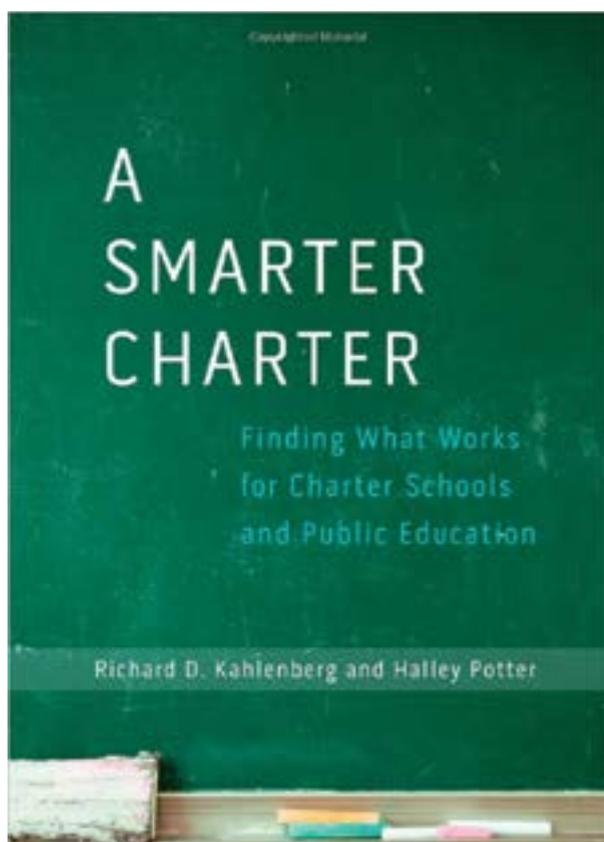


## BOOK REVIEW

# A Smarter Charter: Finding What Works for Charter Schools and Public Education

Reviewed by Jasmine M. Nguyen, BA



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In April of 1983, the United States Department of Education declared the country as a “nation at risk” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). American students were underperforming students from across the globe, college aptitude assessment results were on a steady decline since the early 1960s, and almost 40% of the nation’s seventeen-year old students were unable to make an inference from written text. This initiated a reform that called for an increase in government regulations in education. In 1988, Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) addressed the teachers of America with a proposal – a new school plan.

### Introduction

A Smarter Charter: finding what works for charter schools and public education, reiterates a call for education reform on behalf of two unwavering advocates who polish the original vision of the late president of the AFT, Albert Shanker, as it applies to both charter and public-school settings. Educators, researchers, policymakers, and students interested in the topic will find this resource a refreshing departure from the often-split charter school debates. The authors promote productive solutions to existing problems rather than simply scrutinize the mere existence of charter schools (Rizzolo, 2016). The details include examples of both charter school successes and failures, and readers gain insight from in-depth interviews with experts in the field as they discuss the context behind mechanisms successful charters are implementing. The authors propose that such insight could potentially address ongoing concerns across both charter and public education systems. Ultimately, the authors hope to instill a message of partnership amongst educators in the various settings, while addressing pressing issues

within the charter arena.

As esteemed fellows of the Century Foundation, a progressive think-tank, authors Richard Kahlenberg and Halley Potter display their knowledgeable backgrounds within the realm of charter schools by respectfully bringing us back to 1988, when Shanker made prominent waves in education reform by paving the way for charter schools. Distinguished by his various publications about democratic principles, school diversity, and labor rights, Kahlenberg is noted as “the intellectual father of the economic integration movement” and “chief proponent of class-based affirmative action in higher education admissions” (The Century Foundation, 2018). Potter, a summa cum laude graduate from Yale, includes her perspectives from first-hand experience as a charter school teacher in Washington D.C. A commendable read, the contents of the book are both informative and provocative. With this in mind, the reader must remain open to discourse around the current charter climate meant to stimulate meaningful discussion, even though it may not adequately articulate every issue recognizable by veteran educators.

### Critical Evaluation

The authors summarize Shanker’s new school plan through three primary attributes:

1. A “laboratory school” – to promote the experimentation of pedagogical practices that were not restricted by the complexities of learning (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2016, p. 1);
2. “Teacher Voice” – teacher-led unions should continue to empower teachers as significant contributors to the teaching and learning processes (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2016 p. 8);
3. Ethnic and Socioeconomic Diversity – the learning environment should be all inclusive and promote ethnic and socioeconomic diversity (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2016).

