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### **Whose side are you on? Examining why teachers unions and charter school advocates clash and how they can stop fighting each other and fight together to improve public education?**

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**‘WHOSE SIDE ARE YOU ON?  
EXAMINING WHY TEACHER  
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AND HOW THEY CAN STOP  
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FIGHT TOGETHER TO IMPROVE  
PUBLIC EDUCATION?’**

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## **Introduction**

In my mind, there hasn't been a better time in history to be a charter school advocate and a worse time to be a traditional public school teacher. In 2009, President Barack Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan directed \$4.35 billion as a part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act in order to create the educational reform initiative Race to the Top (Race to the Top Program, 4). Race to the Top is a competitive grant program that challenges states to reform their public education system. In this competitive process, states are scored based on their proposed reforms in five categories: Great Teacher and Leaders (138 total points), State Success Factors (125 Total Points), Standard and assessments (70 points), General Selection Criteria (55 total points), and Turning Around the Lowest-Achieving Schools (50 total points) (Race to the Top Program, 4).

One of the biggest point categories however, is under "General Selection Criteria" which has a 40-point category that supports the construction of charter schools (Race to the Top Program, 4). In awarding the stimulus funds, states without charter school caps and states that are thinking about removing their cap are given preference. Consequently, states that do not embrace charter schools will hurt their chances to compete for the millions of dollars in federal stimulus money.

This has resulted in just that. New York City raised its charter school cap from 200 to 460. The week before the Race to the Top submission deadline, Illinois raised its legislated cap from 60 to 120 charter schools statewide and allowed up to 75 charter schools to operate in Chicago, an increase from 30 charter schools. Tennessee raised its charter school cap in June 2009 from 50 to 90 schools, and Louisiana removed its charter

school cap entirely (Dillon, 2010). (These are just small examples of how Race to the Top has influenced states charter school laws). Forty states and the District of Columbia entered the first round. Delaware and Tennessee won the first round of awards and 9 states and the District of Columbia won education grants in the second round (Brill, 2). Race to the Top has helped reopen the charter school debate nationally and has had huge effects in Massachusetts, the recipient of the Race to the Top funds in the second round. Boston is the focus area of this research project and it relies heavily on charter school to educate its students. The Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 dramatically increased school funding in return for high academic standards, accountability, and enhanced school choice, and public charter schools are the principal vehicle for offering educational choice (Chieppo, Gass, 2009). Thus, charter schools have been embraced by the federal government and pushed to the front of the education reform agenda. However, everyone does not embrace charter schools. In this research project, I will begin to investigate the opposition to charter schools as well as the arguments that support their newfound growth.

In public discourse and popular media outlets, the debate about traditional public schools and charter school often pits them against each other. In this research project, I investigated these disputes by exploring the following questions: What are the factors that block dialogue between the public schools and charter schools? In what ways can traditional public schools and charter schools support and collaborate with each other? And what can each group learn for one another? By interviewing charter school advocates and traditional public school members, I try to open up a discussion between the two to figure out whose side are these groups on, the children's, their own or

somewhere else's? What I conclude is that although there are genuine barriers and disagreements between charter school advocates and traditional public schools, there are areas that can foster collaboration and support. And additionally, we must collaborate for the present and future of our educational system.

### **Literature Review**

The late president of the American federation of Teachers, Albert Shanker, actually popularized the ideas of charter school (Malin, 2007). He envisioned charter schools as a place where teachers had more control over the educational environment because he viewed the failure of public education as the fault of the system rather than its teachers (Malin, 2007). Now proponents of charter schools see charter schools as being more accountable than traditional public schools. This is because since charter schools operate on specific "charters". The school must meet the needs of its parents and students or be in danger of no longer existing. This is a threat that seldom is held of established traditional public schools (Bulkley, 322). With the elements of autonomy, innovation and a level of accountability, charter school advocates see these conditions as a vehicle that would lead to "improved student achievement, high parental and student satisfaction high teacher/employee satisfaction and empowerment, positive effects on the broader system of public education" (Bulkley, 319).

