

The Public Policy
and Civil Society

S E R I E S

CHARTERING IN KANSAS CITY

by Michael McShane



The R Street Institute's Public Policy and Civil Society Series is a collection of case studies that demonstrate how policy can be used to energize non-governmental bodies. Each report will spotlight how government leaders turned to a diverse array of individuals, community-based organizations, nonprofits and/or local businesses to solve a social challenge, which differs from the traditional approach of creating a new centralized initiative run by a government bureaucracy. In total, these studies show how a variety of policy tools—including reduced regulations, new enabling language, tax credits and competitive grant programs—can be used to activate non-governmental bodies, which create an array of solutions tailored to local conditions. We would like to thank the Walton Family Foundation for its support of this series.

FOREWORD

Dr. Michael McShane's study of charter schooling in Kansas City offers a host of insights about how a seemingly modest policy—in this case, a state law authorizing charter schools—can energize a city's social sector. McShane finds that chartering was the state's response to decades of government failure, namely, the ongoing inability of the local school district and then a federal court to fix the city's system of public education. Chartering, however, enabled civil society to take the wheel, making space for non-governmental public schools and then amplifying the power of local nonprofits, parent groups and philanthropists. Importantly, parts of the state law appear to have led to Kansas City's development of a large and diverse charter sector composed of homegrown operators, rather than those imported from other cities and states. This has led to a vibrant and politically stable sector of public education in a city that lacked one for entirely too long. This study demonstrates how smart government policy can unleash the energy of non-governmental actors.

— Andy Smarick



INTRODUCTION

The past forty years of public education in Kansas City can be described in one word: disenfranchisement. This is largely because a landmark school desegregation case put power—and billions of dollars—into the hands of a federal judge and lawyers who made decisions for the district in ways that alienated huge swathes of the population. The school board, which should represent the voices of the community, was marked by infighting, frequently clashing with superintendents and other school personnel. And, in more recent years, it has been a challenge to even hold a competitive election for those offices.

One happy anomaly has been Kansas City's charter school sector. Rather than frustrating the community, charter schools seem to have energized it. Unlike other cities with large numbers of outsider "Charter Management Organizations" (CMOs) that operate schools, almost all of Kansas City's charter schools are homegrown. To a remarkable degree, this has engaged the community in the reform of the city's system of public education and mobilized civil society in the 'Paris of the Plains.'

Today, charter schools enroll 47 percent of students within the boundaries of the Kansas City Public Schools.¹ There are 37 individual campuses, only two of which (KIPP and Citizens of the World) are run by non-Kansas City-native CMOs.² Even among those two, Citizens of the World was brought to Kansas City by a parent coalition attempting to solve a specific problem. So, how did Kansas City end up with one of the nation's largest charter school sectors—and a local, civil society-led charter sector at that?

¹ Rebecca Haessig, "Public Education within KCPS Boundaries," *Set the Schools Free*, February 2019.

² *Ibid.*



THE QUAGMIRE: PUBLIC EDUCATION IN KANSAS CITY

If you only read one book about the history of education in Kansas City, it should be Joshua Dunn's *Complex Justice: The Case of Missouri v. Jenkins*, which focuses on the massive desegregation case that forever reshaped the district and, in doing so, provides the historical context needed to understand public education in Kansas City.³

As Dunn outlines, once lauded as an example of peaceful integration in the years immediately post-*Brown v. Board of Education*, by the mid-1970s, the Kansas City Public School system was both racially segregated and educationally underperforming. Restrictive housing covenants exacerbated student segregation through residential assignment of schools. Two major teacher strikes in the 1970s (one in 1974 that lasted six weeks and one in 1977 that continued for seven) undermined confidence in the district and helped drive thousands of students into private schools and the outlying suburbs. Plentiful, inexpensive land on all sides of the city drove suburbanization as well, hollowing out the historic center of the city.⁴

In 1984, Judge Russell Clark ruled that the city was operating an unconstitutionally segregated school system. In so doing, he found that the physical plants of the school district had degraded to a point that was worse than anything he had ever seen in a prison. To remediate the situation, he allowed the lawyers for the school district to draft an ambitious (and expensive) school reform plan to integrate the district. Moreover, because of the U.S. Supreme Court's earlier decision in *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974), federal courts were prevented from requiring suburban school

