

Critical Education

Volume 6 Number 10 May 15, 2015 ISSN 1920-4125

Political Cartoons and the Framing of Charter School Reform

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Citation: Feuerstein, A. (2015). Political cartoons and the framing of charter school reform. *Critical Education*, 6(10). Retrieved from <http://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/criticalled/article/view/184931>

An article in the Critical Education series The Media and the Neoliberal Privatization of Education

Abstract

This study examines a number of political cartoons focused on various aspects of charter school reform. These images illustrate the ways in which political cartoons are able to tap into dominant cultural beliefs in order to call attention to particular issues often from a critical perspective. The paper unpacks the meaning embedded in these cartoons through the use of tools borrowed from both the study of semiotics and the field of visual rhetoric. With regard to semiotics, the study focuses on identifying the signs and symbols embedded within the images. With respect to visual rhetoric, the study focuses on the way the images condense and combine ideas, present opposing position, and seek to normalize or challenge particular perspectives. More generally, it uses political cartoons as a means to identify currents of opposition and possibilities for contestation in relation to the dominant direction of educational reform. In the case of charter school reform, political cartoons open up a discursive space for consideration and critique of new policies and their consequences. These cartoons provide access to a discourse that questions the benefits of charter school reform and stands in opposition to the neoliberal discourses now influencing educational policy.



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the Institute for Critical Educational Studies and housed at the University of British Columbia. Articles are indexed by EBSCO Education Research Complete and Directory of Open Access Journals.

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The news media can be understood as a collection of multiple arenas where various institutions, groups, and individuals struggle to strategically represent their interests in order to define reality in ways that they find beneficial (D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2009; Gamson & Stuart, 1992; Greenberg, 2002; Stone, 2012). Through these struggles, certain ideas or story lines emerge that provide meaning to ongoing events (Stone, 1989). These meanings are not necessarily linked to objective or empirical observations, but evolve over time as people talk, write about, and comment on the issue. This discursive process can be seen as a contest among various interests, each offering their own interpretation of events over time (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987). This contest often results in a prevailing storyline that is able to maintain its claims in the face of competing explanations. Analyzing discursive practices can provide insight into the ways that some events come to be defined as public problems that must be addressed, while others are ignored (Greenberg, 2002).

In education, most discourse analysis has focused on the examination of written and verbal interactions. Analysis of *visual* news discourse involving images, symbols, and other graphical forms, however, provides an additional data source for observing the social construction of public problems (Greenberg, 2002). In particular, political cartoons, which reflect efforts to ironize ongoing discourse through the use of satire and exaggeration, can provide powerful insights into the struggle over the re-definition of public values now taking place with respect to public education. By examining several political cartoons focused on charter schools, this study illustrates the power of visual discourse to tap into dominant cultural beliefs in ways that both reify particular understandings as natural or given, while also satirizing and challenging those beliefs. Such insight is important, given current efforts to reform public education in ways that appear to weaken the current commitment to universal public education in favor of privatization, markets, and business interests (Apple, 2006; Boyles, 2011; Giroux, 2012; Watkins, 2011).

Theoretical Framework

This project is situated within a constructionist framework that begins with the notion that the world, as perceived by individuals, is not “natural” but rather constituted through discourse, “as people talk it, write it, and argue about it” (Potter, 1996, p. 98). Within politics, Gamson (1989) similarly observes that there is a “political culture” surrounding various public policy issues that frames the issues and imparts particular meanings. He notes that media coverage of events or issues often have “a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 143). This story line, he argues, is the result an ongoing contest among various interests offering different “interpretive packages” or narratives that could be used to understand various issues and actions. These interpretative packages typically provide support for a particular set of social practices or arrangements, while challenging and critiquing others.

Determining how these interpretive packages shape consensus, or at least the appearance of consensus, around a set of preferred social arrangements is one of the aims of discourse analysis. For example, the idea that public schools are failed institutions that must be replaced with market-based alternatives appears to be a matter of consensus (Hursh, 2000). However, this oft repeated conclusion is more likely what Bourdieu (1998) referred to as the circulation of neoliberal discourse which he believed was the result of “a whole labor of symbolic inculcation

in which journalists and ordinary citizens participate passively and, above all, a certain number of intellectuals participate actively”(p. 29). Because discourse analysis examines the ways that verbal, written, and visual discourse is partially constitutive of social institutions and practices – institutions and practices that have implications for issues related to power, status, and the distribution of social goods – it is inherently critical and often referred to as critical discourse analysis (Gee, 2010). According to van Dijk (2008), critical discourse analysis is particularly important because it can help to reveal the ways in which power and domination are enacted, reproduced and legitimized.

Political cartoons, as a form of visual discourse, select and emphasize some aspects of perceived reality in ways that lead to particular interpretations (Entman, 1993; Greenberg, 2002). According to Greenberg (2002), “The visual image, its caption and the accompanying label or ‘punch line’ provide clues to the preferred meaning and the types of outcomes or consequences that the artist feels may legitimately result from the activity, issue or event being depicted” (p. 184). These depictions can be powerful when they resonate with existing systems of social relations within which political actors are situated and draw on deep seated assumptions, presuppositions, and beliefs (Haslanger, 2012). Political actors, including cartoon artists, draw on these deeply held suppositions in order to make their claims, which are often critical of particular individuals, actions, or issues. If the framing is successful, political arguments come to be viewed as unassailable, natural, and consistent with widespread popular consensus.

Using discourse analysis, it becomes possible to critically examine the ways that ideas about free enterprise, capitalism, efficiency, and choice have been used to frame particular issues (such as student performance in public schools) as social problems and certain institutional arrangements (such as charter schools) as preferred solutions. According to Nisbet (2009), this process, which gives “greater weight to certain considerations and elements over others” helps to shape the way readers understand the news, what is important, and what actions should be taken (p. 17). For example, in a previous empirical study, I found two dominant news frames in a sample of 161 news articles related to charter schools drawn from *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *The Philadelphia Inquirer* published between July 1, 2012 and June 30, 2013. One of these frames emphasized issues of *public accountability* with respect to resource allocation and administrative practices in charter schools, while the other emphasized *freedom, choice, and innovation* with regard to educational practices and the benefits thought to be associated with parental choice. I conclude that the ubiquitous nature of these frames in reports on charter schools “function[s] to shape the ways in which charter school issues are understood” as either entities in need of further regulation or as sites of innovation (Feuerstein, 2014). I also suggest that the pervasive use of these frames channels public perception in ways that deflect a more radical critique of the charter school concept.

Just as written news reports “frame” issues in particular ways in order to influence the interpretation of issues by readers, so too do political cartoons. In this sense, political cartoons related to charter schools do more than simply reflect or organize reality; they lead individuals toward particular problem definitions (Entman, 1993). This power to define aspects of reality comes from the ability to illuminate or conceal differences in social power in ways that can challenge or reify various forms of ideology.

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An analysis of political cartoons related to charter school reform promises to reveal aspects of the role they play in reinforcing “taken-for-granted” truths about public education as well as creating “new patterns of reference...to understand what is taking place” (Gamson & Herzog, 1999, p. 250). In this sense, political cartoons are teaching us new ways to “read” particular situations, often from the perspective of an outsider pointing out social inequalities and unjust power differentials (Lamb, 2007). As this paper will illustrate, political cartoons often stand apart from the mainstream consensus presented in the news itself, and offer possibilities for contestation in relation to the dominant direction of educational reform. It is the ability of political cartoons to confront those in power and to question current political events and policies that make them an important instrument in carrying out an ideological critique of educational reform (Edwards, 1997). In the case of charter school reform, political cartoons use a consistent set of rhetorical conventions to open up a discursive space for consideration and critique of current policies and their consequences. The cartoons analyzed in this study question the benefits of charter school reform and resist neoliberal currents within the educational policy discourse which seek to recast “citizens” as consumers and “political empowerment” as the ability to take advantage of market opportunities (Lipman, 2011, p. 11). This type of critique takes advantage of the incomplete nature of neoliberal hegemony which remains unpredictable, partial, and deeply contested (Brenner & Theodore, 2002)

Methodology

By examining the symbols and visual rhetoric used in several political cartoons about charter schools, this study provides insight into the meaning of these images and how they might be interpreted. Such an approach is warranted given that individual readers may react differently to various cartoons, some accepting the “preferred” reading, and others rejecting it, in whole or in part (Greenberg, 2002). According to Zimmerman (2009), understanding the social effects of visual images requires a critical approach that involves three fundamental elements. First, researchers must look carefully at the images in an effort to understand their composition and the potential effects of that composition. Second, researchers must consider the social conditions in which the images were produced and the way the images are used to influence readers’ understanding of a situation as desirable/undesirable, good/bad, etc. Finally, researchers must reflect on their reading of the image in terms of their own subjectivity.

