ADVANCE REVIEWS OF
Charter Schools

"As millions of parents continue seeking meaningful alternatives to traditional public schooling, enrollment in charter schools across the country in the past two decades has exploded. Waiting lists to get into good schools abound as the demand for charter schools has far outstripped their supply. Because of the newness of charters, however, books that examine or explain this important aspect of public school choice have been scarce. Even more scarce, are books written about charter schools *for parents, by parents*. Enter, Karin Piper, a parent who has chosen charter schools as the best option for her children and authored this fine book.

In *Charter Schools: The Ultimate Handbook for Parents*, Karin provides the kind of vital information that parents generally want to understand during the decision-making process about which schools are best for their children. But parents take heart! It is not written in an academic, bland tone, or full of educational psycho-bafflegab. Karin's writing style is fresh, down-to-earth, and witty. For those reasons, and because she is the first author I know to write a book for charter school parents and prospective parents, I predict that this book will be a runaway bestseller in the charter school arena. If I were a charter school leader, I would provide a free copy to every prospective family that came my way. Apart from being an inexpensive form of marketing, doing so would accomplish two worthwhile purposes: The book will help prospective families think through an important decision, and it will save schools time and money by providing information that Karin has already researched and organized.

I heartily commend this book to its readers, and Karin for her insight, perseverance, and for sharing the gift of her wit and intellect with us."

—Dr. Brian L. Carpenter
Charter School Governance & Management Consultant, Author of *Charter School Board University: An Introduction to Effective Charter School Governance* and *The Seven Outs: Strategic Planning Made Easy for Charter Schools*

"A handy guide to the basics. "
—**Jay Mathews**, ***Washington Post*** education columnist

"A friendly resource for any reader, *Charter Schools: The Ultimate Handbook for Parents* answers questions about what charter schools are, why they exist, and how to find one that might be right for a child you know. Piper addresses issues from academic quality and charter school authorization to charter school facilities and how to be a charter school advocate."
—**Nelson Smith**, President and CEO, National Alliance for Public Charter Schools

"Charter Schools: Kid Tested. Parent Approved. The Ultimate Handbook for Parents educates readers about school options, demystifies the myths that surround charter schools, and presents the facts about them with clarity in this comprehensive handbook.

As a charter school parent, Ms. Piper's vast experience and knowledge of charter schools enables readers to make informed decisions about one of the most critical issues concerning their children: education. This handbook is an indispensable must for all who are responsible for making educational decisions.

With a sprinkling of humor throughout the book, the author delivers the facts in a highly informative yet enjoyable read."
—**Bernie Panitch**, Verbatim Editing

"Charter schools aren't for everyone. But we all benefit when parents are empowered with knowledge and choice. This book is a manual for all parents to take back our schools for our kids and their collective future."
—**Ben Austin**, Executive Director of Parent Revolution

"Karin simultaneously entertains, enlightens, and educates with this unique, clever look at charter schools. I've read many books about charter schools and education and I've not seen anything like *Charter Schools: The Ultimate Handbook for Parents.* If you are a parent seeking information about choices for your children's education, this is a wonderful resource. If you have children in a charter school and find yourself confused by some of the criticism of charters, this book will give you the information you need to counter the myths and misinformation. *Charter Schools* is a wonderful contribution to the worlds of education and parenting."
—**Donnell Rosenberg**, Founder of A Parents Voice in Education

"A must read for all parents and taxpayers."
—**Donna Gundle Krieg**, BlitzKrieg Publishing

"Charter Schools: Kid Tested. Parent Approved. The Ultimate Handbook for Parents, written by a true expert—a charter school parent, explains these innovative schools in laymans terms, from what they are, how they work, and what to expect as a charter school parent. There is still a lot of misinformation out there about charter schools and the author does a wonderful job at setting the record straight through her own experiences and experiences of other parents and teachers in the charter school world. Add to that a dash of humor and you truly have the *Ultimate Handbook for Parents.* This is a must read for anyone who is starting to explore public school options for their child. And for those who already have a child in a charter—the next time you are barraged with questions from friends and family about why you chose a charter school—this book will arm you with answers and provide some comic relief from another parent who has walked in your shoes. A wonderful resource!"
—**Stacy Rivera**, Director of Communications, Colorado League of Charter Schools

"An invaluable tool for any parent considering sending their child to a charter school. This guide clearly addresses parent concerns from the different types of charter schools to what to expect for homework. I found the different interviews of various students, parents, teachers and administrators particularly helpful in understanding the breadth and depth of what charter schools are all about. For example, charter school student Jordan Rowley's winning essay was both touching and insightful. It vividly illustrated how she is thriving in her charter school and how the right educational choice made all the difference in her life.