³ Joshua Dunn, *Complex Justice: The Case of Missouri v. Jenkins* (University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

⁴ *Ibid.*

districts to participate in desegregation plans, such as forced bussing.⁵ So, Judge Clark attempted a different approach by requiring the district to spend billions of dollars on improvements designed to entice white families to return. As a direct result of Judge Clark's ruling, Kansas City had the state's smallest class sizes and highest teacher salaries and school facilities that were vastly overbuilt.⁶

The plan did not achieve its goals. The proportion of white students remained roughly constant the entire time the district was under the court order. The case was ultimately dismissed in 2003 by federal Judge Dean Whipple who wrote:

Despite the expenditure of vast sums, the prolonged oversight of a federal court and its appointees, the efforts of multiple parties, and the passage of 40 years since the end of official de jure segregation in Kansas City, Missouri, the KCMSD still struggles to provide an adequate education to its pupils.⁷

The district which, at its peak, enrolled 70,000 students was down to 30,000 by the time Judge Whipple took over the case. It now enrolls just over 14,000 students. In the last 20 years, KCPS has seen seven superintendents (by comparison it had 10 in its first 100 years of operation). The district was unaccredited between 1999 and 2001, provisionally accredited from 2001 until 2012, unaccredited from 2012-2014 and has been provisionally accredited since. It recently scored within range of full accreditation on the Missouri School Improvement Program (MSIP) rubric but needs action by the state board of education to have it fully granted.⁸

There is also a crisis of democratic legitimacy. In the 2016 school board elections, for example, the open, at-large seat was filled by the only person able to get the requisite number of signatures to appear on the ballot. None of the three zoned seats had any candidate secure the necessary signatures and were instead filled by write-in candidates.⁹ Kansas City did a bit better in 2019, with two competitive races, but four were filled automatically by the candidates who were able to get enough signatures and one was another contest of write-ins, since no one got enough signatures to make the ballot.¹⁰

⁵ Milliken v. Bradley, Cornell Legal Information Institute, last accessed Jan. 21, 2020.

⁶ See, e.g., Dunn.

⁷ Dunn, p. 173.

⁸ 41 Action News Staff, "KCPS sees improved performance scores, hits full accreditation range," KSHB, Feb. 1, 2019.

⁹ Maria Carter, "Kansas City School Board Results In, Finally," NPR, April 13, 2016.

¹⁰ Elle Moxley, "Seven of these candidates for school board will shape Kansas City Public's future," NPR, March 20, 2019.



KANSAS CITY'S CHARTERING SUCCESS

As the federal desegregation case limped into its final stages, the state of Missouri sought to prove to the judge overseeing the case that it had a plan to help Kansas City (and St. Louis, a city that had been part of similar legal oversight for some time). The judge had been repeatedly frustrated with the dysfunction of the school district so, taking a lesson from other states, Missouri considered whether *non-district* public schools could be the answer. And, as a result, charter schooling, which got its start in Minnesota seven years earlier and quickly spread to California, Michigan, Massachusetts and other locations, was authorized in the Show-Me State in 1998.¹¹