One of the biggest aspects that differentiate charters from the traditional public school is the idea of autonomy. Through their autonomy, charter schools can facilitate the creation of distinct educational practices (Bulkley, 322). Katrina Bulkley, an educational researcher, points out that autonomy in a charter school could take various forms. She states that autonomy can mean freedom from state regulation, control of their budgets,

instruction or curriculum, and it can provide autonomy for parents and students through the power of choice (Bulkley , 322). In addition, one study found out that this autonomy and freedom from the school district can better create learning communities (Bulkley, 323).

Proponents of charter schools believe that local governments' monopoly on how schools are run results in a culture of mediocrity regarding student performance (Henig, 146). Charter schools are argued as a remedy to this problem. Charter schools require other schools, traditional or otherwise, to compete for students and parents and their services. If these schools don't show that they can serve students, then charter school advocates believe that the student should be able to leave the traditional public school system (Henig, 147). In addition, charter school advocates believe that the market aspects and parental choice will lead to schools that are less segregated by race, class or student ability (Henig, 147). The effect of market values will do this. In contrast to the system of assigning children to schools based on where they live, which is seen by charter school folks as a way to reinforce and create segregation and inequities, choice on the other hand will decrease these numbers because school populations will be determined by the school's performance and offerings rather than its location (Henig, 147).

The opponents of charter schools consider the charter school market-oriented approach, a huge cause for concern. Opponents believe that a market approach to public education will worsen inequities based on "race, socioeconomic status and special need" (Henig, 145). A market approach, which is based on privatization and deregulation, is seen as disadvantaging certain families and empowers others (Henig, 145). In the study "*Creaming Versus Cropping: Charter School Enrollment Practices in Response to*

*Market Incentives*”, Jeffrey Henig and others highlight concerns of this market approach to education using a “supply-side and the “demand-side” explanation (Henig, 145).

When talking about who demands the educational services, particularly the parents, there is a claim that certain families are at a disadvantage. There is a belief that parents, especially low-income ones, have insufficient information to effectively be “consumers” in the created educational marketplace (Henig, 145). When deciding to choose schools, there is the fear that not all families have the same amount of time, money or knowledge as others when determining the quality of schools (Henig, 147). Also, if these parents had enough capital to choose, there is the argument that they may not be able to implement such choice (Henig, 147). Issues such as transportation are one of the biggest examples of one of these instances where a family might not choose a certain school because of how far away it is from their house (Henig, 147). Another concern along the supply-side of the market-oriented approach that charter schools bring to education is the advantage of schools to decide whom they are actually going to serve.

Looking at the supply-side, there are worries that the induced competition, brought by this market-approach, will pressure schools to lower cost and drop low-performing students in order to better compete with other schools (Henig, 146). Opponents of charter schools fear that as a consequence of pressure and the market approach, charter schools may “cream” students, a process of selecting students who are easier and less costly to educate, because this would “give the school the edge it needs to thrive in the marketplace” (Henig, 146). As a result, targeting high performing students would be an incentive for the school’s survival. Just as charter schools might target high-performers, charter school opponents fear that this may steer away “high-cost” students

like special education and limited English learners because of the higher probability of lower test scores that will affect the school's "bottom line" (Henig, 148). This gives charter schools the ability to shape their student demographics, a privilege that traditional public schools do not have. As a consequence, charter schools and the aspect of choice that accompanies it, re-segregates schools as the result of the flight by certain students (Weiher, 79). It is argued that students who have the greatest educational capital will flee the traditional public school for charter schools (Weiher, 79). This leads to another critique of charter schools regarding a perceived selective screening process where schools actively seek students that they already think will succeed (Charter Schools and Race, 4). Furthermore, charter schools are questioned about their ability and expertise to serve effectively large number of English Language Learners or severely disadvantaged students (Charter Schools and Race, 4).