With respect to this last point, Hall (1997) has emphasized the importance of acknowledging the interpretive nature of inquiry with respect to images. Hall (1997) notes that “equally plausible explanations for the meaning of an image can exist” and emphasizes that there is never “one, true meaning” of an image (p. 9). As such, he recommends that the best course is to “look again at the concrete example and try to justify one’s ‘reading’ in detail...” (Hall, p.9). Such reflection and analysis is meant to provide readers with the resources necessary to make their own judgments about the validity of a particular portrayal. With respect to images, this process typically involves taking elements of the image apart in order to understand how they work together and how they might be understood in relation to broader systems of meaning.

In this study, I have sought to follow Hall’s (1997) guidance in my interpretation of these images. In doing so, I have borrowed tools from both the study of semiotics and the field of visual rhetoric. With regard to semiotics, which emphasizes the interpretation of signs in order to unmask hidden ideologies that function to legitimate social inequality, I have focused on

identifying the signs and symbols embedded within the visual images and attempted to link these symbols or signifiers with the concepts or objects they seek to signify. Drawing on the work of Roland Barthes (1972), Rose (2001) notes that certain signs in visual images come to signify particular ideas or concepts. In turn, what is signified by those signs can be transferred to other signifiers. “When these transfers are successful” states Rose (2001), “certain objects become the objective correlates of certain qualities” (p. 90) and it is this transference that allows symbols to take on second level meanings that draw on cultural references. These symbolic linkages, most often studied in the field of advertising (Rose, 2001), can greatly influence the way an audience makes sense of what they see.

Images like political cartoons become meaningful because of their relationship to broader systems of ideas held by particular groups of people. These systems have sometimes been referred to as ‘codes’, ‘referent systems’ or ‘mythologies’, though each term has a different meaning (Rose, 2001). The first level of interpretation of the signs and symbols within an image can be straightforward because they are often descriptive. For example, in the context of the U.S., decoding the depiction of a small red building with a bell can be fairly straightforward because it invokes the image of a school. However, such an image may also carry greater meaning with respect to the dominant mythologies held by various groups of people. According to Zimmerman (2009), the context of the image of the red school house can link it with broader social values such as lost rural simplicity, single-teacher inefficiency, or democracy. If the context of an image favors a particular set of linkages, it is an example of “second level signification” (Rose, 2001). These second-level meanings function as “myth,” making them seem natural and obscuring the fact they are social constructions. Under these conditions, myth can also function as ideology by masking power differences and inequalities (Rose, 2001).

In addition to semiotics, I also draw on the field of visual rhetoric to make sense of the meaning embedded within the political cartoons chosen for the study. The study of visual rhetoric fits within the broader category of discourse analysis and uses many of the same tools and concepts typically used to analyze text. This form of analysis is particularly well-suited to political cartoons which often combine visual elements and text. As a part of the discourse analytic tradition, a central focus for this part of the analysis is the structure of the discourse and the type of knowledge or understanding it is likely to create (Rose, 2001). Potter (1996), who has studied conversation and written discourse, has focused on those elements that build up individual or institutional accounts of “reality” as “solid, factual, and independent of the speaker”(p. 97). Some of these elements include how things are described, how blame and responsibility are constructed, and how actions, objects, events, persons or groups are categorized (Potter, 1996). With respect to images, much emphasis has also been placed on the process of categorization and the ways in which social difference is constructed. Within a political cartoon, this means looking for clues regarding the status of figures depicted as insiders or outsiders, winners or losers, or as representing particular types of moral problems. This type of categorization is often accomplished within political cartoons through the use of humor or parody.

According to Edwards (1997) parody and satire are employed by cartoons to create an “ironic conversion” where “elevated persons with a claim to authority are literally put down or denigrated”(p. 24). Other actors who also experience this type of ironic conversion are often advocates or special interest groups, such as “[t]elevangelists, feminists, and members of the

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National Rifle Association” (p. 24) as well as the general public, which might be criticized for being apathetic or clueless with respect to important issues. Relatively few cartoons elevate their subjects; these typically occur in memorials to revered figures such as “Martin Luther King, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, puppeteer Jim Henson, or Jimmy Stewart by casting the subject in an honorific light” (p. 25). Echoing Potter’s (1996) emphasis on categorization, Edwards (1997) observes that in political cartoons, satire allows individuals to be “aligned symbolically with images of debauchery, evil, ridicule, inconsequentiality, and incompetence” (p. 26) in an effort to classify them in a particular way. Cuban (2013), an expert on school reform and a frequent educational blogger, has been collecting political cartoons on a variety of school related issues for several years. “Cartoonists” he states, “have the knack of getting to the basic point, albeit, with exaggeration, even caricature. Sometimes, they hit the bullseye and say what needs to be said even if it makes the reader wince” (Cuban, 2013, ¶1).

In addition to satire, Gombrich (1963) has explored the use of metaphor, synecdoche and metonymy in political cartoons. Metaphors are particularly powerful because they “bring together two parts of an equation – something as it is and is not – and joins them, not merely in juxtaposition but in consubstantiality. The identities, or selected features of identity, are merged so that a new meaning is effected” (Edwards, 1997, p. 29). In addition to metaphor, synecdoche (where a part of something is used to represent the whole) and metonymy (where an image or term comes to represent something else through association) are also used to create “new worlds of understanding” (Edwards, 1997, p. 8). Such worlds, by drawing on what is understood as familiar, are able to recast events “into imaginative settings, incongruous yet coherent” and create “a drama or story for acceptance as a viewpoint on the true nature of events” (Edwards, 1997, p. 8). As a result, such stories can shape the way individuals and groups come to understand an issue.

Similar to Gombrich (1963), Morris’s (1993) framework for studying the visual rhetoric of political cartoons provides guidance for analyzing visual images through an explanation of four primary rhetorical devices thought to “affect the contents, intended meanings and negotiated meaning of political cartoons” (Greenberg, 2002, p. 186-7). According to Morris (1993), these devices include:

- *Condensation* – “the compression of a complex phenomenon into a single image that is purported to capture its essence graphically.” (p. 200)
- *Combination* – “the blending of elements and ideas from different domains into a new composite that remains clearly identifiable as something that contains each of its constituents.” (p. 200)
- *Opposition* – the reduction of complex problems to dualities or binary struggle.
- *Domestication* – “the process by which abstract ideas and distant, unfamiliar persons or events are converted into something close, familiar, and concrete.” (p. 201)

These four elements further the social goals of the cartoon by creating excitement about a particular issue, as well as identifying its preferred causes, symptoms, and an ensuing course of action. These elements promote what Morris (1993) called “Vouloir” or the “promotion of the

desire for action by exciting an emotional response that is favorable...and that is sufficiently strong to overcome inertia, intellectual resistance, and pessimism about the efficacy of any proposed action” (Morris, 1993, p. 199).

Informed by the methods of both semiotics and visual rhetoric, I begin my analysis of the political cartoons selected for this study with a brief description of the denotive elements within the composition of each image. This description is meant to support the subsequent semiotic analysis, which seeks to identify and interpret the use of signifiers in the selected cartoons and the ways in which they support and draw on various myths or ideologies as described above. I also utilize the tools of visual rhetoric to identify the primary rhetorical devices used in the cartoons and the ways in which they are deployed to create meaning and motivate action. As part of this rhetorical analysis, I also examine what Greenberg (2002) calls “transference” or the way that blame is transferred ‘along a referential chain of signifiers within a particular image” (p. 187). Such an analysis promises to provide insight into the visual discourse of political cartoons and their ability to influence both thought and action.

Data Sources

Because this project is aimed at developing a stronger understanding of the way that political cartoons use images and symbols to frame charter school reform, the study employed a purposive sampling strategy that focused on an in-depth reading of a small number of political cartoons related to charter school reform.

To select these cartoons, I began with a broad web-based Google image search employing the terms “political cartoon” and “charter schools.” I also searched various syndicated cartoon websites such as *GoComics.com* and *Cagle.com*, which serve as repositories for political cartoons. These searches uncovered hundreds of possible images for analysis, though many were only tangentially related to the issue of charter schools. To narrow the sample further, I employed a purposeful strategy aimed at identifying images from both national and local newspapers that were published within the last five years and depicted charter school reform in ways consistent with the broader political discourse surrounding this issue.