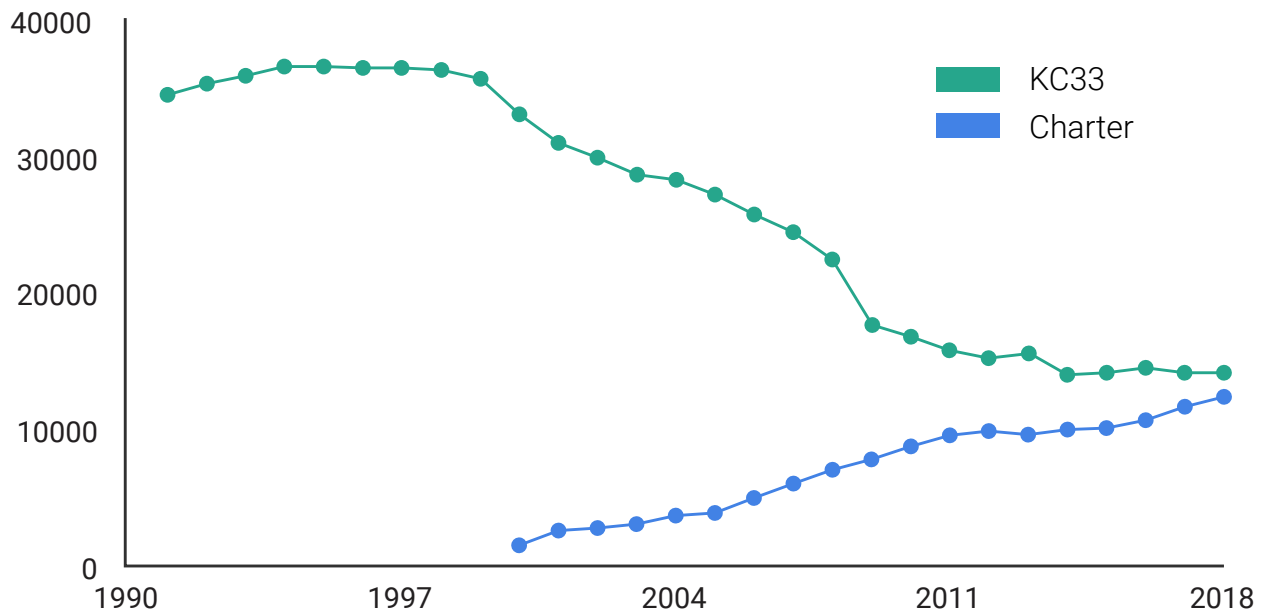
However, relative to other locations wherein chartering has gained steam, Missouri took a somewhat different approach. In many other states, charters operate with significant support from major national charter school networks—nonprofit Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) and for-profit Education Management organizations (EMOs). For example, 60 percent of charter schools in Texas are operated by a CMO or EMO network.¹² That number is 58 percent in Michigan, 54

¹¹ Douglas Thaman, "The History of Missouri's Charter Schools," Missouri Charter Public School Association, 2014.

¹² Ashley LiBetti et al., "The State of the Charter Sector: What You Need to Know About the Charter Sector Today," Bellwether Education Partners, January 2019.

percent in Ohio, and 51 percent in Illinois and Louisiana.¹³ However, most of Kansas City’s charter school growth (Figure 1 below) has occurred almost entirely without the support of major national charter school networks (more than 90 percent).¹⁴

FIGURE 1: Kansas City Public School Enrollment (District and Charter), 1990-present



SOURCE: [Missouri Dept. of Elementary and Secondary Education.](#)

There are many possible reasons for this. For starters, as a small city, Kansas City simply has a smaller local universe of potential teachers and school leaders from which to recruit. It would also have a harder time attracting highly effective educators from elsewhere when compared to larger cities like New York or Los Angeles. Both of these factors can inhibit CMO growth—before moving into a new region, national networks want to know that they will be able to acquire the human capital necessary to operate a set of schools. There are also potential explanations in the state’s charter school law. For example, statutory provisions have all but limited charter growth to the state’s two big cities (Kansas City and St. Louis).¹⁵ Without the ability to scale statewide, many CMOs would find Missouri a less appealing destination. The state’s

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “Missouri,” National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, last accessed Jan. 23, 2020.

authorization process also offers a possible answer. How charter schools come into existence varies from state to state. The “charter” in charter school is the agreement between a nonprofit school operator and an “authorizer,” an entity empowered by the state to oversee charter schools. In some states, only traditional school districts are allowed to authorize charter schools. In other states, it is the state department of education and in still others, an independent state-level charter board acts as the authorizer.

However, not being able to attract major national charter networks may have worked in Kansas City’s favor. CMOs and EMOs certainly have their strengths; for example, they are able to scale to a degree that small, single-site schools find all but impossible. And, several have developed powerful brands that are able to attract talented educators and major philanthropic support. But they also bring baggage. Often they are operated by leaders who are not from the community, which causes tension with the local population. In part, this is because their model was developed to solve particular problems in particular communities, and thus transplanting it to a new community might not always be a good fit.

