

Rationally Speaking #225: Neerav Kingsland on “The case for charter schools”

Julia: Welcome to Rationally Speaking, the podcast where we explore the borderlands between reason and nonsense. I'm your host, Julia Galef, and I'm here with today's guest, Neerav Kingsland.

Neerav was on the founding team of, and then later the CEO of, New Schools for New Orleans. Which essentially rebuilt the public schools system in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, and created the first public school system in the country that was almost entirely charter schools. It's now one of the big, maybe highest profile charter school success stories in the United States.

Now, Neerav is managing partner of the City Fund, which has recently raised \$200 million to work with a select group of cities to create more innovative public school systems around the country. Today, Neerav and I are going to be talking about what he's done, what he's learned, and the evidence for and maybe against the effectiveness of charter schools.

Neerav, welcome to Rationally Speaking.

Neerav: Great. I'm excited to be here. Thanks for having me.

Julia: You were in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina essentially rebuilding the public school system. What was that like? Was it chaotic? Did you have to essentially start from scratch?

Neerav: Yeah, it was extremely chaotic and incredibly tragic. I mean, most of the city was underwater. Over a thousand New Orleanians lost their lives. Kids were suffering from high degrees of trauma.

But out of that tragedy we had a chance to rethink public schooling in the city.

A group of leaders went around the country to try to figure out what to replicate, what city in the United States was knocking it out of the park for low income minority kids. And unfortunately in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, we didn't have one city [out of] the hubs of wealth and talent in our country, that was doing great things in public schools for low income kids.

So instead of adopting what another city was doing, we took our own path. And that ended, as you know from the intro, in creating the country's first basically 100% charter school system.

Julia: That seems like such a radical step. Do you happen to know what the previous record holder was, in terms of percentage of charter schools, in the country?

Neerav: At that time, it was probably closer to 40%.

Julia: Okay.

Neerav: What's radical in hindsight was pragmatic at the time. I don't think anybody really at the outset knew we were going to 100% charter schools. I would say [it was] maybe in year four, year five after the reforms began, looking at the data where the charter schools were dramatically outperforming the traditional system that was being built... A group of us and parents who were choosing these schools wanted to know what was working.

I'd say about half way through the reforms, the vision of, "Well, maybe this is just a better way to do public education," started the forum. Then we had to build a regulatory system around that. What would it mean if the whole public school system was all charter? What does the government do then? How does it oversee those charters? That was really phase two of the reforms thinking about how to govern a new type of public school system.

Julia: Was it hard to get permission to do this? Who did you have to get to agree, to get the go ahead from?

Neerav: No, we had high levels of political support. I think that was for two reasons. One, the system had really bottomed out before. There's a story about the FBI renting out a floor in the building where the school district was setting up wiretaps and convicting over 20 people.

Julia: For what?

Neerav: Fraud. Basically stealing from public school students.

Julia: Teachers? Or superintendents?

Neerav: In the administrative office. Dead people on the payroll.

Julia: Oh, wow.

Neerav: It was really, really bad. I think it was shockingly bad, and a lot of people understood that. That created a space I think to move quicker.

Then second, I think being in a post disaster situation, people are willing to try things that they maybe wouldn't if you were following the inertia of the current system. Then we were under state takeover. So the state was

overseeing at the time about 80% of the schools in the city, and the state was supportive.

We also got an infusion of federal funds. We were able to hold a pretty strong political coalition for about seven or eight years straight, which is really important.

Then it's worth noting now that the system is back under local control.

Julia: What does that mean?

Neerav: I think some people mistake charter schools as a way to avoid democratic oversight of public schools.

New Orleans has now married those. So there's a local school board, locally elected. But the locally elected political entity, instead of running schools, now oversees them. All the schools in New Orleans are governed by nonprofit organizations, and the elected government institution regulator like the FCC or SEC or anything like that.

Julia: The difference would be, they don't choose teachers to hire, or choose which curriculums to implement, or things like that? They just monitor for, I don't know, fraud? Or whether they're meeting the standards of the state, or things like that?

Neerav: Exactly. The government really has two main roles in New Orleans. One is to oversee the system for performance. So, to let the schools that are doing the best to expand, and to selectively replace the schools that aren't meeting kids' needs.

The second is around equity. So, are public schools serving kids with special needs? Are any schools expelling too many kids? There's a lot of issues where you do need some government oversight, to make sure all the schools are playing by the same rules.

Julia: Can you clarify the difference between charter schools and school vouchers? Because I was confused about that for a long time.

