



## Can Charter Schools be a Blessing?

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With Congress deadlocked in deep disagreement over our national debt, it was a surprise last month to see a charter school bill move out of Representative John Kline's (R, MN) House Committee on Education and the Workforce with strong bipartisan support. By a vote of 31-5 the committee passed the Empowering Parents through Quality Charter Schools Act (H.R. 2218). The bill in its current form expands current charter legislation and provides \$300 million in grants to open new charter schools or expand or replicate current charters schools. It also extends the period of time for charter grants from three to five years and encourages states to support charters that promote best practices and report academic results. Of course the bill must also be passed by the Senate and signed by the President, but the signs are there that this is likely to happen either as a standalone bill, or as part of a reauthorized Elementary Secondary Education Act.

Will charter schools provide fertile ground for the education of children that will be less contrary to what Christian parents want their children to learn than traditional public schools? The answer to this is a resounding, "It depends!"

Charter schools receive government funding. They operate under a contract, or charter, issued by either a local or state authorizing agency that defines their role. They are free, to some degree or another, depending on the state law authorizing the charters, from many of the restrictions imposed by state and local authorities on public schools. Since they receive public funding access to the schools must be open to all children, tuition free and comply with health, safety and non-discrimination provisions of law. They must also be nonsectarian and non-religious.

John Frame, Professor of Systematic Theology at reformed Theological Seminary, in an article [http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/2002Charterschools.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/2002Charterschools.htm) written to help Christian parents decide if Charter Schools can be a good choice for their children, analyzed some of the possibilities open to charters that are not available in typical public schools. Frame has plenty of concerns with Christian parents sending their children to any publicly supported school, but he did outline nine possible advantages that a charter school could offer Christian parents:

1. *"A charter school may have a largely Christian board and staff. Probably the school's charter may not include this as a requirement for leaders, but if a school is designed to attract Christian students, it will certainly also attract Christian board and staff members."*

2. *"The teaching and curriculum will be secular, of course. Christian textbooks will not be used. But the school can choose textbooks which do not oppose Christian teaching, which do not seek to brainwash students into becoming radical feminists, secularists, egalitarians, socialists, etc. Teachers also can present the material in ways that do not seek to tear down the values of the home. And the school can take strong positions against abortion, pre-marital sex, and so on."*
3. *"Charter schools can renounce the cult of self-esteem, which opposes academic standards and encourages social promotion."*
4. *"Charter schools are free to take a critical approach to the dominant values of society. They may show that the philosophies of the mainstream educational establishment (pragmatism, postmodernism, naturalism, secularism, liberalism, radical feminism) are intellectually and socially bankrupt. They can therefore destroy all these systems of belief in the minds of the children, leaving only one standing. That one still standing will be, of course, the Christian faith, though the school will not be able to make that point explicitly. But the school can make it implicitly, and very forcefully indeed."*
5. *"Charter schools are free to establish higher standards for classroom behavior and discipline than other public schools. Although the school may not say so explicitly, these standards may well be influenced by Scripture. ...Thus the school will establish better peer relationships among the students and a better learning environment than is possible in most secular schools."*
6. *"Charter schools may offer more flexible teaching hours than other public schools. Some may choose to hold classes only two days a week, enlisting the parents to teach the children at home for the other school days."*
7. *"This more flexible schedule also permits an explicitly Christian emphasis during the home schooling hours. ...For example, rather than trying to exclude the portion of a science curriculum which may require a parent to teach about evolution, the parent could teach about evolution and concurrently teach about creationism."*
8. *"Charter schools are free, and they provide textbooks for the students free of charge. This can be a great advantage to Christian parents. The textbooks purchased will, of course, be secular textbooks, not Christian ones."*
9. *"Charter schools can resist the tendency of the public school system to overreach its authority. They can work from inside the system to discourage attempts of school boards to persecute home schoolers and Christian private schools. They can be instruments of change toward greater educational pluralism in our society, toward ending the practical monopoly of state education."*

Many of these nine possible advantages for Christian parents would also be advantageous for Christian teachers. Teaching in a school where one could speak freely about failings of the

dominant secular culture and where higher standards of behavior are enforced would certainly be a welcome change for many Christian teachers.

However there is a big catch here – charters may adopt these nine standards, but then again they may not. It all depends on who is running the charter, what values they choose to promote and what the state authorizing statute permits. There are currently some 5,000 charter schools operating in the nation. They vary dramatically in terms of their mission statements and results. One does not hear many stories of charters that would be more “Christian friendly” than the local public school. The academic quality of charter schools also seems to be all over the map with some producing high test scores and others so-so results with the average test scores for charters right about the same level as the average public school. So for Christian parents and teachers shopping for a charter school the principle of caveat emperor, let the buyer beware, must be the watchword.

As more charters are allowed by states perhaps Christian teachers and administrators will step up to the plate to sponsor “Christian friendly” charter schools. This would be a welcome development that we would like to know about. If you know of such Charter schools or are interested in starting such a school it would be interesting to hear your thoughts on them. You can address your thoughts to your comments to [WashingtonWatch@ceai.org](mailto:WashingtonWatch@ceai.org).