With regard to this broader political discourse, I drew on findings from my earlier research on the framing of charter schools in the news (Feuerstein, 2014) to develop the initial criteria used to select images for analysis. As discussed earlier, this research identified two dominant frames used to characterize charter school reform in three national newspapers (*The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*). One frame emphasized *public accountability* issues related to charter school reform such as resource allocation and equity in access to high quality education, while the other focused on *freedom, choice, and innovation* and the educational benefits thought to be associated with the entrepreneurship, autonomy, and competition for students exhibited by charter schools (Feuerstien, 2014). Using these frames as a guide, I sought political cartoons consistent with these themes within the larger universe of charter school cartoons found on the web.

Through this winnowing process, I identified many political cartoons focused on *public accountability* concerns related to charter school reform, but I was unable to identify images that emphasized the benefits of *freedom, choice, and innovation* that many news stories associate

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with this type of reform. Similar to Edwards (1997) observation regarding the way political cartoons are frequently used to denigrate their subjects, educational researcher Larry Cuban (2012) also noted the challenge of finding political cartoons that emphasize the benefits of charter school reform. In his blog, which regularly features political cartoons about educational reform, he observed that “Of all the cartoons on charters that I found, every single one opposed them” (¶2). Emphasizing this point further, he noted that the images he did find, “hammered again and again the theme that charters are, at best, harmful to, and at worst, destroying public schools” (Cuban, 2012, ¶2). My experience searching for the political cartoons used in this study was consistent with Cuban’s and I provide several potential reasons for this lopsided (and mostly critical) depiction of charter schools in political cartoons in the conclusion of the paper.

Having identified images consistent with the *public accountability* frame, I selected six images that I believed had the potential shed light on the way that symbols and visual rhetoric are used to influence the political discourse surrounding charter school reform. The selected cartoons were featured in disparate geographical areas including Washington, DC, Georgia, Washington state, and Chicago. Each location has a unique charter school history and context that is relevant and useful in interpreting each cartoon. At the same time, because of syndication many of the cartoons reach audiences that go beyond the home location of the cartoon artists and it is not always possible to link the cartoons to specific events or places. This type of theoretical sampling supported my earlier stated goal of developing a stronger understanding of the way that political cartoons use images and symbols to frame charter school reform. My analysis of the images begins with an in-depth examination of the symbolic and rhetorical devices embedded within the cartoons and offers an interpretation of those elements, the range of possible readings these elements support, and a sense of the preferred reading of the image. The images selected, and analyzed below, are notable for their strong symbolic content and provide a starting point for the development of a framework that could be used in studies aimed at generalizing across a larger sample of political cartoons.

While a more comprehensive study of political cartoons aimed at revealing dominant depictions of charter school reform from a national sample of newspapers would be a welcome addition to the literature on discourse analysis and school reform, such an investigation goes beyond the scope of the present investigation and would require a much larger sample of images drawn from representative sample of newspaper over a specified time period. Edwards (1997), completed a study of this sort on the national presidential election of 1988 and collected over 2,500 political cartoons. Such a large sample made it possible to characterize the collective voice of this national media forum, but largely precluded the kind of close reading provided in this study.

Context of Charter School Reform

The cartoons analyzed for this study were published between 2010 and 2013 against a backdrop of demands for increased accountability and choice in public education. This period represents a window into the much longer debate about the merits of charter schools vs. traditional public schools, which began in the early 1980s and continues to the present. The following review of the changing context of charter school reform from the 1980s through the period from which the cartoons are drawn serves as a useful resource for understanding the meaning of the selected images.

Development of Charter Schools

According to Fabricant and Fine (2012), the concept of charter schools was developed in the 1980s as a response to what were perceived as overly bureaucratic urban public school systems that seemed unable to meet the needs of poor students and students of color. These original charters were developed to be spaces of innovation where educators would be able to provide greater individualized attention to students, and develop programs and curriculum better suited to their needs. As charter schools have grown in popularity, however, they have become more corporate in character, more driven by the demands of accountability, which have typically focused on raising student achievement on standardized tests, and have also focused on issues of efficiency and cost (Fabricant and Fine, 2012). This shift in emphasis can also be observed in traditional public schools, which face mounting pressure to increase student performance. In some ways, however, the pressure on charter schools to improve learning is even more intense because of the benefits presumed to accompany parental choice and the greater independence of charter schools with respect to traditional structures of educational governance.

According to Henig (2008), the growth in charter schools is related to a variety of factors, many of which revolve around the role of charter reform as a way to mobilize the public's interest in choice and competition as means for improving public education. In some ways, explains Henig (2008), charter schools are the legacy of earlier efforts to implement school voucher proposals which sought to provide tax monies directly to families so they could purchase private educational services in place of a traditional public education. Though voucher proposals met with failure in most cases, charters expanded the appeal of school choice beyond free-market Republicans to other more liberal groups interested in progressive educational ideas (Henig, 2008).

Support for Charter Schools

Many supporters of market-based solutions to educational problems believe that competition for students is the key to motivating educational innovation. In addition, they believe that competition will motivate traditional public school teachers and school administrators to work harder and more efficiently. This position has been strongly advanced by Caroline Hoxby and her colleagues who have studied effect of charter school on competition for students and achievement in New York City (Hoxby, Murarka, & Kang, 2009) as well as Michigan and Arizona (Hoxby, 2001). While such perspectives and the methodological foundations on which they are based have been effectively critiqued by other scholars (Mishel & Roy, 2005; Reardon, 2009; Welner, 2010), they are sometimes uncritically accepted by the mainstream press (McDonald, 2013). Beyond touting the benefits of competition, market reformers have also critiqued teachers unions and school administrators claiming that such professionals are unable to focus on the needs of the children in their schools because they are too busy worrying about their own pay and benefits (Moe, 2011). Calling the public system a "monopoly," supporters of market-based school reform models have argued that traditional districts should be broken up into collections of independent schools so that parents have the ability choose among the competing options (Boaz, 1991; Coulson, 2010; Henderson, 1993). By tapping into an increasingly popular neoliberal discourse about the value of choice and competition as the cornerstone of American prosperity (Goldstein, Macrine, & Chesky, 2011; Lipman, 2011; Wells, Slayton, & Scott, 2002), proponents of charter schools have effectively

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increased support for their development and adoption over time. Over half of Americans in the most recent Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup Poll indicated that they believe “students receive a better education at public charter schools than other public schools” (Bushaw & Lopez, 2013).

Criticism of Charter Schools

Despite its seeming popularity, the charter school movement has also drawn much criticism. For example, the growth in charter schools, and the concurrent closing of large numbers of public schools in many urban centers, has raised concerns about charter school quality, equity, and the impact of charter school growth on traditional public schools (e.g., New York had plans to close 23 schools at the beginning of the 2013 academic year, Washington D.C., 15, and Philadelphia, 23, respectively [Brown, 2013; Gonan & Reporter, 2012; Hurdle, 2013]). Such closings have been explained as the most rational way to cope with population decline and budget problems (Rethinking Schools, 2013). In some instances, however, these closings have created “educational deserts” where entire neighborhoods have been left without traditional public school options (Rethinking Schools, 2013). Beyond worries about the closing of public schools, it seems that charter school development has also had a negative impact on Catholic schools in urban areas. According to Lackman (2013), in the case of New York City, “One Catholic school has closed for every charter school that has opened” (p. 19). In addition to their impact on existing schools, other common areas of concern associated with charter schools have included academic quality, the treatment of students in charter schools, and disparities in funding between charter schools and public schools (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2013; Center for Research on Educational Outcomes, 2009; Curtis, 2011; Ellison, 2012; Fabricant & Fine, 2012; Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2013; Lipman, 2011). These areas of concern reveal considerable anxiety about the future of public education.

With respect to quality, typically operationalized as student performance on standardized measures of achievement, the most recent national study carried out in 2013 by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2013) found that 29% of charter schools in the study outperformed a traditional public school comparison group (on a test of math achievement) with the balance either performing about the same (40%) or worse (31%). An earlier study by the same group (CREDO, 2009) found that only 17% of charters had outperformed a similar traditional public school comparison group (on a test of math achievement), with the balance either performing about the same (46%) or worse (37%). Thus while there does seem to be some improvement in the performance of charters over the last several years, the general claim that all charters outperform traditional public schools is relatively weak.