The original intent of Shanker’s school plan was to address the needs of students who struggled in the traditional educational setting. The charters were meant to be schools of choice for both teachers and students in the promotion of self-agency and self-attributed success. (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2016). Shanker’s charter school model has since grown yet dramatically shifted away from the principal attributes identified by the authors. Throughout the text, however, the authors echo his altruistic vision and remain optimistic. Kahlenberg and Potter provide a detailed overview of the three features before they delve into the disappointments Shanker observed towards the end of his advocacy. This recount is

detailed through descriptions of the ineffective practices found across the growing number of underperforming charter schools.

As their analysis unravels, the author criticism revolves around the impact of the complete removal of or forceful limitations posed on the existence of teacher-led unions in the charter school setting. Teachers were no longer empowered to support a laboratory model, and integration was no longer a priority. The authors’ focus on the loss of the laboratory model and exclusionary practices clearly validate Shanker’s shift against a new charter school movement towards privatization. There is, however, limited clarity behind the idea of choice – particularly why teachers would choose to work within a system that does little to promote innovative pedagogical practices, limits teacher empowerment, and promotes the exclusion of ethnic and socioeconomic diversity.

### Laboratory Model and Teacher Voice.

Shanker originally saw the combination of a laboratory or experimental model with the backing of a solid union as a unified force to advance collaborative efforts towards the growth of effective pedagogy. These efforts would not only involve charter school teachers but educators from all educational institutions, at various levels, with the soul intent to apply successful outcomes in the public sectors and improve public education nationwide. Once teacher-led unions were eliminated, however, non-union charters took advantage of selective hiring and firing processes that now left teachers at-will. These charters claimed that such practices allowed them to maintain the quality of teachers at their school sites. On the contrary, Shanker’s support of teacher-led unions was based on the need to ensure support for teachers in their endeavors to generate and foster new ideas that would have a direct impact on pedagogical practices in the classroom. He argued that the presence of a teacher-led union sanctioned negotiations to ensure fair wages, “reduced class size, more professional development, and strong discipline” that empowered teachers to work more creatively and productively (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2016, p. 22).

Kahlenberg and Potter reference data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics to support the fact that the majority of public school teachers belong to a union (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2016). Union membership ensures longevity to gain the experience necessary in the development of an effective teacher. In fact, the anti-union sentiment amongst newly established charters continues to bring reasonable opposition

from teacher-led unions within the public-school system. The impact of this opposition, however, has deterred collaborative efforts amongst educators within the charter and public-school systems, and this is what stunted Shanker's experimentation with creative learning in the laboratory school model.

The authors note that there is little research on the relationship between the presence of a teachers' union and student outcomes. They do, however, include context within case-studies of charter schools in Chicago and Washington D.C. to illustrate how unpleasant anti-union environments can be. In other words, without union backing, teachers were silenced, and an array of issues arose such as high teacher turnover, direct hostility from administrators, and inadequate pay. The new charter movement led to the eventual loss of the initial goal for teachers to have academic freedom to educate students through innovative means within experimental laboratory schools (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2016).

### **Racial and Socioeconomic Diversity.**

Kahlenberg and Potter also divulge the loss of integrated diversity within charter schools. They cite numerous studies and notable historical court cases that illustrate democratic ideals working to maintain the improvement of American education (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2016). Shanker's outspoken "democratic liberalism" took root during his upbringing in New York City public schools, where he attended alongside many immigrant classmates (Chenoweth, 2017). He argued that the new movement of commercialized charters pushed unwarranted agendas as they enhanced enrollment criteria that required parents to jump through several hoops just to enroll their children. Limitations based on religious affiliation, racial identification, or participation in a lottery system allowed charters to be more exclusive rather than inclusive (Shanker, 1988).