I would whole heartedly recommend this book to all prospective and current charter school families. It can help your child live up to his or her potential with its helpful and long overdue information. A brilliant resource!" —**Sylvia Hoffmann**, New Charter School Parent

"Karin Piper's book is easy and fun to read, packed with insider information parents won't get anywhere else. Parents who are looking for alternatives to the neighborhood school should make this book their first homework assignment. "
—**Pamela Benigno**, Education Policy Director, Independence Institute

CHARTER SCHOOLS

The Ultimate Handbook for Parents

Created by

Karin Piper

Wyatt-MacKenzie Publishing, Inc.
DEADWOOD, OREGON

Charter Schools: The Ultimate Handbook for Parents
by Karin Piper

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This book is dedicated to our kids.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Move over puffed corn. Kid testers and approving parents are no longer about cereal—they stand for school choice. The fastest-growing brand name of school choice is public charter schools. It is not just parents who favor charters. The list of approving persons also includes teachers and community leaders—even the president of the United States.

What are charter schools? Are they expensive? Should I consider a charter school for my child?

Charter Schools: The Ultimate Handbook for Parents will guide you through these commonly asked questions and more. Should you prefer technical, thesis-style material on education reform and its laws, you do have a lot of literary options. This would not be one of them.

Another word for *alternative* is *choice*, which is a word much debated when it comes to education. Who makes decisions for your child's education? Who should be responsible for such determinations? Most people have an opinion about this, and as the author of *Charter Schools: The Ultimate Handbook for Parents*, I will give you mine.

I do not claim to be the ultimate charter school parent, but this book will tell you about them. In fact, I could not have written this book without a posse of ultimate charter school parents in my ear.

You will also learn the real definition of charter schools and truths about tuition, enrollment "creaming," teacher qualifications—and more!

Charter Schools: The Ultimate Handbook for Parents is designed to provide basic information about charter schools in the United States. As the author of this book, my view and support for such schools will be clearly heard. However, the intention is not to convince you to run out and register your kids in the nearest charter school. The objective is to educate the general public about charter schools and straighten out some interesting and humorous myths along the way.

Thank you for taking the time to learn about charter schools and how they contribute to public education!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

My name is Karin Piper, and I am a stay at home mom in beautiful Colorado. Okay, technically I am never home, and I am more of a stay-in-the-car mom as my life consists mostly of running errands and transporting my three little angels from one place to another. That's not a complaint; it's just the top of my résumé. I don't know of anything I'd rather be than a mom. I did not choose the mothering business for a hefty salary but for the perks. What other job permits you to be around for scraped knees, and "look-what-I-can-do's," while still receiving copious praise on employee appreciation day (Mother's Day)?

While raising my children I have written for several publications including *Your Hub* (*Denver Post*), *Schools of Tomorrow* (*EdNews Colorado*), the *Examiner* (Colorado Charter School Examiner), and more. My favorite piece was probably "It Mattress to Me," an article about a weird photo with two campaign signs on a filthy mattress in the suburbs. It was featured as "Best of 2008" in the *Denver Post's* Your Hub Blog section for Parker, Colorado.

Along with being a mother and a writer, I am also a volunteer and an advocate for our schools and public libraries. It has been my good fortune to be able to work with wonderful organizations such as the Douglas County Libraries, the Colorado League of Charter Schools, and a collection of area schools.

I was born and raised in Sweden and landed in the United States through a student exchange program. During that year I learned a whole lot of English, a new culture, and how to fall in love with an American boy. The latter was not difficult at all. It is now more than twenty years since I fell in love with my American man and it is he who is my great supportive husband and the father of my three children.

