Reviews for “Charter Schools and the Corporate Makeover of Public Education: What’s at Stake?” by Michael Fabricant, Michelle Fine, Deborah Meier (Foreword) (2012)

“A spectacular book—needs to be published yesterday.”
—Deborah Meier, New York University

“A compelling analysis of the promise, politics, and problems of charter schools. The authors go well beyond a defense of the status quo in offering a progressive agenda to more fully realize education’s democratic ideals.”
—Gary Rhoades, Professor of Higher Education, University of Arizona

“Fabricant and Fine present an invaluably clear, historically textured, and carefully argued account of the charter school idea and its transformation from progressive, teacher-driven experiment to corporate, neoliberal edge of the wedge against public education and the public sector writ large.”
—Adolph Reed, Jr., Professor of Political Science, University of Pennsylvania

“The authors help us see that the emperor has no clothes when one truthfully examines the entire heavily funded charter school movement and the emerging privatization of public education. If you think it does not or will not affect you, please read this revealing book.”
—Barbara J. Fields, Professor of American History, Columbia University

Michael Fabricant is a professor at the Hunter College School of Social Work and executive officer of the Ph.D. Program in Social Welfare.

Michelle Fine is a distinguished professor of Social Psychology, Women’s Studies, and Urban Education at the Graduate Center, CUNY.
Michael Fabricant and Michelle Fine, *Charter Schools and the Corporate Makeover of Public Education: What's at Stake?*

Charter Schools and the Corporate Makeover of Public Education: What’s at Stake? by Michael Fabricant; Michelle Fine

Review by: Y. Kafi Moragne-Patterson

*Social Service Review*, Vol. 88, No. 3 (September 2014), pp. 529-533

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/678461

Accessed: 25/08/2014 11:25

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Michael Fabricant and Michelle Fine’s book Charter Schools and the Corporate Makeover of Public Education: What’s at Stake? situates the evolution of the charter school movement within contemporary debates surrounding the privatization of public education. The authors’ wealth of experience in the education arena makes for a book that strives to provide a thorough and thought-provoking analysis of the ways in which charters, as a strategy for educational intervention, animate and exacerbate the derailment of democratic process and educational equity in the racially polarized landscape of American education.

From the onset of the book, the authors make an important distinction between the noble intentions of the early charter school movement and the contemporary use of charters as instruments for suppressing the democratic process. The former, which in some ways replicated the goals of the small schools movement, aimed to create learning environments that provided smaller teacher-to-student ratios, afforded teacher flexibility, and practiced innovative curricula reflecting the cultural and academic needs of the surrounding community. The latter, the authors suggest, uses anti-union rhetoric and performance-based measures to take advantage of soaring rates of parental disillusionment with neighborhood public schooling options in resource-drained communities. By distinguishing modern-day implementation from the origins of the movement in chapter 1, the authors are able to judiciously laud high-performing charters that are, in fact, serving their student populations well, while simultaneously examining the larger role of charter schools in the dismantlement of education and the refashioning of the very notion of the public sphere.

In chapter 2, Fabricant and Fine describe the evolution of the charter school commitment from an altruistic social justice orientation to a business-
oriented model that uses schools as a front for political gain with little attention to educational outcomes. This chapter raises an important question about the need for avenues of accountability within public/private education ventures: What bureaucratic tensions of traditional schools are mimicked in charters, which rely on significant funding from private investment? The authors suggest that charters have overleveraged indebtedness to charter management organizations and education management organizations, resulting in excessive bureaucratic fees supporting real estate and business endeavors that ultimately contribute to charters falling short on their promises to students and their families.

Additionally, limited accountability structures aggravate conditions for corruption, which the authors demonstrate with the case of Victory Schools, Inc.: “Three city charter schools are on the hook for thousands of dollars in interest payments to a for-profit management company. Victory Schools, Inc., charges charter schools between $2,000 and $2,700 a student for back office support and help with curriculum planning and hiring” (31). In the absence of robust empirical data from the charter schools themselves, anecdotes of this magnitude provide readers with insight into the inner workings of charter infrastructure and raise questions about the political agenda of policy prescriptions favoring a pro-charter sentiment despite significant rates of academic underperformance and curious administrative expenditures.

After examining the political and educational motivation for what the authors posit is an underexamined and inconclusive educational intervention, chapter 3 asserts that, “Quite simply, charter performance declines as the number of charter schools increases and oversight capacity grows more lax. This should not be surprising; as the gates are opened more widely, it is difficult to ensure quality control. Deregulation diminishes quality” (43). Fabricant and Fine effectively weigh empirical data from the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) study to analyze the promised deliverables of the charter movement (student achievement, equity, parental engagement, educator quality/retention, and innovation) against evidence that they suggest runs counter to the promises made by pro-charter entities. For example, according to the CREDO study, “most charters do as well as or less well than traditional public schools on achievement tests; 17 percent outperform local schools” (38). This chapter ultimately pushes the reader to wonder what implications are associated with expanding an undereval-
uated educational intervention like charters. Fabricant and Fine’s answer is a racially stratified, highly privatized education system that overlooks the critical needs of students who lack political cachet, particularly students with special needs, English Language Learners, and students who are counseled out of charter schools for behavioral issues. For example, when looking at one of the more well-known charter networks, Knowledge Is Power, the authors draw on the work of Charles Payne and Tim Knowles (“Charter Schools, Urban School Reform, and the Obama Administration,” Harvard Educational Review 79 [2009]: 227–39), who state: “However, there were significant problems, including attrition. Of the students who entered fifth grade in 2003, 60 percent left before the eighth grade. . . . The portrait here seems to be one of schools having valuable social and academic impacts for a select subgroup of vulnerable children, but not reaching the toughest kids” (49). According to the authors, public schools, with even fewer resources, are then left in the precarious position of finding placement for displaced students seeking alternative school options throughout the school year.

