

In the Nick of Time

Going down for the third time, Nick Shekerjian was saved by a charter school.

By Onnie Shekerjian

Henry Ford once said, “People can have the Model T in any colour, so long as it’s black.” Not long ago, this same lack of choices prevailed in public education, but not any more. Charter schools are providing additional choices with positive results for many children — including our son.

Nick was sinking in the depths of traditional public school complacency. He didn’t have special needs, nor was he a behavioural problem, but he was just not advancing. His father and I read with him nightly, helped with homework, and yet Nick was below grade level in reading.

In grade 3, he began hating school. Bullying had become an issue, with grade 5 boys pushing him and his buddies around. Nick became increasingly depressed.

Our voiced concerns were met with blank stares and feeble reassurances from the teacher that Nick was an average student who was doing fine.

I met with the principal regarding our playground concerns, only to be told Nick needed to be more ‘assertive.’ It was apparent the bullying would not be stopped and his reading issues not addressed.

Having been on my local school board, I knew all too well that the district administration would do little to resolve the problems our son was experiencing, viewing them as too insignificant.

While insignificant to the school district organization as a whole, these problems were devastating for Nick. The devastation was made more than clear when our young son told us, “I kept asking grown-ups at school for help but no one would help me.”

Hearing that from Nick was like a knife in our hearts.

Fortunately, in Arizona, parents have public charter schools, so that we had additional options and choices. We placed him in D.W. Higgins Institute, a public charter school.

Testing revealed he was six months below grade level in his reading when he entered D.W. Higgins in January. By the end of the school year, Nick had advanced over two grade levels.

You can imagine how pleased we were to see our grade 3 son reading at a mid-grade 5 level. We were also overjoyed to greet the return of Nick’s sunny personality — the delightful result of the ban on disrespectful behaviour between students at D.W. Higgins. But there is more to this story.

Last May, as Nick’s grade 4 year came to a close, we received his Stanford 9 scores. The results were incredible. Nick scored the equivalent of “post high school” on reading comprehension, editing, composing, and language. While we realize that a test is a ‘snapshot in time’ and just one piece of the puzzle of a child’s education, the numbers on this test validate what we see at home.

Nick’s work ethic is now excellent. He reads for pleasure and takes responsibility for his learning and homework. He loves school and is emotionally a different child from the one who scribbled “my life stinks” on a piece of paper days before we pulled him from the neighbourhood school.

Because the charter school movement gave us, as parents, the ability to choose our son’s school, Nick is soaring. Charter schools have empowered parents to become fully responsible for their children’s individual educational needs by providing additional choices.

Eventually, even the Ford Motor Company realized the great value of offering choices to meet customers’ individual needs. My ‘mocha-coloured’ Ford minivan is proof of that.

(Mrs. Shekerjian is the vice-president of the Arizona State Board for Charter Schools. Adapted with permission from Parent Power!, January 2002, a publication of the Center for Education Reform, www.edreform.com)

Charter Schools are:

- **Public** (open to all students)
- **Publicly-funded** (no tuition fees)
- **Chosen by parents** (not assigned)
- **Self-governing** (free of school boards and thus able to control their own budget, staffing, hours, transportation, etc.)
- **Accountable** (their charters can be revoked if they do not attract enough students or if they do not meet the terms outlined in their charters)
- **Sponsored** (usually overseen by a non-profit organization such as a university or civic group)
- **Specialized** (usually catering to a particular type of student, such as at-risk or ESL students)
- **Small** (seldom more than 300 students, with small class sizes)
- **Egalitarian** (typically serving a slightly-higher percentage of minority and low-income students than neighboring regular public schools)
- **Financially challenged** (most charter schools receive less funding than regular public schools)
- **Thriving** (enrolment is increasing and retention rates are high)
- **Exploding** (there are now almost 2400 charter schools in North America)
- **Successful** (parents and teachers are more satisfied and student achievement is better)
- **Benign** (in areas with many charter schools, the regular public schools tend to improve)
- **Mainly American** (Alberta is the only Canadian province with charter school legislation, and it has only 11 charter schools)