

Can Charter-School Execs Help Failing Public Schools?



By **GILBERT CRUZ** Saturday, Jun. 27, 2009

U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan, center right, stands with 6th grade students and others at the North Star Academy, a public charter school, in Newark, N.J.

In the late '90s, software entrepreneur John Zitzner was pretty close to being bankrupt. Yet within six months — in one of those typical "holy crap" dotcom-era stories — Zitzner had sold his company and become "a very modest millionaire." Fantastic. And in one of those typical "What do I do with all this money?" stories, he decided to help make the world a better place — specifically by co-founding a charter school in Cleveland. (**Read TIME's report: "How to Raise the Standard in America's Schools."**)

That was three summers ago. Fast-forward to last Monday, when Zitzner was in the audience in Washington as Secretary of Education Arne Duncan appealed to a gathering of charter-school operators to "adapt your educational model to turning around our lowest-performing schools." For months now, Duncan has talked about closing 5,000 — or about 5% — of the nation's lowest-performing public schools. By throwing down the gauntlet to charter schools, Duncan is challenging an industry that has become very proficient at opening up brand-new schools, but has very little experience in going into a preexisting school and turning those kids from low performers into high-quality students. But Zitzner, whose Entrepreneurship Preparatory has about 200 students in grades 6 to 8, can't wait to dive in. In the past three years his students have gone from fairly abysmal test results to scoring in the top quartile on the Ohio standardized test, and he doesn't see why that model can't be replicated among other underperforming students. "Charter-school people are entrepreneurs — we like challenges, and this industry needs people who can make order out of chaos."

The turnaround model could be a road to greater growth for the charter-school movement which, after 16 years, comprises 1.4 million students in 4,600 schools — still only about 4% of all public schools. Charters, which are funded with public dollars but are typically free of school-district and teacher-union restrictions, have typically been regarded as labs of innovation (though a recent Stanford University study makes the case

that charter-school quality can range greatly, from great to not so great). Many charter principals have full control over the hiring and firing of teachers, full control of what curriculum they choose to teach on a daily and weekly basis, and full control over how long their school day should be — all the things that are typically dictated from a central office in a typical public school.

That freedom from bureaucracy is exactly why people go into the charter-school business in the first place, says Nelson Smith, president and CEO of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. And it's exactly what would need to stay in place if school districts are serious about having charter operators come in and take over parts of, or entire, failing schools. "It shouldn't be thought of as trying to change the ocean liner's course," says Smith, but rather, to carry out his metaphor, rebuilding the entire ship. "It would have to be really starting a new school with a new culture and new adults in the building."

Such a radical approach — where, as Duncan says, "the children stay and all the adults leave" — is one of several turnaround options that the Department of Education has endorsed. In Chicago, where Duncan was CEO of the city public school system for seven years, several schools underwent turnarounds under his watch. Results have been mixed, and because some union teachers lost their jobs, the process was — and continues to be — controversial. At a June 19 speech in Chicago, Duncan was welcomed home by a group of protesters railing against charters and turnarounds.

Zitzner, for one, is at least pleased by Duncan's overture, indicative as it is of possible ways that the charter industry could more closely work with school districts. "A lot of us feel that we're the redheaded stepchildren of the education industry, and only recently are some of us starting to get embraced by traditional educators," says Zitzner. "So if they want to work with us, if they want to give us facilities, and renovate those facilities, and give us full funding, and full autonomy, I would love to help do some turnarounds."

Yet, some see the turnaround model as a mostly hypothetical solution that has yet to provide results. "It's the audacity of hope in the extreme," says Mike Petrilli, who analyzes education programs and policy at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a conservative think tank. "There are very few examples in the country where we've been able to turn around failing schools. And those are just a handful. To go from a few dozen schools to 5,000 is quite audacious. It's not very clear how we're going to get from here to there."

Added to that is the fact that turnarounds are essentially the complete opposite of the prototypical charter-school mission. "It's fundamentally different from what charters are good at," says Petrilli. "What charter people know how to do is create a school from scratch, which is a very different animal from going into an existing school and fixing it." Looks like they'll be charting new territory.

TIME Archive: "Do Charter Schools Pass the Test?"