Accordingly, Kansas City’s more locally focused, flexible model that grew organically out of civil society has very likely led to its success. In Missouri, charter schools can be authorized by local school districts, a relatively new state charter school board, and local colleges and universities. It is this last option that has been the most popular in Missouri. And, as a result, the state has a more decentralized chartering process than many others. Rather than going to a single board, which can possess its own biases in favor of particular models or providers, local institutions of higher education are able to listen to the needs of the community and respond accordingly. Given that Missouri has a more decentralized authorizing process, it should not be a surprise that it also has a greater variety of locally grown charter schools. Philanthropic leaders have also played a large role, as have social service organizations that have deep roots in the Kansas City community. Still others of more recent vintage have been the product of community and parent organizations.

As Robbyn Wahby, Executive Director of the Missouri Charter Public School Commission, explains, charter schools “let the community guide itself to what it needs.”¹⁶ In light of this, it is worth digging into the stories of several of these schools to demonstrate the outsized influence of the city’s civil society processes at work.

¹⁶ Author Interview with Robbyn Wahby (telephone), June 18, 2019.

LEVERAGING THE PHILANTHROPIC COMMUNITY: UNIVERSITY ACADEMY AND THE KAUFFMAN SCHOOL

Kansas City is blessed with several homegrown, civically minded businesspeople-turned-philanthropists. Many have chosen to support charter schools. The first major philanthropic investment came from a combination of the Bloch and Helzberg families (of H&R Bloch and Helzberg Diamonds, respectively), who collaborated to found University Academy in 2000. It was one of the first charter schools in Kansas City and has enjoyed great success: its lower, middle and upper schools serve almost 1,100 students that are 98, 95 and 96 percent African-American and 80, 74 and 67 percent low-income, respectively.¹⁷ It is regularly at the top of the school performance list on the state's Annual Performance Report and was named a National Blue Ribbon School in 2017.¹⁸

But the Blochs and Helzbergs were not the only notable Kansas Citians to get involved in charter schooling. Ewing Kauffman, who is the namesake of the city's massive performing arts center and the Royals' baseball stadium, left a multi-billion-dollar legacy foundation that is the largest philanthropic organization in the city. In 2011, the foundation started its own charter school, The Ewing Marion Kauffman School, which has become one of the highest performing—and most sought-after—schools in Kansas City. For its leader, the foundation recruited a Kansas City native and University of Missouri-Kansas City graduate, Hannah Lofthus, who participated in Teach for America in New York City, working with the highly successful Uncommon School network. As a result of Lofthus' efforts in Kansas City, the Kauffman School has a substantial waitlist at multiple grade levels.¹⁹

¹⁷ Rebecca Haessig, "Data," Set the Schools Free, last accessed Jan. 6, 2020.

¹⁸ University Academy, "UA Officials Travel to DC for Blue Ribbon Award," Press Release, last accessed Jan 6, 2020.

¹⁹ Joe Robertson, "In charter school lotteries, KC families play emotional game," Kansas City Star, March 13, 2016.



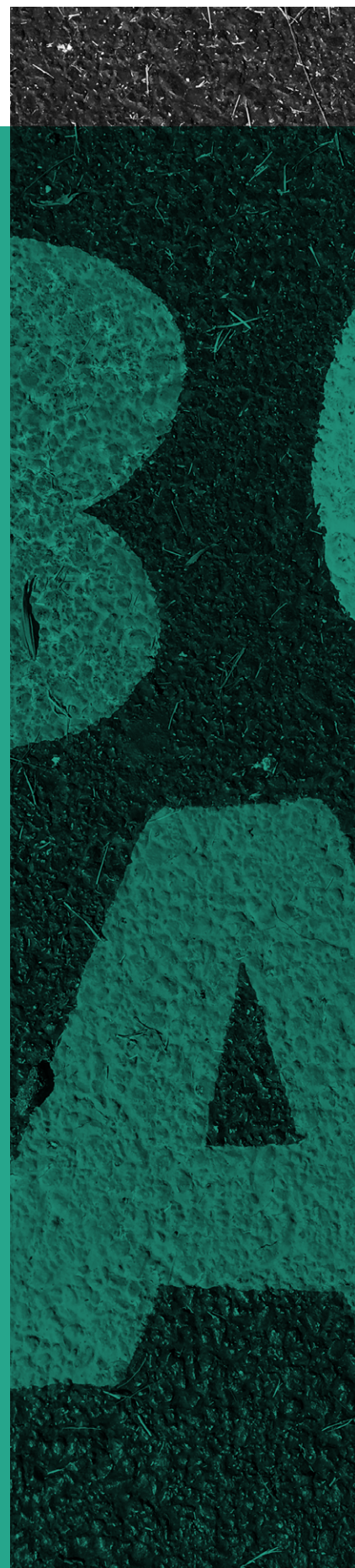
As of 2016-17, the high school portion of the school serves 78 percent African-American and 16 percent Hispanic students while the middle school serves 83 percent African-American and 6 percent Hispanic students.²⁰ In 2018, Mathematica Public Policy Research released a multi-year evaluation of the school and found that: “The Kauffman School’s impacts on achievement in mathematics and ELA three years after enrollment are larger than the average effects observed for other successful charter schools such as those in Boston, New York City, or the KIPP network.”²¹

