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Critical Questions, But Few Solutions In Book on Charters

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Editor's note: This is an excerpt from today's Class Struggle column by staff writer Jay Mathews, which appears weekly on <http://washingtonpost.com>.

Journalists, particularly me, tend to get excited about charter schools, the independently run public schools that have produced, at least in some cases, major improvements in achievement for children from low-income families. The charter educators I write about are often young, energetic, witty, noble and pretty much irresistible. But their schools, which use tax dollars with little oversight, are relatively new and untried. Like all experiments, they could easily fizzle.

That is the point of a short, readable and fact-filled new book, "Keeping the Promise? The Debate Over Charter Schools," available for \$16.95 at <http://RethinkingSchools.org>. Its seven chapters make the best case I have read for a skeptical attitude toward the nation's 4,000 charter schools. For reasons I will explain, it did not change my view of charters, but it should spark, as the subtitle says, a thought-provoking debate.

The book was published in collaboration with the Center for Community Change, a 40-year-old organization dedicated to building community groups that focus on poverty. It has been looking at inner-city schools for a long time. Much of the book reflects its view that political and business leaders have overlooked, or even exacerbated, terrible classroom conditions. One of the most suspicious things about charters to many of the book's authors is that they are often backed by wealthy corporate executives who, in their view, don't understand what it takes to help poor children.

Parts of the book score direct hits on bad charter school laws and organizations, particularly in Ohio. Amy Hanauer, founding executive director of the nonprofit Policy Matters Ohio, reports that more than half of her state's taxpayer funds for charters go "to for-profit companies whose bottom line is sometimes less the well-being of the children than the balance of their bank accounts. The largest and most well-known of the charter operators, White Hat Management, had only two of its 31 schools make the federal benchmark of 'Adequate Yearly Progress' in 2006-2007."

The book has a thoughtful piece by school policy guru Ted Sizer and author-educator George Wood with good questions to ask about charters in your town. Do they treat

students equitably? Do they provide better access to good teaching for families trapped in public schools that don't provide that? There are provocative chapters on the nation's two most chartered cities, New Orleans and the District. In one chapter, charter educators in Philadelphia, Portland, Ore., and the District make their case in long interviews.

But the book's overall message is that charters are not what the happy stories in the media make them seem and that there should be better ways to improve learning. Many people agree with that thesis. Yet the book failed to make the case for me because it offered no compelling or widely available alternatives for the young educators I know who want to save this generation of poorly schooled kids right now.

For the rest of the column, go to www.washingtonpost.com/classstruggle.