



Stanford eCorner

Charter Schools - encourage diversity in the approach

Kim Smith, *New Schools Venture Fund*

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The charter school system allows the alignment of all the stakeholders: the board, the management, the teachers, and the kids, says Smith. They all are choosing to be part of this alternative system and therefore have a stake in its success.



Transcript

When charter schools began 10 years ago, they were looked at as a school site laboratory opportunity, so everyone can go start a school and figure out a neat new way to run a school. And some new innovations, some interesting innovations came from that. We look at charter schools as an opportunity for a systems level innovation, so if we know how to run a good classroom and run a good school, we don't know how to run a good system in communities that are severely disadvantaged. So how can we do that? Part of what charter school systems let us do is align all the stakeholders, the board, the management, the teachers, the kids. They're all choosing to be a part of a system that has a certain design and certain values, philosophy, approach, culture, etc. So I'm trying to think of how to answer the question about innovation. You know, one of our systems has multi-aged groupings and what's called looping where you have kids stay with they same teachers for a couple of years. That seems to help a lot to create a sense of stability for kids who are often living in pretty chaotic environments. Some of them use technology in new ways but fundamentally, our charter systems are less about a cool new thing in the classroom because I think we know a lot about what works in the classroom and they're more about making sure everybody is aligned so that whatever you are doing in the classroom, all your teachers actually want to be doing that. And if not, they should be somewhere else.

All your parents actually want their kids to be doing that and if not, they can go somewhere else. So it's a systems innovation to let people pick what model matches for them. And as a consequence, we have a pretty diverse portfolio. Our belief is on kind of school design and pedagogy, some kids and parents and teachers want totally project-based learning. Many of you in this room may want that. Other kids and parents want a really structured kind of Catholic school environment for lack of a better description. That's okay. They can have both. Just don't put one kid in the other environment because it's bad news and it's terrible for the teachers. So people get upset if they want a really structured environment and they're asked to be in a very low structure, whichever, if they're mismatched.

Our whole philosophy and hypothesis is let people match and everything will be much more effective. So I'm happy to talk to you more offline about specifics of the design because they do have some neat innovative community service stuff, lots of interesting stuff but the core is really about how you design and manage the whole system.