Given empirical evidence of the poor to mediocre performance of the majority of charters, why are major cities opting to expand charters in the face of less than optimal academic outcomes? Chapter 4 reveals the more ominous side of the political agendas advancing charter expansion, with close attention to the evolving language of reform that views charters “as the organizational instrument expected to transform a deregulated public education marketplace into an engine for academic achievement” (63). Fabricant and Fine methodically argue that educational reform, legitimated by influential names such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Facebook, Dell, and the Broad Foundation, is shaped by the economic and political desires of philanthropic support that uses charters as catalysts for the encroachment of private sector goals and standards over the larger realm of public education.

Taking the examples of Chicago, New York, and New Orleans, chapter 5 looks at the ways in which charters perpetuate racial and economic stratification in the poorest communities by exacerbating dropout rates. While exact statistical figures are difficult to find because of the isolated accountability structure of charters, the authors note, “scholars and policy analysts across the political spectrum agree that the rates are high, racialized, and most acute in central cities for students attending ‘dropout factories’” (105). While this is likely true for charters, it is unfortunately also true, although to
a lesser extent, for the entire public education system, which has lost a substantial amount of legitimacy due to failed engagement with parents and abysmal academic outcomes among many low-income students of color. Herein lies the greatest limitation of the book. Why are so many low-income, minority families looking to charters for alternative education outlets? What undergirds the racially charged patterns of tension and mistrust of public education? The authors leave the reader with an overly charitable reading of the current state of the public education system, which has left many parents rightfully disillusioned with traditional schools.

The book concludes with examples of two distinct school districts mobilizing to address issues of educational inequity and democratic process in their communities: one charter and one traditional. The authors provide an example of a successful charter to remind readers that successful charter schools do exist and that they support any type of school doing right by the children they serve. However, Fabricant and Fine suggest that the small amount of successful charters should not be the foundation for public policies pushing charter expansion in the face of little substantiated evidence of academic success and curricular innovation.

The book’s overall tone sets up an opposition of charter versus traditional, which is somewhat reductive since both systems are overwhelmingly failing students. The larger question becomes not charter versus traditional, but what type of educational systems are doing best at closing generational educational deficits. How can we think collectively about creating a holistic education plan that does not intensify the underutilization crisis and the dropout phenomenon? Through what mechanisms might this collaboration occur? The book’s charter versus traditional school outlook may ultimately leave readers wondering: If one supports the role of traditional schools, how do we work to restore organizational legitimacy to the public school system? If one agrees that charters are not producing results that justify the financial and leadership advantages afforded to them, how do we then yield bigger payoffs in the public sphere? Fabricant and Fine do not provide an extensive answer to this question, but their discussion restores important topics like race and class to the forefront of conversations animating discussions of education and civic engagement in the United States.

Fabricant and Fine are to be applauded for taking on the highly contested debate over the privatization of education at a time when private donors and federal policy squarely espouse a pro-charter sentiment. Logically or-
ganized and empirically sound in the face of limited data from the charter world, Fabricant and Fine’s book persuasively articulates the need for a re-imagining of the long-term effects of auctioning off one of our most sacred public goods to the highest bidder.

Y. Kafi Moragne-Patterson
University of Chicago


In the post–World War II era, Europe embraced expectations of guaranteed income among its citizenry, regardless of their efforts to seek new employment. During the 1960s and 1970s, such a policy was even explored in the United States through the Seattle-Denver Income Maintenance Experiments. Yet over the last 30 years, governments around the world have altered their stance, and now income support policies are accompanied by mandatory work requirements. These labor support attachment programs, known domestically as Work First, have been national policy in the United States since the mid-1990s, with similar trends appearing in other industrialized countries.

In Work and the Welfare State, editors Evelyn Brodkin and Gregory Marston document this cross-national turn by focusing on the implementation of Work First policies by street-level organizations. They intend to explore how the practices of these organizations actually redraw the boundaries of the welfare state through what they term the “workfare project,” which they define as “a composite of policies and practices through which countries have promoted participation in the paid labor market and reductions in income assistance to those outside the labor market” (6). While there are many potential ways to examine welfare policy and the roles that organizations play in its implementation, the editors intend for these essays to examine the intersection of policy, politics, and organizational management and to evaluate what results in terms of the welfare state.

The editors have three aims in this volume. First, they want to connect organizational studies with the literature examining the politics of the welfare state. They accomplish this objective thoroughly. Street-level organiza-