



REVIEW OF *A NEW FRONTIER: UTILIZING CHARTER SCHOOLING TO STRENGTHEN RURAL EDUCATION*

Reviewed By

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Summary of Review

Bellwether Education Partners published *A New Frontier: Utilizing Charter Schooling to Strengthen Rural Education* in 2014. According to the publication, nine of the nation's 10 most rurally populated states have no charter schools (in 8 of the 9, they are not permitted); a major purpose of the document is to argue for expanding charter schools into these states. While it is presented in a fashion similar to scholarly research, serious omissions and distortions make *New Frontier* little more than a political lobbying document targeting rural regions (even the most urbanized states have rural regions). Especially problematic are the inadequate support or explanation for *New Frontier's* premises and its presentation of superficial and misleading use of research, particularly rural education research. In the end, it is little more than an advocacy document with premises that predetermine its recommendations: how to establish more charter schools in rural regions. Missing research and slanted representations render the document useless as a source of objective information. *New Frontier* is propaganda—neither a thoughtful inquiry nor an honest report.

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REVIEW OF *A NEW FRONTIER: UTILIZING CHARTER SCHOOLING TO STRENGTHEN RURAL EDUCATION*

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I. Introduction

Bellwether Education Partners recently published *A New Frontier: Utilizing Charter Schooling to Strengthen Rural Education*¹ by Andrew Smarick,² one of the Bellwether “partners.” *New Frontier* is an advocacy piece that lobbies for the robust expansion of the chartering market into rural areas—especially (p. 2) for charter management organizations (CMOs). The document is useful only to those who seek to expand charter schools into rural areas. *New Frontier*³ does not provide objective evidence to assist a reader in understanding the issues, and it will be harmful for busy readers comparatively uninformed on the issues—for example, many rural legislators and their staffers. Opening the still-closed rural “market” is the aim: *New Frontier* draws a special target on the backs of nine very rural states (ME, VT, WV, M, MT, SD, KY, AL, ND) for chartering. The *New Frontier* author has previously floated chartering proposals for the *urban* schooling market.⁴

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The *New Frontier* executive summary (pp. iv-v) highlights four policy recommendations:

- State-level policies need to change to open the rural charter market: existing policies tend to limit the expansion of charter schools to urban regions.
- States should relax credentialing requirements for charter-school teachers; this move will have disproportionate benefits for rural charters because recruiting qualified teachers in rural schools is already difficult.
- States should adopt policies that provide substantial funding for rural charters’ capital and transportation needs. These are real problems for regular rural schools.
- Because charter schools tend to be small, and rural populations thin, Internet-based teaching provisions and policies should be adopted.

The final page also frames five directives for policymakers (p. 29):

- (1) replace barriers to growth with smart, flexible policies;
- (2) provide “flexibility from” (sic) teacher-certification rules;
- (3) provide fair funding;
- (4) make facilities accessible, and
- (5) leverage technology.

III. The Report’s Rationale for Its Recommendations

The document provides no articulated rationale for its recommendations. Rather, it presents explicitly stated but unsupported claims that, if accepted, lead to the recommendations. Among these assertions (excerpted verbatim) are:

- Charters have the potential to serve as a hotbed of innovation for rural education in America (p. iii).
- Underserved city kids have greatly benefited from the options provided by charter schools, but disadvantaged rural kids seldom have the same opportunity (p. 1).
- Student achievement results in our nation’s most remote areas look very similar to those in our inner cities—heartbreakingly low (p. iv).
- There are many reasons to believe that if chartering is done smartly, it can help even more rural areas (p. iv).
- We know that chartering can be a useful tool for rural families that want access to high quality schools (p. 2).
- Charter schools can do good things for rural students and their communities. They can preserve and rejuvenate the areas they serve and provide a great education to many students (p. 6).

Each of these claims either has mixed research support or is completely lacking in support. Though unpacking each of these is well beyond the scope of this review, the point about “heartbreakingly-low” overall achievement in rural schools is entirely misleading, even just plain wrong.⁵

Based on this set of unsupported assertions, the implicit underlying rationale could be stated as:

- Charter schools benefit American children, especially poor children.
- A free-market would open all areas of the nation to this benefit.