In addition to quality, there have also been concerns about equity. Fabricant and Fine (2012) conducted a broad review of the research literature on charter schools and concluded that, “Every published study of charter admissions and recruitment documents underenrollment of English Language Learners and students in special education” (p. 38). Some of this can be blamed on admissions practices, which usually rely on applications, lotteries, and waiting lists and thus require large investments of time and effort by parents to become informed about potential choices. At the same time, there may also be subtle efforts to weed out certain types of students. According to Welner (2013), charter school officials may influence family choices by suggesting that those with unique educational needs, such as special education students or

English Language Learners, might be better served elsewhere. Additionally, charter schools overall are more racially segregated than traditional public schools (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2013, p. 131). This finding illustrates that poor and minority students are often bundled together in some charter schools, while White and middle class students might attend others. Segregation of this type remains a significant concern for those who value desegregated schools.

Beyond equity issues related to the make-up of the student body, there are also equity concerns related to school funding. As charter schools grow in popularity, funding for charter schools students and buildings has become an important issue. In most cases the per-pupil expenditure that would have been spent at a student's public school follows that student to the charter school. In some cases, charter school advocates have claimed that this amount does not adequately cover their space needs, and therefore is not comparable to the funds received by traditional public school students (Curtis, 2011). At the same time, critics of charter schools have voiced concerns about charters having a surplus of resources, particularly when the charter schools make heavy use of instructional technology in place of teachers, as some cyber charter schools do (Baker & Athon, 2013). Other critics have pointed back to the smaller numbers of special needs students enrolled in charters as an important difference in the kinds of students each type of institutions is expected to serve and the costs associated with these students (Fabricant & Fine, 2012). Similar concerns about increased segregation in charter schools have also been raised (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2013).

Charter Schools and Democratic Education

The growth of charters in the face of these concerns has created a generalized anxiety among public school supporters that charter schools may be displacing traditional public schools. While charters only represented about 3.6 percent of the school age enrollment in the 2010-11 academic year (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012), the most recent year for which data is available, there is concern about whether or not charters will be able to adequately support the foundations of American democracy. Theoretically, charter schools are capable of providing students with the knowledge and skills necessary to support future democratic participation (Feinberg, 2008).

For example, in 2010-11, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools reported that 12.3 percent of charters were run by for-profit Educational Management Organizations (EMOs) and 20.2 percent by non-profit Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) which also receive significant corporate sponsorship (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2013). According to Farrell, Wohlstetter, and Smith (2012), CMOs have grown rapidly in recent years, with much of that growth, "attributed to the infusion of foundation funding, which has been estimated at more than a half billion dollars" (p. 500). They also report that there is great diversity in the way these organizations run their schools. At one extreme, for example, The Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), which runs 47 elementary schools, 74 middle schools and 20 high schools (Knowledge is Power Program, n.d.), could be defined as a "franchise" where "schools share an instructional model and philosophy but are not directly managed by a central authority" (Farrell et al., 2012, p. 503). More typically, however, CMOs oversee "a modest number of schools relative to the districts in which they operate" (Farrell et al., 2012, p. 10). With respect to the largest for-profit management organizations (EMOs), Miron and Gulosino (2013) report that in the 2011-12 academic year Imagine Schools ran 89 schools, Academica 76,

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and National Heritage Academies ran 68 (p. ii). K12 Inc., which emphasizes virtual learning, also ran 57 schools with a total enrollment of 87,091 students (Miron & Gulosino, 2013, p. ii).

While there is much diversity in the way these organizations approach charter school education, some researchers have raised concerns regarding the prescriptiveness of some models. In this regard, Ellison (2012) has described the education in KIPP schools as being highly regimented and aimed at “subtly shaping and producing individuals that are economically productive and politically docile” (p. 570). Other concerns have focused on the growing number of virtual schools in the charter school sector where children are educated using offsite computers. K12 Inc., mentioned above, is the largest. According to Miron and Urschel (2012), the performance of students in K12 Inc. schools is quite poor. These authors report that “Only 27.7% of K12 Inc.’s schools met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in 2010-11.” (p. v). Such results underscore the lack of evidence regarding the effectiveness of virtual learning. Glass and Welner (2011) caution that, while there is some evidence that supplemental online learning can be beneficial, “there is no evidence from research that *full-time* virtual schooling at the K-12 level is an adequate replacement for traditional face-to-face teaching and learning” (p. 5). One might also question whether such schools, which fail to provide students with face-to-face opportunities to work collaboratively or interact with each other in meaningful ways, are able to teach their students to respect and value diversity, or more generally, to prepare children for life in our increasingly pluralistic and diverse democracy.

These concerns about the nature of education being provided by charter schools and the impact of charter schools on traditional public schools have fostered a great deal of debate on benefits and drawbacks associated with charter school reform. Both charter school advocates and supporters of traditional public schools have found themselves in a polarized political environment where there is no common understanding of the best ways to address problems within the current system of public education. The political cartoons analyzed below reflect this turbulent political environment and illustrate, through use of images and symbols, some of the ways in which the charter school concept has been interpreted, critiqued, and presented to the public.

Analysis of Political Cartoons

Having established the theoretical foundations of this investigation, explored the range of methodologies employed, and described the study’s data and its context, I now turn to the work of analyzing the editorial cartoons mentioned previously. To help with this process, I will examine each image sequentially and then discuss general patterns in the conclusion of the paper. As stated earlier, my goal is to describe the symbolic elements within each image and also to examine the rhetorical strategies at work, all with an eye toward identifying the preferred reading of the image. I have presented the selected images in chronological order.

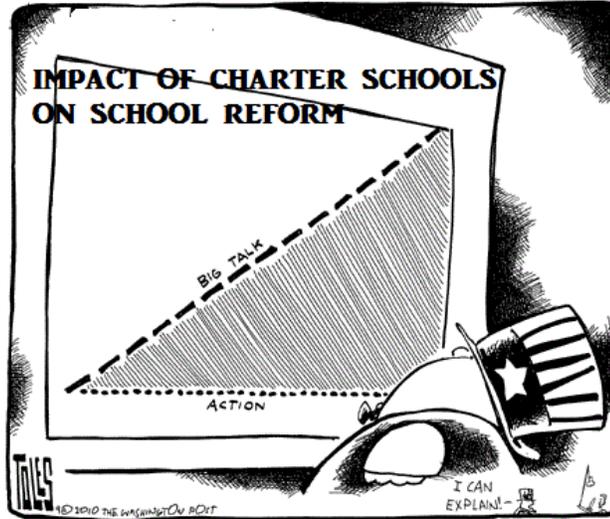


Figure 1. The Impact of Charter Schools on School Reform. Copyright, 2010, Tom Toles. Distributed by The Washington Post. Reprinted with permission.

The first cartoon, “Impact of Charter Schools on School Reform” by Tom Toles was published on September 30, 2010 in *The Washington Post*. Toles is an award winning editorial cartoonist and *The Washington Post* has a broad readership both in the Washington D.C. region and in the nation as a whole. According to *The Washington Post* website, the paper has “Nearly 19 million readers across the US, and more than 90% of them reside outside of the Washington D.C. market area (*The Washington Post*, n.d.). Washington, D.C. has a large proportion of students attending charter schools and *The Washington Post* often reports on local and national news related to charter schools. As of 2010-11, the year this cartoon was published, charter enrollment in Washington, D.C. had grown to 39.1% of students in the district, giving it one of the largest charter school populations in the country (District of Columbia Charter School Board, n.d.).

The cartoon was published shortly after the release of the documentary *Waiting for Superman*, which focused on the merits of charter school reform (Participant Media, n.d.). Directed by Davis Guggenheim, the film featured charismatic school leader Geoffrey Canada and his work at the Harlem Children’s Zone (a non-profit organization that runs pre-schools and public charter schools for poor children in Harlem). The film also featured Michelle Rhee, the controversial former Chancellor of the Washington, D.C. public schools, who was deeply critical of the Washington, D.C. teachers union, and philanthropist Bill Gates, who supported charter school reform through contributions from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Though the film was later critiqued by authors such as Diane Ravitch (2010) and Rick Ayers (2010) as misrepresenting traditional public schools and overstating the effectiveness of charters, the film gained significant public attention and grossed over \$6 million dollars (Box Office Mojo, n.d.). On September 20th, 10 days before the cartoon was published, Oprah Winfrey featured the film on her talk show and had Rhee and Gates as guests (Washington Post Staff, 2010).

Published against the backdrop of *Waiting for Superman*, the cartoon features a bloated human figure wearing a top hat decorated with stars and stripes. This person, representing the U.S. Government, is observing a graph showing that “Big Talk” about the “Impact of Charter

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Schools on School Reform” has increased over time, while “Action” on the issue remained static. The cartoon implies that the figure needs to be aware that the overall contribution of charter schools to school reform has been rather small despite the hype surrounding them. In the lower right-hand corner of the cartoon a small figure, also in a top hat, is seeking to “explain” why so little action has occurred.

