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## **When It Goes Wrong at a Charter School**

By MICHAEL WINERIP

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GILBERT, Ariz[ona]. LIFE at a charter school is always exciting, as Tracey Benson, a mom, has learned. She has enrolled her children in three charters in four years, and if there is one word she'd use to describe their educational experience, it's turmoil. She pulled her three youngsters out of their first charter in 2001. "It had the same problem lots of charters have, teachers leaving in droves, teachers coming in droves," she says. "Not good for learning."

But wait. Wasn't that supposed to be the beauty of charters? No unions, no tenure. Here in Arizona, America's most charter-school-friendly state, a charter principal doesn't even need a college degree. When it comes to charters, Arizona's motto is, "Let the free market rule, baby." Mrs. Benson withdrew her children from their second charter school last Christmas. She has a sixth grader, Jordan, and a seventh grader, Jacob. Their two classes were taught by three teachers, and suddenly two of them were gone. "One was a great, experienced teacher," says Mrs. Benson, "but made too much. They needed to cut costs. After that, classes were unruly."

In January, she tried charter No. 3, the Benchmark School, in this middle-class Phoenix suburb. For three weeks, everything seemed fine. Then the kids came home and said, "Mommy, at assembly today they told us they're closing our school in two weeks." A hundred parents gathered at the school for a meeting. But the gate was locked. And when they banged on the door, Kenneth Finnegan, the charter's business manager, would not open up. Instead, he called the police.

As Randy Payan, a parent, recalls, "The police said: 'We got a call from a man inside who fears for his life. The owner wants you off the property.'" Parents were shocked. "These are all good, hard-working people - the lot was jammed with huge S.U.V.'s," says Mr. Payan, a businessman who arrived in a new Toyota Sequoia. The parents called Carey Pena of Channel 3 News, who rushed to the scene. "It was such a cruel way for the school to handle it," says Ms. Pena. "These were good people - crying kids, angry moms and dads." Mr. Payan says, "We saw Finnegan come out and get into his S.U.V., but he still wouldn't talk to us." So they faced the camera and chanted: "Talk to us, Finnegan! Talk to us, Finnegan!"

Practically overnight, Benchmark officials did a flip-flop and announced that the school would stay open till the end of the year.

When charters first appeared, they were touted as the free-market alternative to bad old public schools. Charters get public money for each child they attract (\$5,100 a head in Arizona). To lure students, charter leaders often derided the bad old public schools and promised fast results, including sky-high test scores. But like a lot of 1990's market miracles, the charter bubble has burst. In Arizona, which has 457 charters, one-sixth of the nation's total, they have been labeled underperforming by the state at nearly twice the rate (36 percent) as public schools (19 percent), according to Gene V Glass, an Arizona State University professor. Regulation is so loose that the state charter board is often the last to know that a school is collapsing. The state file on Benchmark, one of three schools run by a nonprofit company, Life School College Preparatory, was full of red flags.

Last May, parents complained to the board that the custodians had been fired and students were spending an hour a day cleaning. In July, ABS, a company that provides business services to charters, wrote that it was owed \$655,403 and was terminating its contract. In September, the state sent a notice to the charter saying it had not received the school's financial reports for 2000 or 2001. A quick visit to Benchmark last fall would have revealed that it was half-empty, down 200 students (at \$5,100 a head, a \$1 million revenue shortfall).

So when did the state open an investigation? According to Kristen Jordison, the charter board director, when a parent called in late January to say Benchmark was closing. For his part, Mr. Finnegan, the charter business manager, puts blame for the parking lot fiasco on a few parents who "lathered up the group." He says the only problem is a shortfall of 400 students at the company's three schools, leading to revenue losses. "No one's stealing money," he says. "The state audits everything. You couldn't steal if you wanted to. Well, you could - other charters have, but they were caught." He says he was hired in November to better position the charter in the marketplace. "We have no sports teams, no performing arts, no identity. It's hard to compete for kids."

The \$655,403 claim by ABS management? Inflated and likely to wind up in court, says Mr. Finnegan. The missing financial reports? "The state lost them," he says. "But it's been taken care of." He's axed much of Benchmark's staff, and combined grades. Mrs. Benson's fourth grader, Joshua, is now in a mixed fourth- and fifth-grade class. Don Ring served as principal, and cleaned the school, but he, too, was axed. "Don said, 'I'll do whatever it takes to help,' and took it upon himself to mop the floors," says Mr. Finnegan. Must have been hard to let him go? "Not really," says Mr. Finnegan. "There were other issues."

This week the school gets its third principal in seven months. Mr. Finnegan says parents must be understanding. "Some parents need to go back to school and take an accounting course," he says. "They're upset we're not putting education first. But we can't put education first without money." Silly Mrs. Benson, still thinking about education. Joshua's new combined class has been unruly, she says. "They're angry about losing their teacher." Mr. Finnegan has told parents the school will reopen this fall as a performing arts charter. But when parents asked for details on the new curriculum, they got no answers. "They did tell us they're going to change the school name," Mrs. Benson says. "So people will think it's someplace different."