## **Methods**

I interviewed three participants. Aaron Brown is the principal of the Greater Achievement Charter High School, Dave Austin is a teacher at the Greater Achievement Charter High School and Katie Smith is a unionized teacher at Broadview Public High School. All of the names of teachers and schools that are used in my research project are pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality on the participants' part. Initially, I wanted to have a larger sample size and multiple sites of schools. In my research proposal, I intended to at least have eight interviews in both New York City and Boston with four unionized teachers and four charter school advocates in total. Due to difficulty in obtaining access early on in my research, this did not happen. As a result I decided to focus specifically on Boston. I contacted the Boston Teacher Unions (BTU) in order to get the unionized

teacher perspective for my study. I decided who I was going to contact by looking at their officers member and staff list on their website. I then proceeded in emailing 5 out of the 10 members that were listed. Amongst some of the titles of the individuals that I chose to email, were their President, parent and community liaison and the co-editor of their Boston Teacher Union newspaper.

However, like I have stated before getting access was difficult. I succeeded in emailing and actually heard back from a few teachers and representatives who professed support in helping me obtain interviews. However, in following up with there initial support, I never received any more emails from any members of the BTU. After my first set of emails, I got the same response from a lot of the members. One of the interesting things that each of them said in their response was that they would like to participate but they made clear the fact that they did not represent the viewpoints of the Boston Teachers Union. I responded that I understood and actually preferred that. However, when I attempted to contact them again, I never got any responses.

With this unfortunate situation, I started to try and figure out different strategies to obtain data. I had to accept the fact that my participant size would not be as large or extensive as I once hoped it would be. Also, there was a time where the part about traditional public school teachers in my research project all together was in question. I was contemplating whether my study should only cover the charter school perspective. This decision would have changed my research question and as a result, my project entirely. However, I decided that a smaller data sample, even if it were just one teacher belonging to a union and teaching at a traditional public school would be beneficial in what I wanted to do with my research project. Since I wasn't planning on providing a

thesis per say, or an answer to a theoretical question, but rather map the debate between the two sides and have their words and sentiments speak for themselves, I believed that three extensive interviews would be sufficient. This is exactly what I did. All three of my interviews were between 35-40 minutes long. Any other research method would not have been the most appropriate method to use to get my desired results. Interviews were the tools that would most effectively present their voices and viewpoints and thus give me the data I was looking for in the project.

### **Data Analysis**

In my attempt to capture the representations of both charter schools and traditional public schools, with this research project, I realized through my interviews that this was an impossible task. An impossible task because of the realization that not one person, one reform policy, one movie or one charter school can accurately speak for something that is so varied, so fluid and so un-uniform as public education. This is one of the findings that I learned throughout collecting my data. Each one of my interviewees, warned against generalizations of how *all* charter schools and how *all* traditional public school operate, run and perform. Vast stereotypes and absolute statements about each type of school ultimately hurt the prospects of genuine dialogue.

### Harmful Generalizations

Aaron Brown, the principal of Greater Achievement Charter High School, when asked about the common claim that charter schools hurt traditional public schools because they drain them of the most motivated students and leave the less motivated students to go to local district schools, warns us:

“One of the things that I want to impress upon you in your study is that nuance is really the answer to a lot of these questions. There’s no monolithic charter school, they’re no monotonic district public school. And so when we speak I those sweeping generalizations it make it difficult to actually capture how complex and complicated the issue is how different schools are from one another.”<sup>1</sup>

Dave Austin, a teacher at Greater Achievement Charter High School, also felt sweeping statements and generalizations are cause for concern. He asserts, “It’s very difficult to make a blanket statement about something that all charter do... It just been set up in this very simple binary traditional public schools and charter schools.”<sup>2</sup> In addition, he acknowledges the repercussions to potential collaboration of these actions, He says, “It’s hurting it because I think it is completely dishonest to the work that everyone should be involved in. When you have this simple binary is detracts from the actual program.”<sup>2</sup>

A factor that has been contributing to the binary of “failing public schools” and “successful charter schools” has been the media’s representation of the two groups. One of these media outlets is the popular documentary, *Waiting of Superman*, a movie that blames teacher unions for the lack of education reform and praises selective charter schools as incubators of change. This is a position that offends Katie Smith, a unionized teacher at Broadview Public High School. She contends, “It’s a good movie because it shows how broken the system is for our children. It’s a bad movie because it’s got a strong agenda, it’s myopic. It doesn’t look at all the research. It’s propaganda. It’s very, very selective, and it sends a really bad message...”<sup>3</sup> A bad message that she believes the popular media has been responsible for, “I worry to make sweeping generalizations