Although there are few symbolic elements in the cartoon, the overall effect is a questioning of the current state of affairs where talk is represented as outstripping action. What is ambiguous in the cartoon is whether this situation is a critique of charter school reform (or reformers) for failing to transform public education more fully or more likely, as the “Let me explain” caption implies, it is a critique of government inability to generate support for broader and more significant changes in schools. Such a message points out the contradictions between the hype around charter schools illustrated in *Waiting for Superman*, and the fact that only 3.6% of school age children in the United States attended charter schools at the time the cartoon was published. Regardless of the specific nature of the critique, the large size of the figure representing the U.S. suggests that resources are not the issue behind the inaction.

Unlike some of the other cartoons discussed below which include more obvious rhetorical elements, this cartoon’s primary feature is *opposition*, which serves to exaggerate and dichotomize the relationship between talk and action on the charter school issue. How to solve the problem posed by this inaction is unspecified, but it seems that government has an important role to play. Overall, the cartoon satirizes charter school reform and presents a challenge to some of the news themes circulating in the period following the release of *Waiting for Superman*, which emphasized the positive impact of charter schools and the relative failure of conventional public schools. This image also relies on *condensation* by depicting complex educational policy decisions as issues that can be represented by a simple line graph. If the issue is easy to represent as the image suggests, the inability to act is that much more inexplicable.



Figure 2. Charter School Helicopter Rescue. Copyright, 2012, Milt Priggee (www.miltpriggee.com). Reprinted with permission.

The second cartoon, by Milt Priggee, an artist based in Washington state, was created in June of 2012¹. Priggee, like Toles, has won a number of awards for his cartoons and his work is syndicated through Cagle Cartoons Incorporated (www.cagle.com). Published nearly two years after the first cartoon featured, it provides a critique of charter school reform at a time when the movement was becoming increasingly popular with the public. According to Gallup (2012), 43% of the American public in 2012 found charter schools to be “good” and 17% found them to be “great” in comparison to public schools which were rated as 32% “good” and 5% “great” (Jones, 2012).

At the time the cartoon was published, the 2012 Presidential Campaign was in full swing and both President Obama and challenger Mitt Romney were making public statements about the promise of charter school reform. Both candidates endorsed charter school expansion and emphasized the need to develop choice-based educational markets as a means of improving public education. Romney frequently discussed his desire to expand the quality of educational choices available to children and their families. On May 22, 2012, the month before the cartoon was published, Secretary of Education Aarne Duncan, announced a new Race to the Top (RTTP) grant competition that would distribute \$400 million in federal funds to innovative school districts (Brenchley, 2013). Although charters were not directly eligible for these funds, the competition did allow charter schools and charter providers to apply if they were considered to be a Local Education Association (LEA) by their home states (Brenchley, 2013). The previous iterations of RTTP focused on state systems of education but also stressed charter school development and the removal of state level caps on the numbers of charter schools allowed (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2009).

During the same period, Newsweek revealed its list of the 50 top high schools in America and eight charter schools were included on the list. While this high level of representation of charter schools was viewed as positive by charter supporters, *New York Times* reporter Michael Winerip (2012) noted that the list had many flaws. Apart from the difficulties inherent in trying to rank schools, Winerip (2012) noticed that the enrollment at some of these charter schools on the list were largely incongruous with their surroundings. For example, two of the top charters on the list, both located in Arizona (a state with a large Hispanic population), only enrolled a small number of Hispanic students. These schools were part of the “Basis” charter school chain. Winerip (2012) further observed that,

“According to the Basis Web site, the curriculum [at Basis schools] is heavily reliant on A.P. and college-level courses, and it includes Mandarin and Latin. This means that only the strongest academic students need apply, and those who can’t cut it will leave. What does the student body look like at a Basis high school? At Basis Scottsdale — the third best high school in America, according to Newsweek — 95 percent of the 701 students are Asian or white. Asians make up 2.8 percent of the state population, but 41 percent of the Basis Scottsdale students. There are 15 Hispanics (2 percent) in a state that is about one-third Hispanic. There are no Native Americans listed on the State Education Department’s Web site, though they make up 5 percent of Arizona’s population. The site lists 13 African-

¹ Because Milt Priggee sells his work to the Cagle cartoon syndicate, it is not clear how many, or which papers ran his cartoon. Personal communication with the artist 11/25/2013).

American students and no children of migrant workers. There are no children who qualify for subsidized lunches or who need special education classes.” (Winerip, ¶17)

Overall, Winerip (2012) concluded that the distinguishing feature of the “best” schools on Newsweek’s list were their locations and their largely middle and upper-class student bodies. In other words, he stated, “Best in, best out, best school” (¶8).

Perhaps more importantly, given that Prigee lives and works in Washington State, was ongoing debate in that state over Initiative 1240 which was aimed at legalizing charter schools. Though there was significant opposition to this law (three previous ballot measures supporting charter schools in Washington State had failed) a coalition of elite individuals including Bill Gates, Alice Walton, Eli Broad, and others, used their personal wealth and influence, as well as that of their non-profit organizations, to support the referendum (Au and Ferrare, 2014). Initiative 1240 was passed into law in November of 2012.

Within this context, Prigee’s cartoon image of a helicopter, labeled “Charter Schools,” rescuing individuals who are part of a larger group, labeled “U.S. Education System,” can be read as a critical assessment of charter school reform. It is clear from the image that the helicopter is not large enough to take all of the students in line and thus only a special few can be saved. The small size of the helicopter may refer to the fact that only 3.6% of the school age population attended charter schools in in the 2010-11 academic year, though it may also refer to challenges associated with the charter school admissions process. This process, which typically includes applications, lotteries, and wait-lists, can be difficult for some parents to manage. In addition, some charter schools have been critiqued for the subtle methods they employ in order to exclude the most challenging students (Welner, 2013).

The true symbolic power of the image, however, is derived from its broader cultural context as a simulacrum, or copy, of the famous photograph by Hubert van Es depicting an American helicopter evacuating personnel in 1975 from a building near the American Embassy in Saigon (Ryan, 2012).



Figure 3. Fall of Saigon. Hubert van Es/AFP/Getty Images. Reprinted with permission.

The original image has become both a symbol of failed American policy in Vietnam as well a reminder of the way we fled the country as North Vietnamese forces defeated the South Vietnamese two years after the withdrawal of U.S. troops in 1973. In semiotic terms, the cartoon functions as a simulacrum of the photographic image, drawing its power from a sense of hyper-realism (Baudrillard, 1994) while subtly shaping a new reality, or interpretation, with the ability to influence the ways in which charter reform is understood. This is also a good example of second-level signification where the symbols being used have meanings that are derived from broader social mythologies.

Overall, the primary rhetorical thrust of the image is *combination*, whereby the cartoon hints toward an interpretation of charter reform that likens it to U.S. policy in Vietnam. Namely, the image suggests that developments in charter school policy, like our policy in Vietnam, may be significantly flawed; resulting in a situation where only a few will be saved while the majority is left behind to deal with an unwelcome future. This dichotomy between those being saved and those being left behind is also an example of *opposition* with its reference to the frequent concern raised by charter school critics that charter schools are “creaming” the most able students from the public schools while leaving other children who are more challenging to educate behind. In addition to *combination* and *opposition*, the cartoon also reflects elements of *domestication*, (e.g., helping to make abstract ideas more concrete) through its use of familiar images.



Figure 4. Wrecking Ball & Figure 5 Trojan Horse. Copyright, 2012, Mike Lukovitch. Distributed by Atlanta Journal Constitution. Reprinted with permission.

The third and fourth cartoons are by Mike Lukovitch, also an award-winning cartoonist, who draws for the Atlantic Journal Constitution. These cartoons were published on October 14 and November 4, 2012, a time when the presidential race between Mitt Romney and President Obama was about to be decided, and when Georgia was about to vote on a controversial referendum that would create a new pathway for charter schools to be established. Prior to the referendum, there were several ways to establish a charter school in Georgia. The first method was for local school boards to consider local charter applications. Charters approved through this process were then funded from local property taxes. The second method was for the state Board of Education to consider applications from charters that failed to gain approval from local school boards (or applications from charters that would operate statewide -- e.g. virtual charter schools). Charters approved by the state Board had access to state-level funds, but did not have access to local tax revenues. A new law giving the Georgia Charter Schools Commission (a body appointed by the governor) the power to approve charter school applications and provide successful applicants with local tax dollars was found unconstitutional by the Georgia Supreme Court in 2011 (McCaffrey & Salzer, 2012). Those favoring the concept began a campaign to change the Georgia Constitution. The resulting ballot measure, known as Amendment One, asked Georgians the following question, "Shall the Constitution of Georgia be amended to allow state or local approval of public charter schools upon the request of local communities?" (McCaffrey & Salzer, 2012).

