



# VIEWPOINT

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## Charter Schools vs. Teacher Unions: Irresistible Force vs. Immovable Object?

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### Summary

Most charter schools offer their unions more autonomy and better educational climates—both things that teacher unions advocate. Yet the unions have opposed charter schools at every turn. This is because charter school teachers pose a threat to the status quo and vote in overwhelming majorities not to join the unions.

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Charter schools are, by law, public schools. Thus in states with collective bargaining laws, teachers may form a union. In states without bargaining laws, or with Right to Work laws, they may still form an organization and affiliate with state and national unions. And these schools are popular with many teachers

The nation's first charter, in St. Paul, Minnesota, was founded in 1992 by two public school teacher union members. Of the first several hundred charter schools, 25% were started by teachers.

As Milo Cutter, a co-founder of the St. Paul school has said, if the teachers have a problem they sit down at a table, pull out a mirror, and solve it. And most charter schools, like Milo's are relatively small so the staff not only knows each other, and every student, but can function without administrative bureaucracy. Running the school themselves, their efficiency and lack of overhead makes above average salaries possible.

Even where others start a school, it is common for far more teachers, including large numbers of public school teachers, to apply for jobs than there are teaching positions available. This has been a common, almost universal, experience, from Marblehead, Massachusetts where a new charter school had 500 teachers apply for seven positions, to Arizona, where 200 sought one of ten openings.

Once hired, teachers also frequently find a better teaching environment, such as a school in Boston where teachers have their own room, a computer, e-mail, telephone, and no more than two preparations, four classes or 80 students daily. This enhanced autonomy and improved educational climate for teachers are all things that teacher unions say they advocate.

So teacher unions support charter school laws, right? Not quite!

Both major teacher unions, the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers view the charter school movement as a direct challenge, perhaps the greatest from any source. Thus they have opposed laws authorizing the establishment of charter schools, weakening charter school laws as much as possible and limiting the number of such schools that are authorized.



Like a brick wall, the teacher unions refuse to budge on the issue of establishing and supporting charter schools

Source: Corbis

Even after all of this has failed, they continue to try to sweep back the sea. In Ohio where charter schools are called community schools, the Ohio Federation of Teachers wants the authorizing legislation to be found unconstitutional. Why is this so?

Primarily because of one thing that wasn't mentioned in the preceding positives about the charter school movement. That one thing is that charter school teachers, in overwhelming numbers, do not vote to affiliate with the teacher unions, nor do they tend to join the unions as individuals.

More than anything else the charter school movement is illustrating that teacher union rhetoric about teacher autonomy, professionalism, and conducive working conditions are just that—rhetoric.

The last thing the unions want—any unions, but especially teacher unions—is for the teachers to be able to function as independent professionals, like doctors, lawyers, etc. After all, if teachers can function independently, that will be true of their relationship to unions as well as traditional school boards. This presents the unions with an impossible, perhaps fatal, dilemma.

Charter schools have grown from zero in 1991, to the first one in 1992, to several thousand today. Those teaching in charter schools have similarly grown from zero in 1991 to scores of thousands today, an ongoing growth that increases almost daily and actual figures are constantly outdated.

But how do teacher unions organize teachers whose schools they oppose? Why should the staff at such charter schools trust the unions to look out for their best interests when those same unions are trying to prevent, cripple or abolish their schools?

Teacher unions need to change organizationally, but there is no indication that they can or will. Viewing any criticism as an attack, the unions mind set and blindness may be their undoing. It may prove to be an opportunity missed because teachers, like doctors and lawyers, could use an effective professional organization. What increasing numbers of them don't need is someone to bargain for them, to handle grievance procedures—the things which are the overwhelming activity of traditional unions.

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(David W. Kirkpatrick is a Senior Education Fellow with the U.S. Freedom Foundation and The Buckeye Institute. More information is available at [www.buckeyeinstitute.org](http://www.buckeyeinstitute.org). Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided the author and his affiliation are cited.)

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