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<sup>1</sup> Aaron Brown (Interviewed, November 15, 2010)

<sup>2</sup> Dave Austin (Interviews November 15, 2010)

<sup>3</sup> Katie Smith (Interviewed November 16, 2010)

because I feel like the media does a really evil job in making teachers seem like lazy people.”<sup>3</sup>

### Lack of Collaboration, Different Demographics and Points of Contention

Another finding that came through in my interviews is the lack of collaboration between the two camps. Aaron, the charter school leader, acknowledged that he has never been to the local public school that is located just down the street from his charter school. He admits, “To fault myself at this moment, Technology Boston High School has been down the street from us for seven years and I never been, it’s a 10-minute walk.”<sup>1</sup> This lack of contact means that positive dialogue could never properly take place. In a climate where the media has put the traditional public schools and charter schools at opposite ends, it is even more damaging when the actual reality is that they themselves seem to be doing the same thing. Katie, the only unionized teacher in my study, admits to never having previous contact with charter school folks, before joining a teaching program in Boston called Teacher Plus. She says, “Until then I had no exposure to charter school teachers, as colleagues.”<sup>3</sup> With this lack of exposure to each other, there is no wonder why there are so many misconceptions and assumptions about the other.

The two claims that charter schools take the most motivated students from the public school system and the claim that charter schools do not teach the same demographics as traditional public schools are some of the assumptions that are points of contention between the two groups. When asked the question of whether charter schools

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<sup>3</sup> Katie Smith (Interviewed November 16, 2010)

<sup>1</sup> Aaron Brown (Interviewed, November 15, 2010)

<sup>3</sup> Katie Smith (Interviewed November 16, 2010)

teach a similar demographic of students, Aaron Brown gives two different, almost contradictory, answers. First, Aaron contends that charter schools do serve a similar demographic, “I don’t think that charters have that much of a different population of kid then the traditional public school in Boston. Aside from lower numbers in English language learner, and slightly lower numbers in special education, the numbers are pretty on par across the entire system. And so with that the students are largely the same.”<sup>1</sup> This claim is not only supported by Dave’s response to the same question, but he argues that charters schools actually have a slightly larger special education population. He argued, “You look at Codman’s IEP percentage, and we are probably higher or at least equal to a traditional public school. In that sense yes we do, we are open enrollment and we are willing to accept whatever student walk throughout our door.”<sup>2</sup> However, Aaron and Dave both admit that charter schools do attract a different type of family. Aaron says, “I think that charters disproportionately attract parents that are interested in a different kind of education for their kid.” Dave compares charters to “creaming” (a process of selecting the “best” students, who are more motivated, talented, ECT than the overall population). Dave states,

“To be fair the most active parents and the most active students if they perceive charter schools as being a better education, which is what the narrative, are in the media by in large, then what’s going to happen to the traditional public school down the block. People aren’t going to want to go and the people who are going to want to go are people for whatever reason doesn’t have access to material or proactivity. And so that’s problematic, it is a creaming of the top in that respect even though it is not actively acted upon by the charter school.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Aaron Brown (Interviewed November 15, 2010)

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This perception of who charter schools serves, a dissimilar population, is exactly what Katie believes. Katie sees charter schools as not only taking more talented students away, but she think that charter schools actually dump weak academic students in her own classroom. She states:

“The public school sees (charter schools) as taking talent away. For instance you know that some of the student who would come to your class who has the best behavior and is more ready to learn is drained from the public system. So a lot of traditional schools see that as re-segregating of the schools in a way. One charter right before MCAS, every year sends like at least 10 kids or more that they “counsel” out just in time for MCAS. This seems a little shady to us”<sup>3</sup>

