

Charter schools, the media, and the attack on public education in Chicago

On April 3, in a page one story, The New York Times reported that a small charter school in New York City was going out of business amid allegations about financial mismanagement and the loss of staff.

Despite attempts to provide only the brightest side of the story (none of those who view the school's demise as an example of outright corruption was quoted), The Times nevertheless had to admit that the charter picture was not as rosy as the zealous public relations claims of charter proponents make.

Even against a backdrop of teacher bashing and union-busting biases in the major media, the Times story ("Death of Bronx Charter School Holds Mirror to Wider Problem") came at a key moment. While the story was running, a fierce debate was taking place in the media and in the New York State Capitol in Albany over the expansion of charter schools in New York City. On the one hand, New York's billionaire Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg was demanding that the New York State Legislature expand the legal number of charters in New York City to 100. On the other hand, most New York Democrats and most unions were opposing the expansion.

In Chicago, despite widespread and persistent corruption and mismanagement in Chicago's charter schools, charter school supporters, including Chicago's ostensibly "Democratic" Mayor Richard M. Daley, don't have to worry about the major daily newspapers publishing negative news about charters. In Chicago, the major media take as articles of faith that Mayor Daley's "reforms" saved the public schools and that charter schools are a good thing. No need for investigations or evidence. Certain truths, like articles of religious faith, are self-evident.

The actual history of Chicago's charter schools is much more stormy, of course, but Chicago has never seen a front page news story admitting this fact.

As early as 1999, Chicago's charter schools were mired in corruption when the city reluctantly ended a charter on the city's far south side that had been operated by a former Daley staff member. A quick cover-up in the form of a "report" that was never released to the public ended public discussion on that topic.

As charter schools expanded in Chicago, problems expanded at least as fast. The demise of the Nuestro Americano charter school three years ago was just one example. More dramatic was the arrest of charter school principal Joseph Nurek in March 2004 on charges that ultimately ranged from being part of an international child pornography ring to having a live-in 13-year-old boy at his home. Nurek is still in federal custody, awaiting trial, but the charter school that he headed (Chicago International Charter, Belden Campus) continues, without even blushing.

The Nurek case got some public attention (although more in Michigan, where Nurek had worked before coming to Chicago, than in Chicago) when it was alleged that he was involved in international child porn. Somehow, the deregulation and lack of oversight of Chicago charters was left out of the reporting on Nurek.

The rapid expansion of Chicago charters since Mayor Daley proclaimed "Renaissance 2010" in July 2004 has been met with a cheerleading atmosphere in the press. Even obvious problems are ignored. The use of the prestigious name of the Illinois Math Science Academy by the "Chicago Math Science Academy" (clearly not in the same league) is no problem for Chicago's charter school cheerleaders. And the expansion of charters run by Latino allies of Mayor Daley (there are now three Aspira-run charter "campuses" on the north side and three UNO-run charter campuses on the near southwest side) is shrugged off by our colleagues in the media.

There are many dramatic examples of the bias we see in Chicago's reporting of charter news.

Three years ago, the Chicago Tribune virtually dictated a dubious "study" of the success of Chicago's charters by former charter schools chief Greg Richmond. In the study, Richmond found that Chicago charter school students did better than

students at neighboring public schools.

What Richmond left out of the study was that charters all require students to apply for admission and are allowed to kick out students who don't conform to various contractual rules. That made the true comparison the city's selective enrollment public schools and magnet schools — not the neighboring public schools, which are required by law to educate anyone who can prove residency.

Despite the lies at the heart of the Richmond study, that view of charters continues to guide both the editorializing and the reporting of the Chicago Tribune on Chicago charters. Like much of the early news reporting on the invasion of Iraq, the Tribune's news and opinions on charters are uniformly the same. Promoting charter schools as a self-evident good thing is the gospel at the Tribune Tower.

The problem was even seen this winter when the violence that resulted from the "Renaissance 2010" school closings (a prelude to charterization at Austin and Englewood high schools) was ignored by both the Tribune's editors and by its reporters.

And were Chicago's public schools to try a scam as transparent as the proliferation of "campuses" that has been used by Chicago's charter schools to evade a state law capping the number of charters in Chicago, the "corruption" of the activity would surely be front page news.

But the Tribune isn't alone in its benign view of Chicago charter schools. Despite the growing evidence that Chicago's charter schools are run in ways that would be pilloried were the same practices done in Chicago's public schools, the public only hears the propaganda about how good charters are.

One of the reasons why charters are given a free ride in Chicago's press is that they are part of the miracle story surrounding Mayor Daley and his time at the head of the city's public schools. The further into the miracle hoax we get, the more the major newspapers have invested in perpetuating the hoax they helped create.