Financial support for this amendment largely came from a number of school choice proponents, including Alice Walton (\$600,000) of the Walton Family Foundation and StudentsFirst (\$250,000) which is the school reform advocacy group founded by Michele Rhee. Support also came from a number of charter management companies such as, K12 (\$100,000), National Heritage Academies (\$75,000), and Charter Schools USA (\$50,000) (McCaffrey & Salzer, 2012). These pro-charter supporters were viewed by opponents as outside interests with deep pockets intent on undermining traditional public education. Opponents also questioned the wording of the amendment which seemed to obscure the intent of the legislation. Despite these concerns, the amendment passed and was signed into law by the Governor of Georgia on May 3, 2012 (Ballotopedia, n.d.).

The first of Lukovitch's cartoons (above left) shows two state officials standing with a crane and wrecking ball situated next to a public school. The ominous oversized ball hanging from the crane is labeled "Charter Schools." One of the officials is telling the other, "All we gotta do is talk Georgians into handing us the keys." Here the major symbolic device is the wrecking ball, which is already very close to, and swinging in the direction of, the adjacent public school. The cartoon implies that state officials are plotting against the public schools and would like to see them demolished. This is an example of *condensation* because the cartoon reflects a simplified version of the truth; the actual situation was far more complex than it appears in the cartoon. It is also an example of *opposition*, as it pits charter schools against public schools and places charter schools in the more enviable position of being the wrecking ball rather than being wrecked. This image also reflects an element of *domestication* because the cartoon uses the familiar example of a crane and wrecking ball as a metaphor for the potential destructive power embodied in Amendment One.

The second Lukovitch cartoon (directly above caption) features an imposing Trojan Horse with a ballot affixed to its chest. The ballot states "Amendment One On Charter Schools, No__ Yes__." To the right of the Trojan Horse, a middle aged female "GA Voter" is reaching up to complete the ballot stating, "I think I'll vote to accept this. What could go wrong?" The Trojan Horse is a well-established symbol used to represent the threat of external interests. In this case, it likely represents the threat of the advocacy groups such as Walton, StudentsFirst, National Heritage Academies, etc. mentioned above. The voter, representing the people of Georgia, seems to be successfully fooled by the wording of the amendment. "What could go wrong?" she states exemplifying a high degree of naiveté. This cartoon implies that external interests have successfully fooled Georgia voters into supporting a law that might not be in their best interests.

This sense of trickery is reinforced by the dominance of the Trojan Horse in the cartoon. According to legend, the Trojan Horse was presented to Troy by the Greek army as a trophy, which secretly hid a small battalion of Greek soldiers. Once inside the city, the soldiers were to secretly open Troy's gates to the rest of the Greek army. In the context of charter school reform, the images of the horse and the voter work to ironize the cluelessness of Georgia's "citizens" who are depicted as being unaware of the danger presented by Amendment One. This also works as a form of *domestication* as it relates the effort to pass Amendment One with a familiar story. However, understanding the Trojan Horse reference requires a certain degree of cultural knowledge. The use of this slightly more nuanced symbol may resonate with a subset of readers who understand its meaning and are therefore able to view themselves as being "in on the joke." This type of communication can develop an audience's sense of solidarity with the cartoonist and

the message of the cartoon. Together, the two cartoons stress the precarious position of public education in relation to charter school reform.

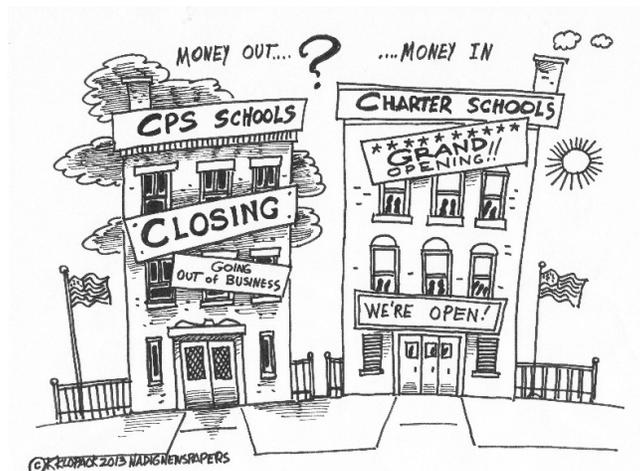


Figure 6. Chicago Public Schools and Charter Schools.

Ken Klopack (www.kenklopackart.com). Reprinted with permission.

Concerns about the impact of charter schools on public schools are also revealed in Ken Klopack's cartoon published in Chicago's Nadig Newspapers on February 20th, 2013. This cartoon (above) shows two schools side by side, with the school on the left labeled "CPS Schools," an abbreviation for Chicago Public Schools. This school looks run-down and is sitting under dark clouds. Across the darkened windows at the front of the building are large signs indicating that the school is "Closing" and "Going out of Business." To the right of this building is a bright, clean building with the sun shining down. Children can be seen in the windows of the building and large decorative signs proclaim "Charter Schools", "Grand Opening!!" and "We're Open!" A caption across the top of the cartoon indicates "Money Out" on the left hand side and "Money In" on the right with the terms separated by a question mark.

The symbolic elements in this cartoon are quite straightforward and offer another good example of *opposition*. In this case, traditional public schools are depicted as losers in a zero sum contest with charter schools. Such a depiction is likely linked to the turmoil experienced in the Chicago Public Schools during 2012 and 2013. This disruption began with a massive teachers strike in September of 2012. The strike affected more than 350,000 children and lasted for more than a week (Payne, 2012). The result was a compromise between Mayor Rahm Emanuel and the Chicago Teachers Union around raises for teachers, a lengthened school day, and teacher evaluation being linked to some degree with student test scores (Cleveland, 2012). After settling the contract, CPS still faced a massive budgetary deficit estimated at \$1 billion dollars (Webber & Tareen, 2012). To some degree this cartoon also provides an example of *condensation*. The closing of traditional public schools and the opening of charter schools are both complex processes involving multiple steps and numerous constituencies. Within the image these steps are skipped over creating the sense that there is a simple cause and effect relationship between such closings and openings.

Despite its oversimplification of the issues, the image did reflect the concerns of some traditional public school supporters in the Chicago area. By February of 2013, school administrators in Chicago had begun discussing the possibility of closing nearly 100 schools as a way to balance the budget. The stated rationale for the closings was “underutilization” (Zorn, 2013) based on student enrollment figures. At the same time, however, many suspected that closings were also related to the desire for continued charter school expansion. According to Chicagoland Researchers and Advocates for Transformative Education (CREATE), a public school advocacy group, the relationship between public school closings and charter school expansion can be illustrated through large investments in charter schools in 2012 (\$350 million) and planned investments (\$23 million) for 2013. This amount, CREATE observed, was “nearly half of what [district administrators] estimate they will save if they close 80 neighborhood schools” (Chicagoland Researchers and Advocates for Transformative Education, 2013, p. 3). This contradiction is likely the inspiration for Klopek’s critical cartoon. Opposition to school closings in Chicago gained national attention during the summer of 2012 when school officials eventually announced plans to close 47 public schools (Ahmed-Ullah, Sector, & Richards, 2013).

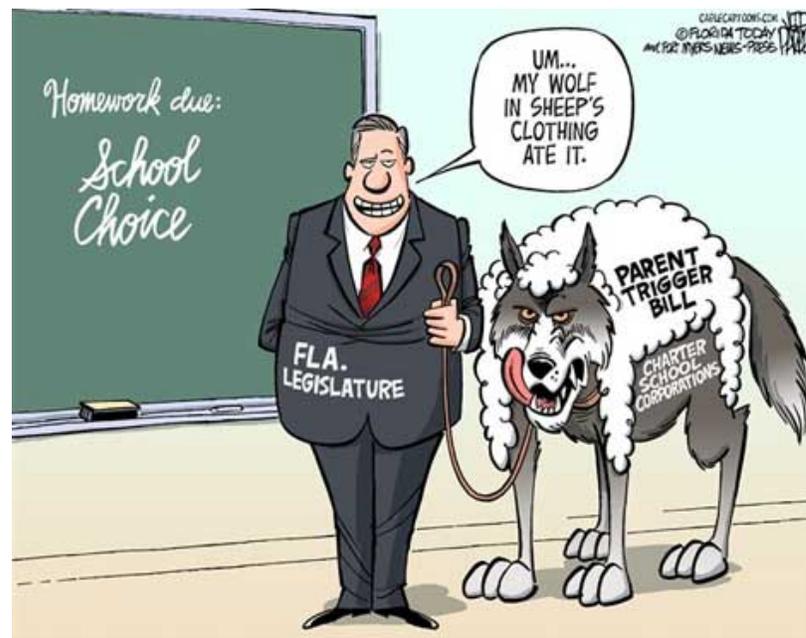


Figure 7. Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing.

