

Chartering Urban School Reform: Reflections on Public High Schools in the Midst of Change. Michelle Fine, ed. New York: Teachers College Press, 1994. 217 pp.

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The school restructuring movement has matured to the point that researchers have a better idea of the most productive questions to ask, the best people to ask them of, and the most appropriate methods to collect data that illuminate the questions. Michelle Fine's *Chartering Urban School Reform: Reflections on Public High Schools in the Midst of Change* is a fine example of this. Collectively, the authors in this book ask the right questions of a wide variety of people, using solid ethnographic research methods. The book is valuable because it provides a vivid description of one restructuring initiative through the voices of teachers, university professors, and educators affiliated with nonprofit organizations. The book provides evidence, not just a statement of belief, that small is better when educating students, and that reflection and inquiry make a difference in the working conditions of teachers, but, most important, in the lives of students.

Chartering Urban School Reform brings together research on the Philadelphia Schools Collaborative, which was established in 1988 to "dismantle the urban high school as we knew it--large, anonymous, and filled with more cracks than safety nets--and to nourish, in its place, many small, intellectually intimate communities of learners called charters" (p. 2). The charters were established to provide a safe space for innovation, "dangerous talk and provocative practice." By 1994, 90 charters had been established in all 22 of the public comprehensive high schools in Philadelphia. Each charter creates a community within the school, with 10 to 12 core faculty serving a cohort of between 200 and 400 heterogeneously grouped students from the time they enter 9th or 10th grade until they graduate. The faculty share responsibility for this core of students and for designing curriculum, instruction, and assessment around a common theme. The book is divided into three parts, the first providing background on the development of the charters and a policy and community context in which to ground an understanding of the Philadelphia Schools Collaborative. Through these chapters, the reader better understands the design of the high school charters, as well as the barriers that a large urban educational bureaucracy places in the way of innovation.

The second and third parts of the book provide vivid accounts of school-based inquiry and reflection on school change. Implementing a project of this scope and nature in a large urban school district could have been seen as sufficiently ambitious, but the Philadelphia Schools Collaborative also set out to create communities of inquiry at the schools and to involve a team of five ethnographers to provide an outsider's perspective on the charters. Most of the 13 chapters are written by members of university- and school-based teams who are engaging in reflective practice and ethnographic research.



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Their research is not *about* school change but *for* school change. The ethnographers do not take the neutral stance toward their research many of us were trained to take. Instead, they use research to advocate for change and work with teachers to make their voices heard. The team of ethnographers provides a critical outsider's perspective, but their commitment to ending the silence of teachers, students, and parents grounds their work in the everyday realities of implementing change. Michelle Fine has been a strong advocate for giving a voice to those in schools who have been silenced for too long by bureaucracy and prejudice. *Chartering Urban School Reform* puts the pen in the hands of a few of those who have been silenced and gives voice to many who are working hard to make schools a better place for children and youth.

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