

Who would have thought? Exciting schools!

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School spending has doubled over the past 30 years. Yet what do we get? More buildings and more assistant principals – but student learning? No improvement. If you graph the numbers, the spending line slopes steeply, while the lines for reading, math and science scores are as flat as a dead man's EKG.

Why no improvement? Because K-12 education is a government monopoly, and monopolies don't improve.

And yet I'm happy to announce some good news: [Cool](#) things are starting to happen in classrooms.

I was surprised to meet kids who said they like school. What? I found school boring. How can it be that these fourth-graders tell me that they look forward to going to school and that math is "rockin' awesome"?

Those kids attend one of those new charter schools. Charters let them escape the bureaucracy of regular schools, including, often, [teachers](#) union rules. These schools compete for kids because parents can always choose another school. That makes them better.

Not every [charter school](#) is good, but the beauty of competition is that bad ones go out of business, while good ones expand. Then good [schools](#) teach more kids. Choice and competition produce quality. Anyone surprised?

Government schools rarely improve because no matter how bad they are, they still have captive customers.

The Harlem charter schools admit kids that bureaucrats label "at risk of failure." But these kids learn. And they do it at lower cost.

I visited another charter [chain](#), American Indian Public Charter Schools in Oakland, Calif., that gets similar top results, also at lower cost.

"Kids in American Indian Public Charter Schools score so far above the average for the state for public school children that there isn't even a word for it," says Andrew Coulson, director of the Cato Institute's Center for [Educational](#) Freedom.

Those schools use methods different from the charters in Harlem. For example, they pay some kids to tutor other kids.

Both charters do something that regular public schools rarely do: fire teachers. One charter principal calls it "freeing up a person's future."

You cannot maintain quality unless you can fire people, said Deborah Kenny, founder of Harlem Village Academies.

While bad teachers might get fired, *good* teachers are given freedom.

"They can choose their textbooks, teaching methods – as long as they, every quarter and every year, make sure that the students are learning what they need to learn," Kenny said.

In Harlem, 43 percent of eighth-graders pass state math tests. In Kenny's schools, 100 percent pass. So if charters work, why aren't there more of them? Because teachers unions hate them. The president of the Newark Teachers Union, Joseph Del Grosso, doesn't want charters in what he calls "his schools."

"Over my dead body, they're going to come there," he told me.

Because of that attitude, people who try to start charter schools often find that bureaucrats make it hard. But in one city, most kids now attend charters. How did that happen?

It happened because when Hurricane Katrina destroyed much of New Orleans, it also destroyed the school system. Some school reformers thought that might be a blessing.

"It was probably one of the worst school districts in the country," said Paul Pastorek, former Louisiana state superintendent of education. The state faced a choice: Rebuild the old system or build something new. It built something new. Opening charters became easy. Today, most kids in New Orleans attend charter schools, and test scores are better.

Ben Marcovitz started a charter school called Sci Academy.

"We have complete control over the quality of our instruction."

At first, only a third of his students were proficient on state tests. Now, Sci Academy's test results are among the best in the city.

Competition drives schools to try different things to succeed. It's similar to what happens with consumer goods – computers, refrigerators, cars – that get better every year.

If charter schools do this well, imagine what a really free and competitive system – one without compulsory tax [financing](#) and bureaucratic chartering procedures – could do.

Our kids deserve a free market in education.