This is an excellent example of how philanthropies can play a major role in civil society, as they play a dual role both as civil society institutions themselves and also as support providers for the tapestry of local nonprofit organizations. They can provide financial backing for groups that governments will not and can provide connection to social networks that populate boards and attract other support from politicians and influential community members.

In Kansas City, philanthropic support of charter schools has been a virtuous cycle. Early investments of both money and interest by families like the Blochs and the Helzbergs (and the Halls, of Hallmark cards) drew others to the cause of charter schooling. The imprimatur of the most successful entrepreneurs in the city made it safer for others to support charter schools, both financially and politically—to the benefit of thousands of children.

²⁰ Rebecca Haessig, “School Level Diversity, KCPs Boundaries,” Set the Schools Free, last accessed Jan. 6, 2020.

²¹ Matthew Johnson and Alicia Demers, “Ewing Marion Kauffman School Year 6 Impacts,” Mathematica Public Policy Research, June 2018.





THE GUADALUPE CENTER AND ALTA VISTA

The Guadalupe Center has been a Kansas City institution since 1919. Founded from a Catholic women's club to support the growing Mexican community that came to Kansas City in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution, it has provided education, healthcare and a host of other social services in one form or another for 100 years.²²

In 1989, the Guadalupe Center started Alta Vista High School, a private school focused on at-risk students. When the charter legislation was passed in 1998, it was one of the first schools to apply to become a charter school and converted to charter status for the 1999-2000 school year.²³ The organization's history and broad public support enabled its school to branch out in grade levels and to grow to one of the largest charter schools in the Kansas City area.²⁴ Its elementary, middle and high schools all serve populations that are more than 90 percent Hispanic and 90 percent low income.²⁵

Had Alexis de Tocqueville visited America in the twentieth century instead of the nineteenth and made his way to the Westside neighborhood in Kansas City, he might have written about the Guadalupe Center. It is the kind of organization that typifies the American civic culture he hailed: A geographically focused, voluntary organization formed by deep religious and ethnic ties to solve problems faced by a specific community.

The Kansas City charter school sector is richer for having tapped into that well of social capital. And, while it is true that, at times, the school has struggled with academic achievement, when it comes to actually representing the people that it serves and trying to connect with the traditions, values and customs of a huge part of the Kansas City community, the Guadalupe Center and Alta Vista are prime examples.

²² ["The Guadalupe Center," The Kansas City Public Library, Oct. 25, 2011.](#)

²³ [Ibid.](#)

²⁴ [Kenan Brown, "Alta Vista and Kansas City's Westside: Education and Community in Latinx Kansas City," Latinx KC, Spring 2017.](#)

²⁵ ["School Level Diversity, KCPs Boundaries."](#)

CITIZENS OF THE WORLD

As is the case in many cities across the country, some Kansas City residents are rethinking the massive urban sprawl that has defined the metropolitan area for the past several decades, and are returning to some of the city's beautiful historic neighborhoods. These are diverse communities both racially and socio-economically, and accordingly, they are working to decide what their schools should look like and do.