- Laws and regulations must change to open the market in rural areas to chartering.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

While the references cited are extensive (and even include this reviewer), the narrative employs very little peer-reviewed research. The use of copious endnotes creates the appearance of scholarly work, but the appearance is misleading. Indeed, the narrative relies mainly on demographic statistics about rural states and self-interested foundation reports. Absent entirely is real engagement with the substantial body of peer-reviewed research on the efficacy and cost-effectiveness of charter schools as a reform strategy. For example, an extensive body of empirical research casts strong doubt on the assertion that charter schools offer any significant benefits over traditional schools.⁶ Students in charter schools do no better or worse than public schools on average⁷—even though, like private schools, they operate schools that are far smaller.⁸

With respect to rural schools and communities, the engagement with peer-reviewed research literature is even thinner. No reference is made to any peer-reviewed empirical research in rural education.⁹ Seven of the rural-related cites are from sources of tabular data, such as the Bureau of the Census. Others come from advocacy organizations or from the U.S. Department of Education.¹⁰ Two are newspaper articles.

As regards the use of research in supporting the recommendations, there is virtually none. This deficiency is consistent with the shrill advocacy purpose so evident in this propaganda document.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The methods employed by *New Frontier* are entirely rhetorical. The arguments turn on unstated assumptions that charter schools provide a positive outcome in all regards, that rural places constitute a closed market that needs to be opened, and that allowing chartering operators access to entire rural districts will “rejuvenate” (p. 6) rural communities. It advances these opinions without adequate examination of the research about either chartering or rural education. Attractively formatted and presented, it does not invite readers to question any of its embedded assumptions or commitments.

As a *rurally appropriate* argument, *New Frontier* is predictably weak. It focuses on common-sense surface issues that charter schools would confront in rural communities: thin tax bases, outmigration, consolidation, staffing, organizational scale, and community attachment. It then inserts charter schools as a universal and effective solution. Yet anyone familiar with the rural education literature would not find the arguments compelling. Such a person would not, for instance, seriously consider a charter school's innovation of the four-day week as being particularly innovative or helpful (p. 27). This practice surfaced at

least as far back as the energy crisis of the early 1970s and was much-described during the 1980s.¹¹

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The real question is whether *New Frontier* exhibits sufficient validity to support the expansion of chartering into rural areas. It does not. The document fails to make the case. Instead, from the rural perspective, *New Frontier* plies a very traditional trade: the export of generic schooling fads to rural places in the name of fixing supposed rural deficiencies.¹²

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

Because of its assumptions, omissions, and distortions, *New Frontier* obscures rather than illuminates the consideration of rural education. Its lack of understanding of the rural context renders it more harmful than helpful. Rural citizens, education leaders, legislators, and legislative staffers who seek to learn the advantages and disadvantages of chartering can consult accessible resources that are far more reliable and trustworthy.¹³ For those of us who actually live in rural places, the assumptions about the nature and quality of rural schools are not only inaccurate, they indicate little familiarity with and even less care for rural schools or communities.

Following *New Frontier*'s recommendations is far more likely to damage than to advance the public good in rural places, *but also elsewhere*. Expansion of chartering into rural communities is of concern to the sponsors for reasons that have nothing to do with rural life or community. The recommended chartering-friendly provisions for rural places include access to more public resources for charter schools, authorization to take over entire school districts, and the more wide-scale replacement of on-site teachers with virtual teachers. If such "improvements" take hold in rural places, the sponsors can later attempt to bring them to scale in cities and suburbs: where advocates also want them. *New Frontier* is part of an aggressive and well-funded political agenda to open rural markets thus far legally closed to chartering. Indeed, the most rural states quite literally are the final frontier for chartering.

Notes and References

1 Smarick, A. (2014, January). *A new frontier: Utilizing charter schooling to strengthen rural education*. Boise ID: Rural Opportunities Consortium of Idaho, J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation, and Bellwether Education Partners. Retrieved March 11, 2014, from <http://bellwethereducation.org/a-new-frontier-utilizing-charter-schooling-to-strengthen-rural-education/>.

2 See <http://bellwethereducation.org/people/team/#smarick>. Smarick has played prominent roles in organizations beyond those that sponsored *New Frontier*: the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, the American Enterprise Institute, and the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. He has served in several roles in federal and state administrations. He holds a masters degree in public policy.

3 The *frontier* metaphor is remarkable among chartering supporters; see, for instance:

Hill, P. (2013). *Frontiers of K12 reform options for Idaho*. Seattle, WA: Center for Reinventing Public Education;

Smarick, A. (2012). *The urban school system of the future: Applying the principles and lessons of chartering (New Frontiers in Education)*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

One of the Bellwether partners, Paul Hill (now among the ROCI advisors and task force members), writing in 2006 used the phrase for the domain covered by *New Frontier*: “Chartering’s new frontier...is the removal of barriers to scale and the development of mature charter sectors in key cities” (203). See:

Hill, P. (Ed.). (2006) *Charter schools against the odds: An assessment by the Hoover Institution’s Koret Task Force on K12 education*. Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution.