Charters are more frequently designed to be for-profit and privately funded. Although many publicly express an intent to reach out to underrepresented subgroups, most actually segregate students based on exclusionary enrollment requirements and/or mandated parent-volunteer commitments that charters endorse. Charters that do enroll higher percentages of underrepresented students experience what is commonly referred to as white flight. White flight is best known as a social phenomena wherein Caucasian groups relocate from an area usually based on its racial composition (Crowder and South, 2008). Kahlenberg and Potter point out trends of white flight in states like

Minnesota where significant statistical data indicated that "8.6% of charter schools did not report data on the number of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch in 2009-2010" (Kahlenberg & Potter 2016, p. 56). The concern suggests that a large number of charter schools may be purposefully not enrolling underrepresented student populations of in their areas.

Charters that do not integrate racially and/or socioeconomically diverse students pose the argument that "at-risk" or "niche" schools already exist for those who were oppressed or ignored in public schools (Kahlenberg & Potter 2016, pp. 18-19). One example of an ethnic niche-based charter is the chain of Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) schools. In their marketing, KIPP highlights having a "95% African-American or Latino student population" (Kahlenberg & Potter 2016, p. 21). While the authors respectfully praise these charters for positive intentions to serve underrepresented groups, they maintain that many are actually negatively encouraged by market-driven motives. Such motives are further enhanced by private sponsors who favor profit over student success and the fostering of quality educators.

Kahlenberg and Potter insist that, because students feed-in from various locations, "charter schools should not mechanically mirror the background residential segregation in neighborhoods; instead, they should aspire in most cases to reflect the socioeconomic and racial makeup of a metropolitan region" (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2016, p. 49). This would allow for the integration of a more diverse student population, and the authors provide evidence in support of the concept that higher rates of integrated diversity can lead to improvements in student achievement. This insight strengthens the authors' argument to wholeheartedly promote racial and socioeconomic diversity in all classrooms across the charter and public-school systems.

### **Summary**

Kahlenberg and Potter make reference to the Coleman Report of 1966, research by Douglas Harris (2007), and statistics from the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), amongst others, that each include findings in support of the positive impact of integrated schools. The authors highlighted a number of schools that were able to promote teacher voice and/or student diversity and pointed out a few that were succeeding at both. For example, at City Neighbors Charter School teachers

instill democratic values across the curriculum. At High Tech High teacher voice is supported through strong unionization, and student diversity is viewed as a cornerstone to improving student success rates in higher education and beyond (Kahlenberg & Potter 2016, p. 159). The latter half the of the book highlights continued efforts on the part of some charter schools

collaborative efforts led to the identification of recommendations to address student attentiveness, participation, and the effects of relationships with peers, educators, and loved ones (Morales, 2017). To improve student success within charter and public-school systems, the study served as a model on how to take-on responsibility for site-based faults and be proactively empathetic towards and accountable for the students and families that a school site serves. Overall, this book is a grand push and noble effort in support of collaboration across all school partners, public and private alike, throughout all levels of instruction. This thoughtful collection of information is valuable to those who wish to lend their time to promulgate strengthening the foundation of a progressively diverse public education system across the United States.

<p><b>Teacher Voice</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Amber Charter School</li> <li>2. Avalon School</li> <li>3. Green Dot Public Schools</li> <li>4. IDEAL School</li> <li>5. Minnesota New Country School</li> <li>6. Springfield Ball Charter School</li> </ol>
<p><b>Teacher Voice and Intentional Student Diversity</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. City Neighbors</li> <li>8. High Tech High</li> <li>9. Morris Jeff Community School</li> </ol>
<p><b>Intentional Student Diversity</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>10. Blackstone Valley Prep Mayoral Academy</li> <li>11. Capital City Public Charter School</li> <li>12. Community Roots Charter School</li> <li>13. DSST Public Schools</li> <li>14. E.I. Haynes Pubic Charter School</li> <li>15. Larchmont Charter School</li> </ol>

to exemplify the qualities of experimentation, teacher representation, and integration, which Shanker originally envisioned. The authors address these three features throughout the book, and they amplify the need to adopt these values within the currently existing charter schools and across public schools that have survived the numerous closures over the past two decades.

**Disciplinary Research Methods of Synthesis and analysis.**

Various profiles of fifteen charter schools are displayed in the appendices of the book as additional resources for analysis, but they are admittedly less detailed in the concrete processes behind their experiments:

Nevertheless, their success may be further supported by evidence of collaborative efforts to establish strong partnerships amongst educational entities – charter and public-school systems. In the case study of a partnership between an urban charter high school and an urban Northeastern university,

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