One answer is the Citizens of the World charter school, and how it came to be is a great example of civil society at work. Jacob Littrell is an architect who made an atypical move for someone with a young family, relocating from the Kansas suburbs to Midtown Kansas City. In doing so, he found there were a lot of families with young children looking for good schooling options.²⁶ As he met people around the community, he found many other people specifically looking for a diverse school that would “create quality seats for all students in our community.”²⁷

To meet this goal, Littrell helped start the Midtown Community Schools Initiative, an informal community group that put together a request for proposals outlining the type of school that various groups would like to see. Three groups responded: the Kansas City Public Schools, a local charter network and the Los Angeles-based Citizens of the World charter school network. After much debate and discussion, the group chose Citizens of the World and began the process of opening it as a charter school.

As an established charter management organization, Citizens of the World was able to provide a great deal of support with the drafting of the charter application and navigating the process overall. Citizens of the World launched as a diverse-by-design charter school in the fall of 2016 and has been growing in grade levels and enrollment since. The most recent data suggest that the backers have been successful in creating a diverse school: During the 2016-17 school year, it was 48 percent African-American, 11 percent Hispanic, 6 percent multi-racial and 34 percent white.²⁸ Its population also includes 10 percent English language learners, 8 percent students with special needs and 59 percent free and reduced-price lunch recipients.²⁹ In this instance, a community group reached outside of its own borders to find a partner eager to work together to help Kansas City students and families.

²⁶ Author interview with Jacob Littrell (telephone), June 11, 2019.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ “Data.”

²⁹ “School Level Diversity, KCPS Boundaries.”





TENSIONS, TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS

Although not every charter project has been a resounding success, even the less-happy stories can help to clarify the role of civil society and the potential for future improvement.

"UNITING" AT SOUTHWEST

The building that once housed Southwest High School sits prominently on Wornall road, a major thoroughfare through the upper-middle class Brookside neighborhood. At one time, it was a highly sought-after high school in Kansas City, with notable graduates including both Henry and Richard Bloch (who went on to found H&R Bloch), Nobel Prize-winning Chemist Richard Smalley and the journalist Calvin Trillin. It was closed in the late 1990s.

The building was later occupied by a charter school (that failed) and by a district-run, early-college high school (that failed as well). Recently, a civic group formed to reopen the school as a project-based, purposely diverse high school. They held meetings at local businesses and created yard signs calling for “Uniting at Southwest.” There was debate as to whether it should be a charter school, but since the district owned the building, there was reluctance to turn it over to a non-district operator. There was also a push for charter-like autonomy for a school within the school district, but those negotiations failed as well. The two sides were not able to come to an agreement, and the building still sits empty.³⁰

This proved to be an unfortunate example of the natural tension between the district and charter approaches to public school delivery. Although both the district leadership and the civil society entities wanted improved educational opportunities for the city’s students, they had different visions for how to bring that about. For example, the district would understandably see this individual school in the context of the district’s entire budget, its entire portfolio of schools and citywide politics, while community leaders might see this as a straightforward matter of allowing a hyper-local association of families to independently develop a public school that met their needs. Moreover, this story demonstrates the operational challenges of unwinding the generations-long position of the district system; that is, even if the state approves a community group to run a charter school and families want their children to attend, the district still owns the facility and can therefore decide to disallow the charter school’s use of it. In other words, the district was created to be the monopoly provider of public education in the city, and a number of policies (e.g. related to facilities and funding) make it difficult to transition to a decentralized, civil society-led system.

³⁰ [Uniting at Southwest, “Dr. Bedell Said No,” Press Release, last accessed Jan. 6, 2020.](#)



KANSAS CITY NEIGHBORHOOD ACADEMY

In 2016, the Urban Neighborhood Initiative (UNI), a nonprofit organization devoted to improving the health, education and prosperity of a section of the historically African-American east side of Kansas City, partnered with the Kansas City Public Schools to open the Kansas City Neighborhood Academy, a charter school. At the time, it was hailed as a great connection between a respected civil society organization and the school district, and promised a project-based STEAM school in a traditionally underserved part of the city.³¹ It elicited a \$1 million grant from the Kauffman Foundation and another \$600,000 from the Hall Family Foundation.³² The school was designed to be part of a “purpose-built community,” providing quality education, wraparound social services and mixed-income housing, all under the “quarterbacking” of UNI.