Neerav: Sure. The easiest way to think about charter schools is they're basically public schools that are governed by nonprofit boards, for the most part. About 80% of them are nonprofit. Rather than by the locally elected school board.

Most cities have traditional government monopolies that run the public school system. Charters are a way to allow nonprofits to operate within the public confines, but with a different governance level.

I think, and I can go in deeper into this, that's probably the most important thing about charter schools. That the nonprofit governance has really been a breakthrough, in terms of allowing for greater efficacy.

Vouchers are different, in that they're outside the public system. You're getting public funding, as a family that's using a voucher, but you can attend, let's say, a Catholic private school. That Catholic school can be religious affiliated, it might not need to take the state test.

It's really outside the confines of what you think of as traditional public schooling. A voucher system allows families to use public funds to exit the system and then access private schools.

Julia: I see. So, in the charter school model, you're still getting to choose which of the charter schools do you want to send your kids to?

Neerav: Exactly. You have choices. It's just a little more highly regulated. Charter schools have to take the state test, the same way the traditional public schools do. They can't pick and choose which kids they're gonna serve, which sometimes in private schools you can do that.

You're operationally decentralized with a charter school model, but the charter school can pick their curriculum. They can pick the teachers. They can pick the length of the school day. They can pick their calendar. But they're still plugged into the overall regulatory apparatus of the government, with state standards and state testing, and so forth.

Julia: In practice, how do charter schools end up being different from the standard public schools? Along what dimensions do they vary? Are they teaching in different styles like more of a Montessori thing or are they trying smaller classrooms, or what are they doing differently?

Neerav: Yeah. This has been a big change for me, so: I think the people who started the charter school movement, and I think myself when I got into this, thought that the greatest "aha" of charters would be innovative practice.

In a certain sense, I think the true innovation of charter schools is in the governance model. A charter school that's governed by a nonprofit can have strategic consistency over decades. So some of the best charters that have gotten the scale like the KIPP Schools have now been in operation for 20 years. They've iterated on the model, but they've held the same core beliefs, and they've grown. KIPP serves almost 100,000 kids across the country. They're not bound by geography, and they're not bound by the turmoil which sometimes happens through elected boards.

With the nonprofit governance, you can really scale on an effective organization. Whereas, in the traditional model, the school board is elected every four years. A new politician comes in, and they say “We're gonna change things.” They hire a superintendent. That superintendent says, “My way or the highway,” and then all the teachers roll their eyes, and here we go again, just constantly reinventing the wheel. It's very hard to do anything consistently over time.

Governance is extremely important, and perhaps the most important innovation of charter schools.

The second thing that's really important is it allows for entrepreneurship. As we've seen in so many other sectors, a rogue person with a great idea starting something new is often how the world is changed, and that's just really hard to do in a monopolistic bureaucracy. A charter school allows an educator who has an amazing idea to open up a school that families then can choose.

I'll get to your question in a sec, but I do think the major innovation has been around governance and entrepreneurship. Now, once you unleash that upon the world, you just see a wide variety of models. So there's charter schools that are very progressive, Montessori-oriented, students follow their own learning path. And then you have charter schools that are military schools, that are very strict and regimented. I think we've seen a wide breadth of how schools operate under the more flexible regulatory issue.

Julia: Does that mean that we then also have data, telling us which of these “thousand blooming flowers” are an improvement over the norm?

Neerav: We do. I'll stick to what's really working with low income kids who are at risk. That's our line of work.

Julia: Okay.

Neerav: Roland Fryer, an econ professor at Harvard, looked at charter schools in New York and tried to figure out what the commonalities of those that were increasing test scores the most. And he found five core components.

One was a culture of high expectations, of things like every kid is expected to go to college. Every kid is expected to get good grades, and really pushing kids hard on academic.

Two was rapid cycles of teacher feedback. Instead of your evaluator coming in once a year and saying good or bad, the principal's in there every day or every week, giving you very iterative feedback, so you can grow as a professional.

Three was the use of data. So, very frequent assessments daily and weekly. You're constantly checking where kids are at, rather than waiting to the end of the year.

Fourth is tutoring, either in a one-on-one or in small groups. So, pulling kids out who are further behind and giving them very close one-on-one attention.

Fifth is extended time. Longer school day, longer school year.

When he looked at schools in New York that are really knocking it out of the park on test scores, those were the five practices. I would say around the country, we see some of the higher performers sticking to some version of that model.