Katie’s belief that some charter schools, one in particular in Boston, remove kids right before the state standardized test as a way to keep or raise their schools test scores. As a result of raising test scores for the respective charter school, it may result in lower test scores for that traditional public school. As a result, the public school has to be responsible for being labeled a failing school. This false classification and narrative of the “failing public school” and the “successful charter school” is not appreciated by teachers like Katie. The negative discourse is a key factor in keeping these two groups from working with each other. When one group is demonized and other is elevated, it is hard not to fight for your own interest. Collaboration becomes the last thing on anyone’s mind. Katie powerfully frames the results of this divisive dialogue. She says:

“I think public school teachers feel like they are beaten up in the media everyday and we are angry. There is a set up right now and it is so contentious between the two that if you say the word charter school in a union meeting or a big meeting of public school teachers and its visceral and people feel like they have been punched in the stomach. Teachers feel

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<sup>3</sup> Katie Smith (Interviewed November 16, 2010)

like here I am working 70 hours a week, with the toughest kids in the city and I can't remove my kids, I got 20-25 % special ed, 30% English language learner, great kids, everyone is different in my class, and then I go watch that movie and I'm working 70 hours a week and I don't see my own children and they telling me that... you know it hurts even though its not intentional. I think that is unhealthy though.”<sup>3</sup>

A different narrative is constantly said about charter schools. Countless stories of success, images of smiling children, and visuals of charismatic leaders and loving teachers are competing for the public's perception and attention. Dave notes that, “People love the narrative. They love the narrative that charter schools are going to save the American educational system.”<sup>2</sup>

### Learning Lessons from Each Other

The narrative of successful practices in certain charter schools is a belief that is echoed surprisingly by Katie. Being a traditional public school teacher, Katie acknowledges and envies certain practices that are done in the highest achieving charter schools. One specific area is professional development, the process where teachers partipicle in opportunities to develop or improve as teachers. Katie reveals,

“My professional development at my school is so bad. It's bad because we spend so much of the time not learning but doing to do lists like we have to get this done for accreditation and the learning is minimal if at all. And then I talk to Liz or this or that and I hear about the things that they are doing and I feel like they are doing professional development that's meaningful.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Katie Smith (Interviewed November 16, 2010)

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<sup>3</sup> Katie Smith (Interviewed November 16, 2010)

This acknowledgement is a crucial step in future collaboration between the two groups. Because as much as a dichotomy has been portrayed, Katie sees a lot of areas that public schools can learn from. Katie remarked about the school culture, “The school culture seems more cohesive.” She further comments, “There are these standouts like KIPP and uncommon and green dot. And you think wow what are these schools doing that is so amazing and when I hear what they are doing it’s so much better than what we are doing here that it’s frustrating.”<sup>3</sup> When I ask the question, are charter schools enough to change the system of public education? Aaron, the charter school principal, and Katie, the union school teacher, answer similarly, creating hope for the future of education. Aaron believes that one of reasons charter schools exist is to not only show other traditional public schools but society that educating urban children is doable. He believes,

“One thing that charter schools can do, always, is to be instructive about what is possible with less. Two: what’s possible with our kids? We have high performing schools with predominantly students of color. I think that’s instructive, I think it changes the conversation; I think it’s a game changer in my mind. Some practices that happened in some charter schools that can be used throughout. I think the extended school day, which has caught on, has always been a part of the charter school model of our state. Those things allow us to speak to the larger system. Its incremental change. It’s not a revolution.”<sup>1</sup>

These last sentences are incredibly promising and significant for continued dialogue between the traditional public school advocates and charter schools. An acceptance that charter schools are creating incremental change rather than revolutionary change, points to the fact that large systematic change is still needed and this change could still reside in the traditional public school. This idea is also affirmed by Katie’s belief that charter

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<sup>3</sup> Katie Smith (Interviewed November 16, 2010)

<sup>1</sup> Aaron Brown (Interviewed, November 15, 2010)

schools do indeed have a place in education but it should be in the service of supplementing traditional schools and not being competition. She says, “I don’t think charter schools are the answer, I don’t think they are sustainable; I think that they should be labs.”<sup>3</sup>