However, at the end of the 2018-19 school year, the school announced that it was closing its doors. UNI CEO Dianne Cleaver told the *Kansas City Star* that: “Despite vigorous efforts, we have struggled to meet our annual enrollment and budgetary goals” and noted that “slower than expected housing development around the school and the increasing number of (charter school) seats available in our city” posed “significant obstacles for KCNA” and “caused us to analyze the long-term sustainability of our school.”³³ It remains to be seen how the rest of the purpose-built community is going to pan out, but without the school at the center, UNI faces an uphill battle. Not all widely hailed civil society efforts succeed.

³¹ STEAM schools use an approach based in Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts and Mathematics.

³² Mará Rose Williams, “Kansas City Neighborhood Academy charter school gets a \$1.6 million boost,” *The Kansas City Star*, July 12, 2016.

³³ Mará Rose Williams, “It was not fair to the kids’: Here’s why two Kansas City charter schools are closing,” *The Kansas City Star*, March 28, 2019.



LESSONS LEARNED

Kansas City's experience with charter schooling offers three especially valuable lessons to those interested in using public policy to strengthen and energize civil society.

1

CHARTERING WAS NOT JUST AN OUTGROWTH, BUT A FORCE MULTIPLIER OF CIVIL SOCIETY.

Before the Guadalupe Center was able to run Alta Vista as a charter school, it could only educate a handful of students. Without the back-office support of Citizens of the World's network, the Midtown Community Schools Initiative would have had to navigate the state's chartering process on their own, delaying or potentially even scuttling the school before it ever had a chance to open. The Kauffman, Helzberg, Hall and Bloch families, and their associated foundations, have quite a bit of money, but not enough to operate large schools for thousands of low-income students entirely and indefinitely.

In all of these cases, the ability to access the funds that come with charter schooling extended the reach and power of organizations outside of the government sector. What was a small, but important, social service organization was able to build a multi-campus school serving more than 1,000 students. A plucky group of parents was able to find a building, hire staff and launch a new school model, serving not just their own children, but anyone who wants to attend. And now, thousands of children have been able to attend a high-performing charter school founded by philanthropists but sustained by public dollars. These are examples not just of partnership or outgrowth, but rather of a multiplier effect that allows civil society organizations to dramatically increase their reach.

For those looking to expand the influence of civil society organizations, the charter model offers a potential solution, and framing it as such when working with community organizations could be helpful. For those already sold on charter schooling, thinking about the number and types of organizations that are able to authorize schools can be helpful, as well. Vesting all of the chartering authority in a single authorizer can replicate some of the same anti-civil society tendencies of traditional school districts, and thus allowing for multiple authorizers can make charter schooling more bottom-up than top-down. Accordingly, rather than offering paeans to the free market, or decrying the woeful quality of existing schooling options, charter supporters should consider appealing to civil society organizations that want to scale-up and dramatically increase their reach.

2

ALL POLITICS IS LOCAL.

One of the political vulnerabilities of charter schools has been the perception in some quarters that charter schools are run by outsiders trying to impose their vision of good education or good society on someone else's community. This is particularly true when charter schools are part of large networks of schools run by a single charter management organization. It is also true that large CMOs can start

to look like the very thing that they are trying to replace. Rather than being nimble educator- and community-backed organizations, they are large, multi-city and multi-state organizations that develop their own bureaucracy and self-preservative instincts.

However, as discussed, Kansas City is home to very few CMOs, and CMOs like Citizens of the World only came on the scene after a careful, community-driven vetting process. This insulates charter schools in Kansas City from charges of outsider interference. Similarly, while it does not insulate charter schools from all criticism (an inevitable part of education politics), it creates a local constituency to rebut it. In community meetings, when someone makes an unfair generalization about charter schools, almost inevitably, someone will raise their hand and say “I teach at a charter school” or “I’m on the board of a charter school” or “My kids go to a charter school” and then explain why that point is wrong. That provides the real, grassroots support that educational projects need to succeed in the long term. And, the best way to ensure that kind of support is to focus on and engage local organizations and stakeholders whenever it is feasible and possible to do so.

