

Charter Schools : Real Innovation or Empty Promises

By Bruce C. Ditata

While most media outlets incessantly trumpet the so-called "innovations" of charter schools and offer scant evidence, the bandwagon is overflowing with the tired clichés and empty rhetoric that privatization of our public school system charters will improve the quality of education.

The question is whether charters really do offer innovative curriculum and pedagogy or is the charter school model merely a placebo to a disgruntled populace.

As the estimable Dr. Leonard Roche, retired Principal of New Bedford's John B. Devalles School, once observed during the mid 1990s when full inclusion replaced tracking as school policy, what happens in education is often cyclical, and there is a tendency for changes to swing back and forth like a pendulum.

Currently, with a massive public relations campaign heralding the age of the charter school movement, the wisdom of career educators like Roche is often lost in the deluge of hype. More than a decade ago, the Wareham Middle School, a traditional public school on the Gateway to Cape Cod, earned plaudits as a national model for community service learning. What occurred there, in principle, is what the well-heeled public relations shills are proposing in numerous charters under the guise of "innovations."

Wareham was able to parlay grant money into community-based learning projects. Interdisciplinary units based upon MCAS-driven curriculum standards were implemented, and students traveled to work sites in the town. One of the projects was the construction of a platform at the town's recycling station. Students learned about the benefits of recycling, wrote reports, designed scale models of the platform, then under the supervision of town employees, built the actual platform.

Innovative, interdisciplinary "expeditionary" units with a "community service" component, therefore, are nothing new. For traditional public schools, like Wareham Middle School, to reprise the glory days of off-campus projects, it takes funding. With the emergence of charters and the potential drain of dollars once earmarked for other traditional public schools, the dilemma is where to earmark the funds — to the existing schools or to the trendy, new genre, i.e., the charter school.

This controversy continues to rage in educational forums across country, and many media outlets have already become the willing minions of those who would trumpet charters as something new and innovative, as a panacea for all that plagues public education. But are charter schools really offering pedagogies or strategies that are new or innovative? Or are their mission statements an effective sales pitch in a climate of anti-teacher, anti-union rancor designed to hook frustrated parents?

It is instructive to pay heed to the wisdom of experienced educators like the aforementioned Dr Roche as this rush to write off traditional public education moves into warp speed.

It might be just a pendulum that will correct its course, but at what cost to our educational system, now and in the future?