Our family car pool has been heading toward a local charter school since the beginning of this millennium (2002). I must say I didn't know much about charter schools, what they are, and what makes them unique. I was just incredibly thankful that our public school district offered a solution for our son's academic needs. Throughout the years, it is not just my children who have been learning, but I have gained knowledge as well. By discovering

charter schools through personal experience, I consider myself "street smart" on the topic. My personal journey of evolving into an informed, "school-choice parent" is paved with tales of confusion, frustration, hilarity, and the unbeatable spirit of community partnership. Becoming a charter school parent no longer needs to be learned the hard way. Connect with parents who walk in chartered shoes, read, consult the Internet, and visit charter schools. Even if you decide charter schools are not your cup of java, you will become one savvy parent who is equipped to make a great school choice for your child.

That's an awful lot of talk about me, and I would rather hear about you. You can contact me through my Web site at www.charterschoolmom.com.

FOREWORD

Educating the students in our public schools has never been more rewarding or challenging. This is especially true of all the hundreds of charter schools that have opened. Helen Keller once stated: "One can never consent to creep when one feels an impulse to soar." When it comes to charter schools, that statement catches the vision of founders and parents who have decided to engage in the excitement of creating or having their children attend such a school.

Having started three charter schools in the Colorado Springs area, I can tell you there are many hurdles to overcome but also much satisfaction when you see the type of education the students are receiving. All three schools, Cheyenne Mountain Charter Academy, James Irwin Charter High School and Colorado Springs Early Colleges, address specific needs that were unmet by the traditional public schools. Their lasting success pays tribute to the mission and vision created for students by these schools.

The ability to create new schools provides a unique opportunity to start something entrepreneurial in a highly managed public school system. It is my firm belief that charter schools have helped all of us work to accomplish higher academic achievement for all students, whether or not they attend a charter school.

This book takes a comprehensive look at charter schools and provides information in a light and friendly way that excites you to read the whole book. Karin Piper has done a great job in writing it. It is my hope that it will encourage more entrepreneurs to start a charter school and parents to put their students in one. The free market of ideas is alive and well in this country. This book will truly help some of you soar to the challenge. After all, it is people who are the greatest resource of this country. God Speed in your journey.

Senator Keith King
COLORADO SENATE, Education Committee

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank God!

I don't mean that in a blasphemous sense, but in sincere gratitude to our creator.

There have been times in the past several months when I was not sure how and why pieces of this project came together. All I can say is that without the good Lord, this manuscript would still be idling on page one. There were many days when writing began and ended on a prayer.

Many of these prayers were about connecting with really smart charter school experts to provide answers and resources.

Let's face it; I'm *just* a charter school mom. Without a posse of incredible individuals and organizations, none of this would ever have been written. These are the people behind the scenes who make our public charter schools possible to begin with. Let me start from the beginning.

Thanks to the entire staff at the Colorado League of Charter Schools (CLCS). You guys have no idea what Jim Griffin, Sean Bradley, and especially Stacy Rivera have had to endure while this book had been in progress. It is a miracle that these guys still answer their phones. Every time that phone rang, they risked being peppered with a round of questions from one of the charter school parents in Colorado. Stacy has also connected me with several individuals, and without them the project would not have lifted off the ground. If it wasn't for Stacy and CLCS, I probably wouldn't have kept writing about charter schools for very long, as I would have run out of information.

Susie Miller Barker at the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, Todd Ziebarth at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, Jonathan Oglesby at the Center for Education Reform, and Pam Benigno from the Independence Institute are a few of these key supporters. When it comes to charter schools from a national perspective, these are the go-to folks.

Donnell Rosenberg (*A Parent's Voice*) has become a dear friend, and operated much as a voice of sanity. Donnell also has a much more defined view of politics than what I do, and she has helped me tremendously with understanding some of the issues surrounding our local charter schools. She is unafraid of speaking her mind, and one of the strongest advocates for parental rights to choice in education that I've ever known.