4 Smarick, A. (2012). *The urban school system of the future: Applying the principles and lessons of chartering (New Frontiers in Education)*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

One of the sponsoring organizations, the Idaho-based Albertson Foundation, is a strong advocate of chartering: it currently offers any new charter school in that state a \$250,000 grant to defray startup costs. Albertson is a family non-profit based in Idaho, the creation of the founders of the grocery chain of the same name, and is still managed by family members. See <http://www.jkaf.org/>.

Albertson Foundation. (2014). *Education choice: Charter school support program*. Boise, ID: Author. Retrieved March 11, 2014, from <http://www.jkaf.org/initiatives/education-choice/charter-school-support-program/>.

It is unclear whether or not one of the multi-site education management organizations would receive from Albertson a separate \$250K grant for each school.

5 See, for instance: Fan, X., & Chen, M. (1999). Academic achievement of rural school students: A multi-year comparison with their peers in suburban and urban schools. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 15 (31-46);

Howley, C. B., & Gunn, E. (2003). Research about mathematics achievement in the rural circumstance. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 18 (2), 86-95;

Lee, J. (2001). Interstate variation in the achievement of rural and nonrural students. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*.

As with any test-score distribution, rural scores vary substantially by classroom, school, district, and state. Moreover, the K12 national average also disguises lower test-scores for higher-level mathematics in rural

areas, possibly a result of more meager advanced course offerings or the nature of the aspirations of rural students for staying close to home and working locally. See:

Cogan, L., Schmidt, W., & Wiley, D. (2001). Who takes what math and in which track? Using TIMSS to characterize US students' eighth-grade mathematics learning opportunities. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 23(4), 323-341;

Burnell, B. (2003). The real-world aspirations of work-bound rural students. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 18(2), 104-113.

6 See, for instance, the following:

Betts, J.R., & Tang, Y.E. (2011). *The effect of charter schools on student achievement: A meta-analysis of the literature*. Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved October 31, 2013, from http://www.econ.ucsd.edu/~jbetts/Pub/A75%20pub_NCSRP_BettsTang_Oct11.pdf;

Lubienski, C. & Lubienski, S. (2006, January). *Charter, private, public schools and academic achievement: New evidence from NAEP mathematics data*. New York: National Center for the Study of Privatization of Education, Columbia University. Retrieved October 23, 2013, from <http://www.ncspe.org/readrel.php?set=pub&cat=126>;

MacIver, M.A. & MacIver, D. J. (2007). *Privatizing education in Philadelphia: Are educational management organizations improving student achievement?* NCSPE Occasional Paper 141. New York: National Center for the Study of Privatization, Columbia University.

7 For a recent summary of the research, see:

Miron, G. & Urschel, J. (2012). The impact of school choice reforms on student achievement. In G. Miron, K. Welner, P. Hinchey, and W. Mathis (eds.), *Exploring the School Choice Universe: Evidence and Recommendations*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publications.

NEPC has published assessments of this research; search by topic on the NEPC website for the ongoing accumulation (which at this date includes 24 research briefs, 14 policy briefs, and 2 legislative briefs on the two topics of (1) charter schools and (2) charter management organizations.

8 A body of research establishes the association between smaller schools and improved test-scores in impoverished locales; see, for instance:

Coladarci, T. (2006). School size, student achievement, and the “power rating” of poverty: Substantive finding or statistical artifact? *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 14(28). Retrieved March 11, 2014, from <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v14n28/>.

9 The omission is peculiar since all 32 years of research in the excellent *Journal of Research in Rural Education* is very easily accessed online.

10 Including a very brief synthesis written for ERIC by this reviewer: with two reference entries given “as cited in” from that synthesis (endnotes 86-88).

11 See, for instance:

Bauman, P. (1983). *The four-day school week* (Issuegram 14). Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States. Retrieved March 11, 2014, from ERIC database. (ED234502).

12 Ideas about rural places, ignored completely in *New Frontier* but well-represented in the rural education literature, would have improved the presentation. Two very useful volumes would have been:

Schafft, K., & Jackson, A. (2010). *Rural education for the twenty-first century: Identity, place, and community in a globalizing world*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press; and

Haas, T., & Nachtigal, P. (1998). *Place value: An educator's guide to good literature on rural lifeways, environments, and purposes of education*. Charleston, WV: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools Retrieved March 11, 2014, from ERIC database (ED420461).

- 13 Some are referenced in this review, but, again, many others are freely accessible on the NEPC website. NEPC has its own agenda in opposing chartering, but unlike many advocacy “think tanks” it does strive for objectivity and accuracy and not toward the manipulation and deception so evident in New Frontier.

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