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Ky. coming late to battle for soul of charter schools movement

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By **Richard Day**

Around the time charter schools first began to appear in Minnesota, Kentucky was neck-deep in the Kentucky Education Reform Act, the most sweeping set of school reforms undertaken by any state at any one time.

As a result, there was little interest on the part of the legislature, or the press for that matter, in allowing Kentucky schools to veer from the KERA's path.

Everybody's hands were full. The new law was already being attacked from the right and supporters worried there might not be enough votes to sustain KERA in 1996.

Meanwhile, the Patton administration took the position that ""Kentucky is not ready for charter schools.""

The idea for charters began around 1988 with Albert Shanker, then president of the American Federation of Teachers. Shanker proposed that teachers who believed they had a better approach for helping the toughest students, ought to be able to get permission from their districts to try. Such experimental schools would directly target dropouts and likely dropouts.

The schools would be given a specific charter - a mission, if you will. Their successes would improve equity in the school system.

Since charter schools would experiment with new approaches, regulations governing curriculum and instruction would have to be waived. Any improvements that could be validated would be shared.

Thus, charter schools were seen as an effort to strengthen the public schools, not to make losers of them. That idea came later, and from others who were much less interested in the public schools' success.

While the American economy soared in the early 1990s, Bill Gates was becoming the world's richest man. To his credit, he made retirement plans that included spending 90 percent of his personal wealth by supporting important causes, including education.

The \$43 billion Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has spent hundreds of millions on public schools. The foundation's first effort - to make inner city high schools excellent by making them smaller - was an admitted failure. But undaunted, Gates nimbly moved on to new ideas, one of which was promoting charter schools.

As more charters arose, a new and more opportunistic breed of charter operator began to shift attention away from the original mission of improving the public schools while helping the least among us, to providing parents with public funds they could use to escape them both. Charter

schools were starting to resegregate as birds of a feather exercised school choice.

When Shanker first saw such developments, he renounced his own idea. He came to believe that charters, once established, turned into a form of privatization that was indistinguishable from vouchers and he began to fight against charters as a threat to public education.

Conservatives argued that charter schools provide ""school choice."" They claimed that the public schools were bad and - forgetting recent lessons from Wall Street - that deregulated competition was inherently good.

In Kentucky, the Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy Solutions went further, promoting the addition of vouchers, and the subtraction of the Kentucky Education Association.

Interestingly, BIPPS found an unlikely ally in the Rev. Jerry Stephenson and the equity-minded Kentucky Education Restoration Alliance.

Apparently fed up with certain persistently low-performing schools in Jefferson County, and perhaps lacking faith in Superintendent Sheldon Berman - who in 2004 sued to stop charters in Massachusetts - the Alliance sought to create better schools for inner-city kids and locked arms with BIPPS to promote charter schools.

Kentucky Education Commissioner Terry Holliday says that he is no great fan of charters, but supports them under the right circumstances and with sufficient community oversight. He has 175 million reasons to give them a try. But he wisely insists that all publicly supported schools, charter and otherwise, must be accountable for results.

Hoping to avoid the lax oversight that has existed in other states, Kentucky's HB 109 places primary oversight with the local school boards. But the bill fails to specify the conditions under which a charter might be granted. Gov. Steve Beshear is considering a special session to give the bill the public vetting it needs.

During a recent appearance at Eastern Kentucky University, Kati Haycock, president of the Education Trust, put the charter school issue into perspective. She told the audience that there are people in the charter world who want to make a difference for kids - and there are wonderful examples of charter schools.

But there are others in the charter movement who are just about freedom from regulations and whose results are worse than some of the worst traditional public schools.

""There is a battle going on for the soul of charter schools, she said. ""It is very important who wins that battle.""

Richard Day is a former elementary school principal who writes a blog on educational issues.

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