Then we have the scores of charter school leaders, founders, teachers, directors, students, and parents who submitted information and stories about their charter school experiences. In addition to the many charter schools that are featured throughout the book, there is a list of more than seventy award-winning schools in the index of this book!

Nancy Cleary of Wyatt-MacKenzie Publishing deserves an honorable mention for taking a chance on an unusual topic with an unknown author.

Last, but not least, my family deserves a huge thank you.

My husband, Jeff Piper, the love of my life and the wind beneath my wings, is an absolute saint. If you don't agree with me now, you will soon, as my offbeat sense of humor is in print throughout this entire book. Every time you roll your eyes at one of my bad jokes, think about what my husband endures on a daily basis.

And to my kids, who have taken me on this journey. If it wasn't for them—well, I wouldn't be sitting here writing this book, because I would not be a *charter school mom.*

A grand thank you to all!

DISCLAIMER

This book is designed to provide information on charter schools. It is sold with the understanding that the publisher and the author are not engaged in rendering legal or other professional services. If legal or other expert advice is required, the services of a competent professional should be sought.

It is not the purpose of this manual to reprint all the information that is otherwise available to parents, educators, and business professionals, but instead to complement, amplify, and supplement other texts.

You are urged to read all the available material, learn as much as possible about school options, and tailor the information to your individual needs. For more information, see the many resources in the appendix.

Charter schools, like any school, are not a one-size-fits-all solution. People who pursues a charter school as a chosen form of education must expect to invest a lot of time and effort in their child's schooling success. For many families, charter schools have served as solid public school options that meet the unique needs of their individual students.

Every effort has been made to make this handbook as complete and accurate as possible. However, there may be mistakes, both typographical and in content. Therefore, this text should only be used as a general guide and not the ultimate source of charter school information. Furthermore, this manual contains information on charter schools that is current only up to the printing date.

The purpose of this manual is to entertain and educate. The author and publisher shall have neither liability nor responsibility to any person or entity with respect to any loss or damage caused, or alleged to have been caused, directly or indirectly, by the information contained in this book.

If you do not wish to be bound by the above, you may return this book to the publisher according to the publisher refund policy.

The Importance of School Choice

Who makes choices for your child? If you asked my kids this question they'd tell you they do. Don't let them fool you. If this were the case, they'd run around dirty, eat nothing but crap, and stay up until the cows came home. The person who does the choosing is responsible for the results of decisions made—the good, bad, and indifferent. If you don't believe me, imagine feeding your kid a heap of sugar and then sending them to the neighbors for an afternoon. Don't try this at home—not even in your mother-in-law's home.

Clearly choices come with consequences, some more permanent than others. Education definitely falls within the category of potential, long-term side effects. Parents decide what is best for their kids. After all, as parents we are also the ones accountable for future consequences. So why is it that some folks feel that the government knows best about what type of school is a proper fit for your kid? Is it that the state knows your kid better than you, the parent? Or is it that the government wants to be responsible for the consequences?

The irony is that it is generally the people that advise government-knows-best-education that wag a finger at "uninvolved parents" when reports of failing schools come out. On the flip side, the government has a place in our public schools since they are funded with public taxpayer dollars. But choosing the school that is the best fit for your child still belongs to the parent.

I am a believer that parent involvement in education makes the difference between failure and success. However, the parents should be enabled to make educational decisions for their children from the get-go. A child should not need to endure educational failure before it's acceptable for a parent to represent their student's needs.

Regardless of the school you pick, you are making a choice. Placing your child in a neighborhood public school is a choice, too! Quality education is a children's right issue. Selecting which education better fits the child is a matter of parental rights.

The Charter School Choice

There is a vast ocean of school choices including homeschooling, private, online, and magnet schools. How do charter schools contribute to the education assortment?

Charter schools are affordable to all families

Prior to charter school law school choice was for the rich. Private school tuition and homeschooling may be impossible for a low-income family. Since charter schools are public schools there are no tuition fees; hence, they are viable alternatives for families regardless of background and income.

