system.

Eliza Shapiro, a New York City education reporter, and Dodai Stewart, deputy editor of the Metro desk, dialed into a conference call with New York Times subscribers on Thursday morning to discuss the backlash against charters. Ms. Shapiro discussed her recent article on the [changing attitudes toward charter schools](#) and what she discovered in her reporting. Read a lightly edited excerpt from their conversation, led by Ms. Stewart, here.

DODAI STEWART: How did this story come about and what was the reporting process like?

ELIZA SHAPIRO: I have been writing about charter schools in New York for the last six years. I had been hearing from some of my sources who run charter schools, work in charter schools, think about charter schools, that there had been sort of this sea change in how willing leaders of charters were to acknowledge shortcomings in their schools.

I decided to pick three charter networks: KIPP, which is a national network; Achievement First, which is a regional network; and Ascend, which is only in Brooklyn; and look at how those schools had been making changes in response to criticism from teachers, from parents, from students, and actually from elected officials all across New York.

When charters first came on the scene in New York, there was a lot of fanfare.

There was this pretty consistent narrative, at least in New York, that charter schools were saving public education; they were rescuing vulnerable kids. Then there was this tone shift to, "We're doing the best we can."

This had been stuff that had really been whispered about for years, but I felt only in the last few months was it really tumbling out into the open.

Discipline has always been central to the charter model, and maybe one of the biggest differences between a charter school and a regular public school. Why has that become such a big controversy?

Charters, at least in big cities, were created as alternatives to traditional district schools that parents often felt were unsafe. There was a real demand for schools, and there continues to be a huge demand for schools, that are more structured and are more rigid in their discipline. Schools in New York have gotten a lot safer since charters were opened in the late '90s.

But the question in the 20 years since has become: Has the focus on discipline gone too far? Is there a way that a school can be orderly without discipline that some stakeholders in the schools feel is punitive?

I was spending some time at a KIPP school in Harlem called KIPP Star. The principal of the middle school there is a black woman. We were talking about discipline. At this school, you have to wear your uniform shirt every single day. If you don't wear your specific uniform shirt, you get an infraction. There's a consequence. Basically, you get in trouble.

A kid came to her one day and said, "Listen, I know I've gotten in trouble for not wearing my uniform shirt every day, but my mom just started a new job. We don't have time to wash my one uniform shirt. That's the only shirt my mom can afford. Can you give me a break on this? We are struggling." This principal said, "Oh, my God. I realized we were punishing poverty." And very quickly, that specific rule was modified.