

Upfront

Models of Participation **Do charter schools hold the key to responsive government?**

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COMPETITION

Models of Participation

Do charter schools hold the key to responsive government?

Even the smallest businesses know how important it is to listen to their customers. Yet in the public sector, after decades of efforts to reform government and promote greater citizen input, government ineffectiveness and insensitivity to public need still abounds. Can government ever be as attentive to citizens' needs as businesses are to consumer needs?

The answer to how public services can adopt a more democratic and inclusive decision-making attitude, writes Michael Mintrom, associate professor of political studies at the University of Auckland, may lie in the charter schools. His study, "Market Organizations and Deliberative Democracy: Choice and Voice in Public Service Delivery," was published last March in *Administration & Society* (vol. 35, no. 1).

Charter schools are designed to shake up the entrenched education system by competing with traditional public schools. Their funding is based upon enrollment, and is not guaranteed. They are market-driven organizations because they survive by competing to attract and retain students.

To investigate the extent to which charter schools can embody both market-driven and inclusive decision-making logics, Mintrom surveyed decision-making processes in schools in Michigan, which has the third-largest concentration of charter schools in the United States. He surveyed 101 charter school principals (out of the state's 138 schools) and 105 public school principals, who reported how decisions are made at their

schools. Mintrom compiled the list of practices reported and sent it to all participants, who then reported on which of the practices were used at their school and how long they had been in place.

The survey results found that decision making in charter schools is a more inclusive process than it is in traditional public schools. For example, the school board consulted parents on decisions in 25 percent of charter school cases, compared with 14 percent of traditional public school cases. The board consulted teachers in 28 percent of charter school cases (versus 11 percent) and consulted principals in 84 percent of cases (versus 18 percent).

Moreover, 68 percent of charter schools provided pre-enrollment interviews – another opportunity for parental input and discussion – versus 34 percent of traditional public schools. Eighty percent of charter schools surveyed parents about their expectations for their child's education, compared to 66 percent of traditional public schools. Indeed, charter school principals reported spending more hours per week with parents than did their public school counterparts. In return, parents more actively participate in charter schools. Twenty-six percent of parents regularly volunteer in the schools, compared to 20 percent of parents in traditional public schools. Seventy-six percent of parents attend parent-teacher conferences in charter schools versus only 70 percent in public schools. Finally, charter schools made

more efforts to maintain and encourage communication, including using parental "contracts" and promoting a "familylike atmosphere" between teachers.

To Mintrom, these results show that charter schools are more inclusive in their decision making. This model, he says, could potentially benefit "all organizations – whether public or private. ... Placing service providers in a competitive situation serves to greatly increase their incentives to solicit and listen to citizen voice." Certain caveats, however, are in order. Charter schools vary considerably in their organization and practices. For charter schools to represent a successful merger of market and citizen participation logics, leaders must understand the importance of the latter and market success must be tied to success in accomplishing it. Mintrom cautions against management companies running chains of charter schools that could lead to the "McDonaldization" of schools. Such centralized management could reduce community and parental participation.

The study concludes that "placing service providers in a competitive situation serves to greatly increase their incentives to solicit and listen to citizen voice. ... To this extent, it is possible for market organizations to serve as sites for development of deliberative democracy." –Andrew Nelson