Charter schools provide education diversity within public schools

States with charter school laws have created fantastic opportunities for school districts to serve their students with diverse needs, hence retaining more students who may otherwise need to seek options beyond public education. Progressive public schools have strong partnerships with their charter school counterparts and work collaboratively and inclusively to effectively meet the needs of its students.

This is the type of relationship we will see more of as state lawmakers and education leaders increasingly gain awareness of the advantages of public charter schools.

Charter schools offer innovative teaching methods

Since charters have fewer regulations than other public schools, they can explore cutting-edge teaching tools and curricula that may take longer for other schools to implement.

The benefit is on several levels: firstly, the charter school teachers and

students may experience immediate gains; secondly, the greater public school system would have the advantage of having another educational entity implement new programs.

If you question the benefit of this, ask yourself how you feel about anything that is "version one"; let it be a car, computer, or service. Version one is notorious for recalls and updates. It is an advantage for traditional schools to observe other public schools trying out a new program or service to learn what worked and what didn't.

A friend of mine bought a new cell phone that I had been drooling over for some time. It was a well advertised little number, which had all the bells and whistles. It was also a new release. Although I don't wish my friends to go through difficulty (not even with something as trivial as a cell phone), I must say I learned tons about that snazzy phone through her imperfect experience.

Charter Schools are designed with specific criteria

Charter school agreements are written with specific purposes. There are charter schools that cater to gifted and talented students, at-risk youth (a term used loosely as all kids who do not get their educational needs met are at risk of not graduating), pregnant teens, and many more. Charter schools are like snowflakes; they are unique, even compared with one another.

Charter schools drive up the overall quality of education

This is a topic I cover carefully. Some feel that charter schools are competition to other public schools; I do not agree. Charter schools provide educational options unique from traditional schools. Many of these charter students would end up in a private or homeschooling situation should their current charter education cease to exist.

Education is not a commodity product; hence it does not compete. If you think about it, you cannot apply the "supply and demand" principle to education. Demand for good education does not go up and down. It is a

constant. The number of students may vary, but the demand for quality education does not change. Supply of excellent education may unfortunately vary, but due to different circumstances than demand.

However, where there is choice, quality goes up. When students are not held hostage by schooling of default, education leaders pay extra attention. If quality is not maintained, the students have the choice to be serviced elsewhere.

Although comparing charter school offerings with its traditional peers is like comparing apples and oranges, it is still fruit. If the apples are rotten, there may be a rush for oranges and vice versa. The fruit vendor is prudent to assure his offering is top notch when there is a choice.

Here is a terrific article written by Alexander Ooms (who serves on the board of West Denver Preparatory Charter Schools), which describes the difference between choice and competition.

Competition vs. Choice

By Alexander Ooms

Denver Public Schools' recent decision to have different schools share buildings provoked fearful cries of "increased competition" among some neighborhood advocates. But these objections blur the important distinction between competition and choice.

While unfettered competition could well have a negative impact on public education, managed choice (and the resulting academic specialization) can benefit everyone.

Organizations that offer commodity products compete primarily on price (think gas stations). Those that offer non-commodities compete by having different products or services. Public education is not a commodity product, but defenders of the status quo often act like it is, and assume that adding a second school to a half-full building can only mean the demise of the original school.

That assumption is unfounded. Demand for commodity products does not increase with more choice (i.e., one does not buy more gas because there are two stations). But demand often increases for products that are reasonably distinct, even if they are located right next door.

If, within a single building, one gives different schools the autonomy and ability to better focus their academic programs, there is no reason to think they won't both attract more students and do a better job helping them learn.

The common example of this differentiation in business is Starbucks, which took an industry with a single bland offering and both introduced new products (skinny caramel soy latte, anyone?) and provided better service. Surprisingly, instead of a new Starbucks resulting in the demise of all nearby coffee shops as once feared, it often helps them. According to the Specialty Coffee Association of America, from 2000 to 2005, in the midst of Starbucks' period of rapid growth, the number of independent coffeehouses grew 40%.

This phenomenon is not limited to business. There is a large body of research on the tendency of like-minded organizations to "cluster" and the benefits that clustering brings. In industries as varied as textiles, medical research and the visual arts, similar organizations in close proximity see increases in both innovation and productivity.

