

# Attack of 'The Blob'

Why are teachers unions and school boards trying to kill charter schools?

NEWSWEEK WEB EXCLUSIVE

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Nov. 27 — There's no silver bullet. That's what everyone in education says, and it's true. But certain types of schools are what might be called silver arrows in the quiver of reform. The charter school movement, which began ten years ago this fall with just one school in St. Paul, Minnesota, is quietly changing public education, especially in inner cities. With 2,400 such schools in 40 states, charters represent a workable and often inspiring form of public school choice. So of course mindless boards of education and reactionary teachers unions are trying to smear them.

THIS MONTH, for instance, the Illinois Board of Education released results showing that the state's 23 charter schools had performed no better than the state average on tests. But many of those charter schools are for troubled kids who fail in regular public school settings, so the comparisons are meaningless. That didn't stop the teachers unions in that state from telling the press that this was some kind of black eye for charter schools.

Charters don't always hit their target. More than 150 of them have been shut down, the victims of poor fiscal management or even criminality. Maybe you heard about the Los Angeles principal who took \$90,000 in taxpayer money meant for kids and used it to buy a sports car.

Forget the horror stories. Despite this year's Supreme Court decision legalizing them, vouchers are too toxic politically to have a real impact beyond talk TV. Charter schools, by contrast, go down much easier. They offer choice and healthy competition in a public setting.

## A MATTER OF CHOICE

The whole idea of "charter schools" is still confusing for most people (sort of like "fast-track authority" or "tort reform"), in part because the rules governing these independent public schools vary so much state by state. Basically we're talking about a genuine grassroots movement for small, non-religious, taxpayer-funded alternative schools. They're sponsored by idealistic educators, parents, non-profits, or businesses that win the freedom to try something different and avoid silly union work rules—all in exchange for accountability.

Instead of creaming the best students from the top, admission in most states is by lottery. More than half are in poor areas, where waiting lists are especially long.

The critics make sure you hear about the failures, but the successes receive less attention. Boston boasts the "Academy of the Pacific Rim" that gets some of the highest test scores in town using Asian instruction techniques with black kids; Mesa, Arizona, opened an Arts Academy in a Boys and Girls Club that has local gangs on the run and academic results surging. Whenever I visit Newark, New Jersey's North Star Academy I'm amazed by how much learning is going on. The level of enthusiasm and commitment by teachers and students is phenomenal.

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