3

INCOMMENSURATE VISIONS POSE A CHALLENGE.

While the first two lessons were positive, the third serves as a more cautionary note. Both at Southwest and at the Kansas City Neighborhood Academy, the individual schools were embedded in bigger systems; the KCPS in Southwest’s case and UNI in that of the Kansas City Neighborhood Academy.

Those hoping to unite at Southwest had a different approach to change than the school district. For historical and policy reasons, KCPS saw itself as the steward of the entire city’s system of public schooling. This led the community groups and the district to reach different conclusions about what was best for local students and families. And, while the district did re-open one elementary school in a catchment area that largely overlapped with the Southwest community, beyond

that, its efforts have failed to recruit en masse the upper-middle class community that left KCPS in the 1970s, 80s and 90s, as Judge Clark intended. Regardless of whether that's the right strategy, it does exert a repulsive force on many families in the community who believe their needs are not being met and their entreaties are not being accommodated.

Along these lines, we should appreciate that there is a conflict of visions between the district and the array of nonprofit community-based groups in the city. And that difference of worldviews leads to tension in politics and practice. The district is a longstanding, democratically controlled government body. It was created to serve—and did for generations—as the public-education monopoly in the city. It was designed to reflect the will of the majority, to own and operate all of Kansas City's public schools, to serve all of the city's public-school students and to maintain similar schools across its portfolio. But the charter model was created with pluralism and civil society in mind. It is premised on the expectation that families will want different types of schools and different types of nonprofits will be able to provide them. The district model and the charter model are, in a sense, incommensurate. They reflect different goals and methods and, as such, changes to the city's education landscape that are seen as ideal by one will be seen as utterly wrong to the other.

Advocates of civil society should be aware of this tension. Each of its entities will naturally seek to provide relatively narrow offerings to a relatively narrow community. But, in combination, the collection of civil society bodies will serve the larger geography. No single charter school can be all things to all students; but *chartering*—the system enabling a wide array of charters to serve as an expansive educational mosaic—can. That is a different worldview than that of the district, which was designed as a monopoly to provide a uniform education to all students.



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Although not every charter project has been a resounding success, even the less-happy stories can help to clarify the role of civil society and the potential for future improvement.

CONCLUSION

When charter schools came on the scene, schooling in Kansas City was in rough shape. The discouraging results of two decades of federal judicial management were felt by students and community members alike. Chartering was a break from that past.

Now more than 20 years later, the charter school system still has shortcomings. There are still not enough spaces available in good schools. Lower-quality charter schools are able to linger because parents lack better options. Similarly, some very disadvantaged neighborhoods do not have charters located in them, forcing their students to travel longer distances to attend a better school—if they can get in.

Charter schooling has not healed the rifts caused by segregation and *Missouri v. Jenkins* either. Kansas City remains a divided city, and—to a large extent—housing patterns still follow the boundaries of neighborhoods redlined by government officials or kept racially isolated by realtors, banks and homeowners' associations. Many citizens harbor distrust of government, schools and their neighbors.

But charter schooling in Kansas City has done two important things. First, it has opened more opportunities for more children to get a better education than they would have otherwise. If the trends at play in 1998 were to have continued apace, the district (and the city) would have continued to hemorrhage students, and fewer quality schools would exist. Second, and most important for our purposes here, charter schooling enlivened civil society in Kansas City in ways that previous educational initiatives had not. This is not to say that there were not schools or programs in the past with community support, but the depth and breadth of the support of the community that charter schools have seen is unparalleled in recent educational history in Kansas City. Hundreds of people serve on the boards of the nonprofit-run charter schools. Countless nonprofits support the work of these schools. Thousands of individuals teach and work in them. Tens of thousands send their children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews to them. All of this has occurred because the government-run system was unable to fix itself, even after a massive court-order remedial plan, and because a state policy (chartering) empowered civil society to devise a new response.

ABOUT R STREET

The R Street Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, public-policy research organization (“think tank”). Our mission is to engage in policy research and outreach to promote free markets and limited, effective government. In addition to our D.C. headquarters, we have offices in Georgia, Texas, Ohio, Massachusetts and California, covering the Southeast, Central, Midwest, Northeast and Western regions, respectively.

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