Of course, public education is not coffee. Opening a public school requires significant planning and a lengthy application process carefully vetted by both DPS and the Board of Education with considerable community input. Any competition is carefully weighed among different factions, and Colorado's school choice law ensures that there is no centralized planning such that students are required to attend a specific school. Increasingly, the role of public school boards includes the approval and oversight of new schools, a process DPS manages increasingly well.

What DPS has achieved through the decision to share school buildings is the ability to offer students and families carefully placed educational choices that can help all schools, placing programs together that often complement each other or allow each to focus on their strengths. Thus, West High School will share with Edison, a middle school that could easily increase the number and academic preparation of kids eventually attending West. Kunsmiller Creative Arts Academy, slated as a K-12 integrated arts school, will share a facility with sixth- to eighth-grade West Denver Prep, which overlaps in middle school years but will offer a different, highly structured curriculum and culture.

Smiley Middle School, with a specific International Baccalaureate program, will share with a new Envision school that features project-based learning. An elementary school run by the Denver teachers union will share with a high school expansion from the nationally successful Knowledge is Power Program.

Managed choice is important because there is no single school model that works for all kids. Increasingly, the idea of a single school that is the right fit for every child in a neighborhood is problematic. No one disputes that kids can be vastly different, so why do we demand that different kids attend only one local school?

Having different schools in close proximity allows each the option to specialize. New York City recently graded its public schools, and the eight specialized schools within the city all received the highest ranking. It is likewise no coincidence that the two best high schools in DPS—located less than a mile apart—are both highly focused: Denver School of the Arts and Denver School of Science and Technology.

When opponents decry "competition" in shared buildings, they overlook the benefits: Increased and better school choices will help more of Denver's families choose some form of public education in one of its evolving flavors. And the truth is that competition for public schools already exists in private schools or in dropping out altogether. This is the competition that public school advocates should fear most—not the choice of a different educational program in the same building.

Quick Facts

This Q & A will cover the ten most commonly asked charter school questions. Detailed information on each topic will be covered throughout the book.

1. What is a charter school?

A charter school is a public school that is operated by an entity other than its district (or authorizer) and accountable for its student's performance. *See chapter 1.*

2. Are charter schools public or private schools?

Charter schools are ***public schools***. *See chapter 1.*

3. Do charter schools charge tuition?

No. *See chapter 1.*

4. How are charter schools different than traditional schools?

Charters are designed to be autonomous from their district (or authorizer) and answer to fewer regulations than its traditional counterpart, but are held accountable for student achievement. *See chapter 1.*

5. How is a charter school funded?

Charter schools receive state funding, and in some cases federal, grant, and local tax revenue shares. *See chapter 26.*

6. Do charter schools handpick their students?

No. Charter schools are public schools and must follow antidiscrimination laws. *See chapters 21 and 30.*

7. Are charter school teachers qualified?

Yes. *See chapter 5.*

8. Do charter school students take standardized tests?

Yes.

9. Does my state have charter school laws?

Forty states and the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico have signed charter school law as of May2009.

See chapter 28 and the appendix.

10. Is a charter school right for my family?

Only you can decide this. *Charter Schools: The Ultimate Handbook for Parents* will provide you with basic information and worksheets for your research. *See chapters 18, 19, 20, and 21.*

Part 1

The ABCs of Charter Schools

In Part 1:

1. What Is a Charter School?
   Definition and explanation for parents
2. The History of Charter Schools
   The genesis of charter schools and the creation of charter laws
3. Why Do Parents Choose Charter Schools?
   Parent testimonials

OVERVIEW

- What is a "charter school?"
- The definition of a charter school and the purpose they serve is one of the misinterpreted topics of education today.
- Part 1 will provide parents with the basic facts on charter school origins.
- You will also get that nagging question answered: why do parents choose charter schools?
- The answers will come directly from charter school parents.
- This is the beginning of your education about charter schools.

CHAPTER 1

What Is a Charter School?

