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The Shifting Rhetoric of School Reform

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Some school reformers said it would never happen. But after spending nearly two decades launching thousands of charter schools to challenge traditional public school systems, the [Teach for America](#) generation of social entrepreneurs who poured out of the nation's best colleges bent on transforming urban education are now moving into leadership positions in the very school systems they sought to replace.

Not surprisingly, they're working hard to introduce a new performance-driven brand of public schooling into often-dysfunctional government bureaucracies. But they're also speaking candidly about the downsides of charter schools and openly questioning the reach of a charter-centric reform strategy—unlikely commentary from leading voices within the entrepreneurial wing of school reform even a few years ago.

This new reform rhetoric was on display recently at the annual summit of the [NewSchools Venture Fund](#), the non-profit venture philanthropy founded by Silicon Valley venture capital titans John Doerr and Brook Byers in the late 1990s to fuel reform-minded education start-ups, and the organization at the center of entrepreneurial school reform. Some 900 charter leaders and other reformers jammed the San Francisco Airport Marriott for a daylong policy-and-networking fest.

At the conference's opening plenary [Kaya Henderson](#), the well-regarded former Teach for America corps member who served as Michelle Rhee's deputy schools chancellor in Washington, D.C., before becoming the city's top educator last year, told the crowd that traditional school systems and not charter schools educate the most vulnerable students. "There is a subset of kids who cannot fill out a charter application," she said.

Many charter schools in Washington, where over 40 percent of the city's students attend the publicly funded but privately operated schools, push out students with disabilities and other challenges, she told a session on the "View from the Other Side: Entrepreneurs Running Systems." "We become the default" for such students, she said. "A lot of charters in our town don't want them," a charge often leveled by charter school critics but rarely by reformers themselves. Henderson's mission in Washington, she told a slightly confounded audience, is "to prove to people that you don't have to go outside of districts to get great schools."

Henderson wasn't alone in challenging charter schools at the NewSchools event. [Cami Anderson](#), a TFA graduate who was named superintendent of the Newark, N. J. school system last year, told the "View from the Other Side" crowd that she wants schools with the autonomy and strong sense of identify that the best charter school exhibit, part of a plan to turn the Newark school system into "a system of schools." But she warned that reformers shouldn't over-rely on charter schools. "Individual islands of excellence" aren't a sufficient strategy for large-scale reform, she said.

[Chris Barbic](#), who launched the successful [Yes Prep](#) charter school network in Houston after serving in TFA, and who now runs a group of failing Memphis public schools under a mandate from the Tennessee Department of Education, spoke openly of "bad actors" (low quality and unscrupulous charter operators) and "creaming" (charters drawing stronger students) in the charter sector.

What outsiders-on-the-inside like Barbic, Anderson, and Henderson say they want is partnerships with the charter sector that give high-quality charter operators a strategic role in school system reform efforts. Henderson, for example, reported that she's working with the charter school board in Washington as part of a master-planning effort to close failing schools and provide new educational options to underserved neighborhoods. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, once a major funder of charter school expansion, has launched a \$20-million program to promote such partnerships in Baltimore, Nashville, and about a dozen other metropolitan areas through "District-Charter Collaboration Compacts." In New Haven, for instance, charter school representatives are working with district officials to redesign the city's middle schools.

This is a far cry from the scorn that many education entrepreneurs have heaped on traditional school systems since the emergence of the charter school movement two decades ago. And while there are still plenty of reformers who would love to replace traditional school systems with thousands of additional independent charter schools (there are some 5,600 charters today serving 2 million students, about 4 percent of the public school population), the new roles and evolving rhetoric of several of today's leading education entrepreneurs are signals that school reform is heading in a different direction, one that could produce reform on a much larger scale.

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