While conducting my interviews one of the most surprising conclusions that I reached was the fact that what charter school members want is not so different than what traditional public schools desire. Both the traditional public school and charter school advocates have similar ideas of what they would want in a successful school. All members of my research project express the desire for collaboration amongst schools, teachers, faculty and administrators. A desire for improving as educators, through collaboration, was strongly expressed. Aaron talks about collaboration initiatives that his school will bring up with the City public school superintendent in an upcoming meeting he would be attending. He says:

“ One of the ideas is that we should be in each other site visit teams and right now charter schools have these site visits 3 every 5 years and mostly It’s other charter school folks who are doing these visits who are in schools for 2-3 days having conversations with kids and staff about what’s happening in schools. There’s no reason we shouldn’t participate in the same process with schools down the street in tech Boston, especially because they have a better retention rate on their students then we do. There are things that they do that are better than what we are doing no doubt we have stuff that is better than what they are doing so that makes sense.”<sup>1</sup>

This desire to get better by using each other as a way to achieve success is repeated by Dave who says, “I think transparency, having an ability to recognize acknowledgment and model the fact that you don’t always have the answers. But collectively through

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<sup>3</sup> Katie Smith (Interviewed November 16, 2010)

<sup>1</sup> Aaron Brown (Interviewed, November 15, 2010)

dialogue and conversation you can come closer to the answers.”<sup>2</sup> An honest confession of not always having the answers is once again a positive sign in the prospect for education reform. A sentiment of improvement by working together, is shared by Katie in her answer to the question of makes a successful school. She says,

“A place where teachers are constantly challenging them to get better and constantly collaborating where am I weak? How can I learn from someone else? And vice versa. Where people are observed pretty regularly and it’s not scary and the spirit of it is we are all here to get better. Because people are shutting their doors to this observation because they see them as got you things rather as ways of getting better.”<sup>3</sup>

Cooperation between all groups must be acted upon. There has to be the mentality of being receptive to feedback instead of being resistant to it from both sides. This means that charter schools will learn from the traditional public school just as the traditional school will learn from the charter school. Katie comments on the importance of mutual support and collaboration in my interview when says,

“When I was at the teacher plus meeting, when the idea of collaboration came up the director, put it as what can public schools learn from charters, she didn’t mean it that way but one of the teachers took offense to that. The idea that charters school teaching the public schools is never going to fly unless it is considered mutual.”<sup>1</sup>

The idea that any collaboration can happen without a mutual sense of responsibility and commitment to work together by both groups will only fail.

## **Conclusion**

The intention of my project was twofold: to map out what was the barriers that block dialogue between traditional public schools and charter schools and the second was

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<sup>2</sup> Dave Austin (Interviews November 15, 2010)

<sup>3</sup> Katie Smith (Interviewed November 16, 2010)

<sup>1 3</sup> Katie Smith (Interviewed November 16, 2010)

to look for ways of collaboration and support giving. And what I am struck with at the end of my project is the fact that there are areas for both, collaboration and support. However, there are barriers that hinder collaboration and support between traditional public schools, and charter schools. Generalizations and binaries from public discourse and fellow educators are an area that actually hurts collaboration but also is an area where they can work together. It jeopardizes the chances of any dialogue because through generalizations one picture is painted of the other. The painted picture is most likely false or often times too complicated to narrow down to mere statements. Through these false narratives of what the other is about, individuals can feel slighted or become defensive. As a result, the mentality to fighting against, instead of with is found. Both groups acknowledge this fact. And this is ironically an area where they can support the other. Both groups see the harm in simple generalizations for future hopes of collaboration. Thus, both must reject doing such practices. Another barrier that is clear through my interviews with my participants is competition. Competition of resources, money, and similar demographics of students are all areas that participants' in my study cited in my interviews. This competition fosters resistance by both parties.

However there are areas where collaboration is possible. Charter schools advocates and traditional public school acknowledges strengths in the other. Whether it was Katie, the traditional public school teacher acknowledging the fact that professional development is done better in charter schools or Aaron Brown, the charter school principle, conceding the fact that the traditional public schools has better practices to educate a larger population of children than his school has. These are areas where schools must focus on. Areas where there are more similarities than differences. There are

positives that are going on everywhere and educators must not continue to fight and oppose each other but accept a vision of support, not competition, embrace a system that works with each other not against.

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