Definitions of Charter Schools:

"Charter schools are nonsectarian public schools of choice that operate with freedom from many of the regulations that apply to traditional public schools." —*US Charter Schools*

"Charter schools are semiautonomous public schools, founded by educators, parents, community groups, or private organizations that operate under a written contract with a state, district, or other entity." —*Education Committee of the States*

"The term 'charter school' means a public school that: in accordance with a specific State statute authorizing the granting of charters to schools, is exempt from significant state or local rules that inhibit the flexible operation and management of public schools, but not from any rules relating to the other requirements of this paragraph [the paragraph that sets forth the Federal definition]." —*U.S. Department of Education, No Child Left behind, Charter Schools Program*

Charter School [noun];

Charter schools are innovative and independent public schools run by an entity other than its authorizer. These schools are produced by parents, organizations, or community groups to fill an educational need not otherwise offered by traditional schools.

There are two principles that guide charter schools: they are operationally autonomous public schools, exempt from many of the procedural requirements of district public schools, and they are accountable for student achievement.

Charter schools are intended to be unique of its traditional public school counterpart. That's just the whole point—isn't it? If offering a public school

option, creating more of the same would simply defy the purpose. Why bother with education reform if it is not with the goal of improving the offering that already exists?

There is no magic bullet, and there is no "one-size-fits all" education. What works beautifully for one student is a disaster for another. Our traditional public schools are set up to offer education for the general masses. In some cases it works, other times not so much.

The reason a child is not learning to his or her full potential is not always the fault of poor national education or an inferior teacher. Sometimes a student just falls outside the peripheral lines of his or her learning environment. Whether your child is bored out of his gourd and needs more of a challenge, or falling behind the rest of the class, finding a solution is pertinent. Ignoring a child's individual education needs can evolve into a future disaster.

So what is a parent to do for a child that fits this description? First, you (the parent) are your child's advocate. Without your involvement and support little can be done to improve the situation. Second, you need to consult a professional who can advise about your child's specific requirements. Your school district or state education department can provide you with contact information to such specialists in your area.

Contact information for your state's education department is in the appendix of *Charter Schools: The Ultimate Handbook for Parents.* Next, it is time to research your education options, and that's what you are doing by reading this book. We will give you the tools to do this in future chapters, but before you start working the formulas, we recommend that you read the preceding chapters.

Making a school choice is a tough decision and research should always begin with understanding the principles behind each option.

Do not choose a school based on anybody else's opinion but your own.

The above sentence, my friend, is the fine print of this book.

CHAPTER 2

The History of Charter Schools

Once upon a time in 1974, there were no charter schools. Along came a professor named Ray Budde. He was one of those kind-looking fellows with the same hairdo as Mr. Clean. Budde was a teacher and an enthusiast of organizational theories. He channeled both these passions into a paper for the Society for General Systems and titled it "Education by Charter." The response to this paper was as anticlimactic as it was unanimous—there was none.

Apparently Budde's colleagues did not feel that there was much of a problem with the existing structure of the educational system. So Budde stashed his solution to a nonexistent problem away for a decade or so. Thank goodness that paper shredders were not all the rage yet.

Then the 1980s came along. The United States was moonwalking in parachute pants and entertained by *The Breakfast Club* and *Saved by the Bell*. We also received *The Nation at Risk* and the *Carnegie Forum* reports. Suddenly, through the ozone-thinning cloud of Aqua Net hairspray, it became clear: There was a problem with our schools. Our educational system needed a face-lift.

Budde dug out his old paper and managed to get it published by the *Northeast Regional Lab*. He also did what every self-respecting, recently published author would do—and mailed a copy to the serving president of the United States—George H.W. Bush.

Then one Sunday in July, Mrs. Budde noted that her hubby had made the paper. She pointed to a column that reported the *American Federation of Teachers*' support of the notion of having teachers initiate autonomous schools. The AFT president, Albert Shanker, was even quoted stating that Budde had the best name for these schools: "charter schools."

The AFT teachers union was already one of the most organized sectors in the country, much to Shanker's credit. Shanker, like Budde, was a teacher at heart. He had built a career upon opposing unfairness toward teachers—low pay and lack of voice. Shanker's early support of charter schools really