

Lesson Learned

William Martin talks about how charter schools could fundamentally change the Texas education system.

Interview by Steve Thompson, August 2010

With almost one third of the students in the U.S. failing to graduate from high school, it isn't surprising that education experiments such as charter schools are gaining attention nationwide. Writer-at-large William Martin, who is an emeritus professor of sociology and senior fellow at the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy at Rice University, investigated the trend in Texas and discovered the answers to some fundamental questions, including whether charter schools are more successful than public schools, why some programs are being accused of encouraging Islam, and why charter schools may signal the beginning of an overhaul in the education system. Here's the story behind the story.

How did Harmony Science Academy in Houston become the focus of your piece?

Since my original intent was to write an article about the Harmony schools and that was the first of the schools, it was the obvious place to start. Early in the process, it became clear that I needed to address the larger questions regarding charter schools as compared with regular public schools, but I had always intended for Harmony to be the primary focus.

It seems as though HSA has been the gold standard for charter schools, but you described the building as somewhat run-down. What is the true spirit behind this school?

The Harmony schools are exceptional, but so are KIPP [Knowledge Is Power Program] and YES [Prep] and other schools mentioned in the article. They all deserve gold medals. I was fascinated by the Harmony schools because they are operated by Turkish Muslims, not alumni of Teach for America. The motivating spirit of all these schools is a conviction that it is possible to do a much better job of educating children, particularly economically disadvantaged children, than many public schools have been doing. Instead of giving up on these children, they set high standards and then provide a nurturing environment and the constant encouragement necessary to help children meet those standards. It isn't magic. It is just a continuing effort to figure out what works and put it into practice and insisting on "No Excuses!"

Why is it that charter schools teaching more economically disadvantaged students seem to do particularly well?

Again, it's not magic. The schools I've written about all insist on structure and order, vital to learning but not always present in the homes of such children. Another element is keeping close track of students to spot weaknesses and problems before they worsen. The home visits impress both students and their parents and show that the teacher and the school really care about them. This matters. Over the decades I taught at Rice, I made a point of learning the names of my students and a little about them as individuals. Few of them were disadvantaged, but again and again they told me how much it mattered to them just to know that I had made the effort even to learn their names. How much more that must be true with students who have seen schools from less supportive backgrounds and environments.

How valid is the argument that test scores at charter schools are higher because the students come from families that value education more?

Much research has shown that family environment is a crucial element in academic success. Obviously, students whose parents are interested enough to try to get them into a high-performing school have an advantage over students whose parents have little or no interest in their education. But, as I said in the article, the fact that these schools have waiting lists in the thousands indicates that many parents want more for their children than they are receiving in the regular public schools now available to them. Moreover, natural experiments such as the one principal Thaddeus Lott conducted at Houston's Mabel B. Wesley Elementary School several years ago showed that the approach used by the best of the charter schools could work across an entire school, regardless of parental interest.

You said that many public school teachers see charter schools as threatening to salary and job placement based on seniority. Aren't these aspects of public schools dangerous to the learning environment?

I'm not sure "danger" is the word, and I have great respect for the way unions have helped teachers obtain better salaries and more job security. But unions, like tenure for college professors, which I enjoyed for many years, can reduce incentive to improve, or even to maintain one's skill and effort. Greater flexibility in pay, geared to valid measures of performance, seems to me to be a good thing. Knowing that salaries will rise only in modest increments, pretty much regardless of performance, can dampen teachers' enthusiasm for improvement. I don't think it's wrong for veteran teachers to reap some benefits from years in the classroom—as a senior professor, I was able to have some influence over course schedule—but it's unfortunate when the least experienced, and sometimes least competent, teachers are assigned to the most challenging posts. It's hard to see that anyone benefits from that.

What other problems in public schools did you not find when visiting charter schools around Texas?

I can't generalize about all public schools or all charter schools. My children and grandchildren have been in public schools that were excellent and public schools that were inferior. Some of the private schools they attended have been better than other private schools. I purposely visited only charter schools that were reputed to be doing quite well, but, as noted in the article, most charter schools do not perform as well as most public schools. The really good ones, however, especially the ones serving poor minority children, appear to do significantly better than the regular public schools those children would otherwise attend.

