

The *QUICK* and the ED

Thursday, May 08, 2008

Breaking Down School Choice Silos

Over at [This Week in Education](#), Alexander Russo criticizes the charter school movement for being too insular and for being absent from conversations about improving traditional public schools—where the vast majority of students are, and likely will continue, to be educated for the foreseeable future. I agree that too often conversations about charter schools and traditional public schools happen in isolation, or only the context of charters versus districts. I had the good fortune to attend a conference on Tuesday that took a decidedly different tone, focusing on the common goal of Chicago charter schools and [Chicago Public Schools](#)—to [create many new and better school choices](#) for students and parents in the city.

The conference, held by the [Renaissance Schools Fund](#), a partner to CPS's Renaissance 2010 initiative to create 100 new schools, didn't focus just on charter schools or just on creating and turning around traditional public schools. Instead the conversation revolved around topics that cut across all types of schools. Sessions focused on best practices for replicating successful school models, how to involve private philanthropy, ensuring that proposals for new schools—whether they are charter or district schools—are vetted through a rigorous quality review process, and the struggles associated with turning around an existing school. The panelists varied from practitioners in CPS schools to charter school operators, to the people in philanthropy and non-profit organizations that work to create and support these new schools. All in all, it was a great discussion about what it takes to establish high quality new school options, including restructuring existing schools.

But I'm not sure if this type of conversation was possible a few years ago, before charter schools were a sizable part of the education scene in many urban districts and before it was clear that charter schools aren't going away any time soon. And I'm not sure if it will happen in districts that don't have the leaders—mayors, schools superintendents, and leaders in the business and nonprofit communities—who are willing to see charter schools a source of ideas and talent for improving an entire school district.

One thing was clear from the conference—that lessons learned (and still being learned) from the charter school movement, including balancing autonomy and accountability, ensuring quality in new schools, and replicating existing school models—can be, and should be, applied in school districts that are looking to make some real changes and create new options for students.