Jeff Parker (www.cagle.com). Reprinted with permission.

The idea of threats to public schooling is also reiterated in this final cartoon by Jeff Parker. This cartoon, focused on Parent Trigger Legislation in Florida, was drawn for Florida Today and the Fort Myers News-Press and was published on March 27, 2013. Within the cartoon, a male figure in a neck tie is holding the leash of a wolf which is hiding under a sheep’s fleece and licking its chops. The male figure, likely a politician, is wearing a suit and tie and is labeled “FLA. Legislature.” This label is in the area where the pocket of the jacket would normally be. The wolf is labeled “Charter School Corporations” and is partially covered by a sheep’s fleece labeled “Parent Trigger Bill.” On a chalkboard in the background of the scene, indicating that the situation is taking place in a school, the word “Homework due: School Choice.” In response, the figure is saying “Um... My wolf in sheep’s clothing ate it.”

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This image has some parallels with that of the Trojan Horse discussed above. The figure of the wolf in sheep's clothing is another symbol that represents a hidden threat. In this particular case, the image suggests that charter school corporations, meaning charter schools run by charter management organizations (CMOs) or educational management organizations (EMOs), are hiding their true intentions, which involve taking over or "consuming" public schools. This intent, however, is hidden under the guise of parent trigger legislation, and is being assisted or possibly led by the Florida legislature. To understand the nature of this image more clearly, it is helpful to explore the concept of the "Parent Trigger" and how this issue unfolded in Florida.

The term "Parent Trigger" refers to a set of laws that have been approved in several states since 2012 that target "failing" schools and allow parents of children in these schools to call for interventions in the operation of the school via petition. Responses to successful petitions typically involve one or more of the following actions:

- closing the school
- reconstituting the school (meaning replacement of all staff and faculty)
- providing the students with private school vouchers
- converting the school into a charter school (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2013)

In the national context, parent trigger bills have been developed and promoted by a variety of conservative political organizations including the Heartland Institute, Parent Revolution, StudentsFirst, the Walton Family Foundation, Democrats for Educational Reform, and the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), which has created model bills that state representatives can use to introduce the "Parent Trigger" concept in their own legislatures (Lubienski, Scott, Rogers, & Welner, 2012). These organizations are strong supporters of charter schools and many have financial ties to charter school providers.

Support for parent trigger, as discussed below, has come from a broad variety of philanthropic, corporate, and media organizations. One example is Walden Media, owned by conservative billionaire Philip Anschutz. Walden Media produced the film "Won't Back Down" in 2012, which depicted two activist mothers seeking to use a parent trigger law to take over a failing school (Cavanagh, 2012). To promote the film, both former Florida Governor Jeb Bush and former Chancellor of the Washington DC Public Schools Michele Rhee led a panel discussion of the film at the Republican National Convention (Klein, n.d.). Bush and Rhee both run well-funded non-profit parent trigger advocacy organizations; Foundation for Excellence in Education (FEE) and StudentsFirst, respectively.

At the time this cartoon was published in March of 2013, Jeb Bush and other supporters of the parent trigger concept had successfully moved a parent trigger bill onto the Florida legislature's agenda. Supporters of the bill emphasized the legislation's focus on parent empowerment (Solocheck, 2013), but critics claimed that the bill was a veiled effort aimed at making it easier for for-profit charter school companies to take over public schools (Larrabee, 2013). Opponents of the bill, made up mostly of parent and teacher groups, emphasized that parents already had multiple avenues, such as school boards, which they could use to influence public school policy and the measure was unnecessary. In addition, they pointed out that the FEE

strongly lobbied many members of the Florida Legislature and paid for them to attend conferences and meet with corporate donors (March, 2013). Several important public meetings about the bill occurred around the time of the cartoon's publication. The bill was defeated in a tie vote in late April of 2013 (Postal, 2013).

With this context in mind, it becomes clear that the figure in the cartoon is a powerful politician and may represent either the Florida State Legislature or an individual politician who controls the legislature. In the image, the politician has the corporations on a leash and seems to be leading them (disguised in the garb of the parent trigger bill) toward a parent trigger option. Such an image can be read as a critique of the significant political influence wielded by some Florida politicians who seem to have developed an alliance with set of partners who might be dangerous to traditional public education. At the same time, drawing from the political context of the Parent Trigger debate in Florida, it seems plausible that the wolf might actually be in control of the politician(s). Taken from this perspective the wolf represents the corporate supporters of the Parent Trigger legislation who worked through the FEE to lobby for changes to educational policy.

According to March (2013), the FEE raised nearly 8.5 million from donations in 2011 and was supported by a variety of foundations and corporations seeking to advance charter school reform. The list of corporate sponsors included The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, The Charles and Hellen Schwab Foundation, The Robertson Foundation, and the Walton Family Foundation, among others (Beckel, 2013). In terms of corporations, the list included companies such as K12 Inc. discussed earlier in the paper, and Connection Academy (owned by Pearson), which develops on-line educational content for charter schools (Graves, 2012). These corporations and others stood to benefit from the passage of parent trigger legislation.

The cartoon obviously plays on the concerns of parent trigger opponents and utilizes elements of *condensation* to simplify and identify the relationship among a large group of policy actors. Most prominently, the cartoon simplifies the linkages between “charter school corporations” and the Florida Legislature. In terms of *opposition*, the image uses the figure of the wolf to represent the oppositional nature of charter corporations with respect to traditional public schools. The use of the wolf in sheep's clothing also provides a sense of *domestication* making the story of corporate involvement immediately recognizable as a hidden menace.

Conclusions and Implications

While each of these images conveys a unique view of charter school reform within a particular context, considered together, they reveal a number of interesting consistencies and some differences, with respect to ways in which ideas about charter school reform are constructed in political cartoons. I begin this final section of the paper with a brief review of the dominant symbolic and rhetorical elements used across the images selected for this study. Following this review, I discuss the meaning conveyed by these cartoons and how the inherently critical quality of political cartoons makes them an important site of ideological critique.

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Rhetorical Features

In terms of rhetorical features, the most commonly employed elements in these cartoons were *condensation* and *opposition*. This seems understandable given that one purpose of political cartoons is to use comedy to sum up the essence of a particular political situation and provide a critique. In an effort to convey their point of view, cartoonists distill the political and moral complexities associated with an issue like charter school reform and dramatize the consequences associated with its implementation. By simplifying conflicts into opposing camps, and limiting the scope of issues considered, the cartoons are able to provide a potent commentary and raise uncomfortable issues. The other rhetorical elements of *domestication* and *combination* were used less frequently though I identified examples of each.

It is possible that the more limited use of *domestication* and *combination* in the cartoons selected for this study is simply a result of the non-random nature of the sample. It seems likely that a larger and more comprehensive viewing of charter school focused cartoons would provide additional examples of both rhetorical elements. Another possibility is that *domestication*, which is used to make ideas more familiar or concrete, is less useful as a tool of critique than *opposition* and thus appears less frequently in the critical cartoons used in this study. Likewise, visual metaphors that can effectively link abstract concepts with more familiar examples can be difficult to generate. *Combination*, which blends concepts from different domains together, is a complex form of rhetorical argumentation, and may also be more difficult to employ than the more common elements of *condensation* and *opposition*.

In general, these rhetorical elements were used effectively to further the social goals of the cartoon and emphasize particular issues related to charter school reform. By drawing on common elements of visual discourse these cartoons work to both consciously and unconsciously connect issues, raise questions, and influence the interpretation of various charter school issues.

The Meaning Conveyed by Political Cartoons Focused on Charter School Reform

In addition to considering the rhetorical elements embedded within the political cartoons, it is also useful to consider the meaning conveyed by these cartoons in response to the idea of charter school reform. The most common message conveyed in the images above is one of concern; none of the images analyzed here are celebratory and identifying positive portrayals of charter school reform in political cartoons is difficult (Cuban, 2012). As mentioned earlier in the paper, even my initial Google image searches, which were quite broad in scope, failed to uncover political cartoons favoring charter school reform.