What was the main difference you saw between charter schools and regular public schools?

Although regular public schools have some wonderfully qualified and dedicated teachers, research consistently shows that teachers are drawn disproportionately from the lower third of their college classes and that many teacher-education programs prepare teachers rather poorly, often concentrating more on methods than on substantive competence. My wife's undergraduate degree was in elementary education. At the time, many years ago, she noted that much of what she learned in the education courses that occupied much of her undergraduate education could have been covered in no more than a semester, perhaps no more than a course or two. The charter schools I visited had a higher number of teachers who had majored in college, and often in graduate school, in the substantive areas they were teaching. That can't help but be an advantage. It's worth noting, however, that a growing percentage of teachers in the regular public schools are obtaining alternative certificates, meaning they have majored in something besides education and have supplemented that with a modest number of educational theory and technique courses—which can be quite helpful to a new teacher. I see that as a positive development.

As an educator yourself (albeit higher education), how difficult was it to stay objective while working on this story?

Who can say for sure? As a sociologist and journalist, I try constantly to test my responses and impressions against whatever data are available and against the views of those who may disagree with me. I regard fairness as a cardinal virtue and strive for it. For this article, the aspect that concerned me most was not the relative merits of charter and public schools, but my relationship with many of the Turkish Muslims who operate the Harmony schools. As noted in the article, I have taken two trips to Turkey, largely at the expense of a Turkish Muslim group, the Institute of Interfaith Dialog, an organization that seeks to give Americans a positive view of Turkey and of the form of Islam they follow. I have also attended events sponsored by the Gülen Institute, a Houston organization that works to acquaint people with the teachings of Fethullah Gülen. These have included speeches by former Secretaries of State James A. Baker III and Madeleine Albright and former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. These organizations are separate from the Cosmos Foundation, but the leaders of both organizations know each other and cooperate with each other in various ways. I met Soner Tarim and learned about the Harmony schools as a result of my association with members of IID and the Gülen Institute. I am quite aware that some readers will suspect that my generally positive assessment of the Harmony schools is a kind of payback, conscious or unconscious, for benefits I have received and friendships I enjoy. People with good access to politicians, business figures, and entertainers face the same challenge. I would encourage anyone who questions what I have written to visit a Harmony school. I am confident they will be welcomed.

Was there anything you wanted to expand upon in your story but didn't have room for?

I just described one thing. Another key matter was the recent spate of articles, largely coming from three or four people and circulated widely, characterizing the Harmony schools as madrassas that are turning their students into Islamist extremists. This is both false and malicious, but not something that could be refuted in a paragraph or two.

I also wish there had been room to include my visits to the original KIPP academy in Houston and to Wimberley's Katherine Anne Porter School, a high school geared to "at-risk" students who have either dropped out or had serious academic or other problems for at least one semester at another school. I wrote some about KIPP, but had to omit KAP entirely, which I regret. It's a good story.

Another thing I'd like to mention is that Arthi Satyanarayan, a Rice senior working with me as an intern at the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy, visited several of the schools with me, spent a good bit of time at HSA-Houston, and offered observations and insights that helped me shape my understanding and perspective. She is a valuable assistant.

With President Obama asking states to raise the number of charter schools they allow, do you think there will be a significant change in the U.S. education system in the near future?

It is already having an impact. The schools founded by Geoffrey Canada as the foundation of the Harlem Children's Zone appear to be doing a remarkable job. Michelle Rhee's efforts in Washington, D.C., are drawing great attention to the problems of existing schools and the strengths and weaknesses of new approaches. The KIPP academies are widely praised for their success in city after city. In her new book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, educational historian Diane Ravitch raises a number of thoughtful criticisms of most charter schools—she does, however, explicitly praise KIPP—reminding us that educational fads have come and gone without producing the transformative results they had promised. As I noted in the conclusion of the article, it is unrealistic to expect charters to supplant regular public schools. But they can serve as models that point the way to improve the performance of all schools, public and private.