The most common concern in the images I analyzed focused on the potential impact of charter school development on traditional public schools. In Figures 4, 5, 6, and 7 this impact is depicted in negative ways. Public schools in these images are destroyed, closed, or taken over by corporations. Because traditional public schools have been a bedrock social institution promising both individual and communal benefits, initiatives that would alter their role in society are often met with resistance (Labaree, 2010). Though the reality of public schooling has often failed to live up to its aspirations, the promise of public education still holds a special place in the American imagination. These images seek to raise public awareness that this promise is imperiled and that charter school reform is likely to lead to public school closings and the

privatization of an institution that was formerly considered central to the maintenance of democratic society.

More than simply raising awareness, Figures 4, 5, and 7 also communicate concern about the public being misled with respect to charter school reform. In this regard, these images question the general integrity of politicians involved in these issues. Each of these images presents politicians as duplicitous individuals who resort to misdirection and trickery to get their way. Rather than engage with the public openly, these cartoons suggest that politicians often mask their true intentions.

Expressing a somewhat different set of concerns, figures 1 and 2 suggest that charter schools may represent an insufficient response to the problems facing traditional public schools. The first image stresses this insufficiency by emphasizing the gap between what charter schools promise and what they have been able to achieve. The second suggests that the insufficiency is related to the fact that only a small group of student can be rescued through charter school reform. Overall, these images suggest that charter school reform may not be the panacea that some believe it to be.

Political Cartoons as Sites of Ideological Critique

In general, this analysis illustrates some of the ways that political cartoons respond to, challenge, and participate in the construction of the concept of charter school reform. Because of their visual quality, and the critical perspectives they convey, political cartoons have a unique ability to draw attention to contentious issues like charter school reform and to stimulate political action. Reflecting on this quality, Navasky (2013) notes that political cartoons can be a powerful means of communicating ideas and have often sparked controversy and raised awareness of political issues. Citing multiple examples, such as the worldwide Muslim protests that followed the publication of a political cartoon depicting Muhammed in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005, Navasky (2013) builds support for the notion that political cartoons can be more powerful than words and have “a unique emotional power and capacity to enrage, upset, and discombobulate otherwise rational people and groups...” (p. xxi) Their power, he believes, comes from having a condensed argument coupled with a an image; in his words: “a one-two punch” (Navasky, 2013, p. 18.).

The power to frame political issues in a compelling manner makes editorial cartoons a particularly effective form of political communication. However, rather than simply reflecting reality — like a mirror — these images are actively involved in constructing reality. The idea that reality is constructed through forms of discourse such as language (Potter, 1996) or images (Rose, 2001), underscores both the possibility of manufacturing narratives that stand in opposition to dominant perspectives and the prospect of alternative outcomes. In other words, political cartoons have the power to alter the way people view particular issues. In this sense, cartoons provide a view of reality that can be clarifying or distorting; “fair” or “unfair” (Navasky, 2013). It is this malleable character that makes cartoons an important vehicle for raising controversial issues. Cartoonists, notes Navasky (2013), are like the court jesters; they have been “licensed” to confront those in power, but they must do so using irony and satire (Navasky, 2013).

As a result, political cartoons are typically more critical than salutatory. According to Edwards (1997) political cartoons employing satire and parody typically function by effecting, “downward conversion” of the subject (p. 24). Although cartoons may occasionally elevate their subjects, the more common focus is critique and downward conversion. This observation helps to explain the absence of political cartoons that build up or elevate charter schools even though positive depictions of charter schools emphasizing the qualities of freedom, choice, and innovation are often found in news reports about charter schools (Feuerstein, 2014). More generally, the use of satire and irony in political cartoons functions to create tension by depicting various unresolved problems (Edwards, 1997). This tension can create cognitive dissonance for the cartoon’s audience and thus motivate the desire for change (Edwards, 1997).

While the role of images in stimulating political action seems well established, it is also true that images are not always successful in this endeavor. In case of charter schools, it seems that the critique provided by these political cartoons is diluted in the broader media discourse about charter school reform, which generally frames the movement in positive terms. According to Stern, Clonan, Jaffee, and Lee, (2014), “Much of [the] support for charter schools is held up by a discourse that promotes them as ‘better’ than ‘traditional’ public schools” (p. 3). Similarly, Goldstein, Macrine, and Chesney (2011), note that the mainstream media’s coverage of public education consistently emphasizes neoliberal values that stress the importance of individual choice, emphasize the benefits of competition, elevate private interests over public interests, and view efficiency as the primary criterion for public policy decisions. These authors argue that a constant repetition and emphasis on these values in the news media has constructed a “new normal” for public education where “[t]he language of the market -- commercialism, privatization, and deregulation – has become its own ‘regime of truth’...” (Goldstein, Macrine, and Chesney, 2011, p. 116). The consensus that has developed around the agendas of corporate school reformers is difficult to challenge; within the “new normal” even potent political cartoons can be written off as misguided liberal sentiment.

Because of the dominance of neoliberal discourse about public education, the types of political cartoons examined in this study are increasingly important as sites of contestation and resistance in mainstream media. Through the use of ironizing and satiric discourse, these images emphasize the distance between current reality and a more desirable situation for public education. In an ideal world, these images suggest, charter schools would be a more effective solution to the problems faced by public schools, the future of public schools would not be threatened by the development of charter schools, and politicians would not resort to dishonest tactics to implement charter school reform. As comic critiques, the images have the potential to stimulate inquiry, deliberation, and political action with respect to the issue of charter school reform. Moreover, they serve a moralizing function by drawing attention to areas where society may not be living up to its ideals. They reflect the hope that critique can lead to change and thus serve as a springboard for inquiry and action (Morris, 1993).

On a more cautionary note, rather than motivating resistance, these cartoons, and others like them, could serve to reinforce dominant perspectives. This latter outcome is always a possibility given that the irony embodied in the images is built out of stereotypes and exaggerations, and may be interpreted, at least on the surface, as reifying particular elements of the dominant discourse. As Hutcheon (1994) notes, “Even if an ironist intends an irony to be interpreted in an oppositional framework, there is no guarantee that this subversive intent will be

realized” (pp. 15-16). For this reason, and others, she concludes that the use of irony is always “risky business” (Hutcheon, 1994, pp. 15-16). Though the intent of the images used in this paper is the critique of charter school reform, the images also draw strength from their connection to the way this issue has been framed in other media sources such as newspapers, television, and on-line media. For example, the contrast between charter schools and public schools present in some of the cartoons might leave less critical readers with the erroneous belief that traditional public schools are inferior institutions (see Figures 4 and 6).

In closing, it is the ability of political cartoons to confront those in power, and to question current political events and policies that make them an important instruments in carrying out an ideological critique of educational reform. According to Leonardo (2003), “A critical approach to school reform starts with an awareness that the power of language oppresses as well as liberates educators from the taken-for-granted ways we name our everyday schooling experiences”(p. 60). In the case of charter school reform, political cartoons open up a discursive space for consideration and critique of current policies and their consequences. Coming from a critical perspective, these cartoons provide access to a discourse that questions the benefits of charter school reform, and stands in opposition, at least to some degree, to the neoliberal discourses now influencing educational policy.

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Critical Education

criticaleducation.org
ISSN 1920-4175

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Rebecca Goldstein, *Montclair State University*
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Panayota Gounari, *UMass, Boston*
Sandy Grande, *Connecticut College*
Todd S. Hawley, *Kent State University*
Dave Hill, *Anglia Ruskin University*
Nathalia E. Jaramillo, *University of Auckland*
Richard Kahn, *Antioch University Los Angeles*
Kathleen Kesson, *Long Island University*
Philip E. Kovacs, *University of Alabama, Huntsville*
Ravi Kumar, *South Asia University*
Saville Kushner, *University of Auckland*
Zeus Leonardo, *University of California, Berkeley*
John Lupinacci, *Washington State University*
Darren E. Lund, *University of Calgary*
Curry Stephenson Malott, *West Chester University*
Gregory Martin, *University of Technology, Sydney*
Rebecca Martusewicz, *Eastern Michigan University*
Cris Mayo, *University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign*
Peter Mayo, *University of Malta*
Peter McLaren, *University of California, Los Angeles*
João Paraskeva, *UMass, Dartmouth*
Brad J. Porfilio, *California State University, East Bay*
Kenneth J. Saltman, *UMass, Dartmouth*
Doug Selwyn, *SUNY at Plattsburgh*
Özlem Sensoy, *Simon Fraser University*
Patrick Shannon, *Penn State University*
John Smyth, *University of Huddersfield*
Mark Stern, *Colgate University*
Beth Sondel, *North Carolina State University*
Hannah Spector, *Penn State University, Harrisburg*
Linda Ware, *SUNY at Geneseo*