I think what we don't know yet is how much those higher test scores lead to longer term life outcomes. This is a really important part of educational research -- the easiest thing to figure out is test scores, but the connection between test scores and life outcomes is pretty murky. We are still learning about what that means for high school graduation and college graduation, and ultimately wages and income, down the road.

Julia: Going back to the impressive results of implementing charter schools in New Orleans: Well, first off, can you just summarize the empirical ... What do we mean when we say there were impressive results?

Neerav: Yeah. Doug Harris, a researcher out of Tulane, studied the reforms and he found roughly a half standard deviation effect size on test scores. Which is very, very large in the education literature. I think a quote from his report was he's never seen a city improve this much in such a short time.

To put that ... It's not quite apples to apples, but to give some layman's context, a black-white achievement gap in America is about .8 standard deviations. So making a .5 standard deviation jump is a pretty big jump for a whole city to move in about a seven-year period.

Julia: Yeah. That's helpful.

Neerav: We're just starting to get data back on high school graduation, college enrollment, college completion. That has been modestly positive to date, but we're still in the early cohorts. And I hope is over the next five to 10 years we'll get a lot more positive data among our term outcomes.

Julia: I'm curious how much you trust that evidence, or how much weight you put on it.

I mean, rebuilding a school system after a hurricane is a weird situation. First of all, there's the problem of, a before-after comparison isn't a randomized control trial -- but then specifically in the case of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, it's just unusual in so many ways.

And I could imagine, or generate off the top of my head, various possible reasons we might see this huge improvement, that don't stem from the charter school element specifically. Like, maybe just rebuilding schools, having new schools instead of old schools, is good.

Or maybe ... You said there was an influx of federal funding. I don't know how much that changed the spending per student, but that could have something to do with it. Or maybe the survivors had a new lease on life, and they resolved to buckle down and commit to education, or -- I don't know. I could make up a lot more stories.

But I know you're a pretty careful thinker when it comes to evaluating evidence. I'm just curious how you think about that with the case of New Orleans in particular.

Neerav: Two quick responses to that. One is we thought a lot about how much should we trust the evidence, and so a lot of controls were put in around a lot of the things we talked about: who were the returnees, how do we compare them with other kids across Louisiana.

Funding did go up by, I think, a little over a thousand a kid. What does that mean? A bunch of different teachers came in; this wasn't an experiment, and causation was really hard to draw.

I think you need to marry the research with lived experience a little bit. I lived in New Orleans before the storm. I tutored in public schools before the storm.

Julia: Wait, did you get caught in the storm?

Neerav: No. I was away at law school when the storm actually hit, and I moved back down. The classroom I tutored in when I was living there before the storm was, to this day, probably the worst public school classroom I've ever been in my life. A year after I was done tutoring, there was a gang-style drug execution at a middle school campus, at the campus I was tutoring at.

Julia: Wow. During a school day or around ...

Neerav: During a school day.

Julia: That's rough.

Neerav: I think there is both lived experience of the people who were there before and after the storm, that shows ... It's just hard to refute, if you were there on both sides, that the schools are just fundamentally better.

I think the test score data adds to that belief. There's multiple reasons why I think things are better.

All that being said, it is a very unique circumstance and causation is hard to draw. The organization I'm working at now, the City Fund, our goal basically over the next five to seven years is to try a version of this model in another 10 cities or so, and see if we get similar results at a greater level of scale.

That gets into the bigger questions of the role of philanthropy, the role of evidence, how quickly or slowly should you move these things. I think we're trying to take that pragmatic and somewhat conservative approach, of, we think we have a couple of good data points and we wanna try it out one more level of scale and see what happens.

Julia: There are other cities in the country that have implemented charter schools on varying levels. What have we learned from those other examples? Like, which cities have seen success with charter schools and which cities haven't? Do you understand why we see the differences, et cetera?

Neerav: Yeah. I am a big, big believer in urban public charter schools.

Julia: Why that specifically?

Neerav: There are just very few public policy interventions that, A, have shown good results at any level of scale... so, the national data on the urban charter schools at CREDO, a research group out of Stanford, has done the biggest research. They're looking at sample sizes in the tens of thousands of kids, if not larger. Maybe in the hundreds of thousands.

The test score results are positive. I think the last one I saw is over a three-year period. It was about a .1 standard deviation jump, give or take. Between .06 and .1.

The results improved over the course of the study. Urban charters are scaling. They're getting good results. In that course of the actual five-year study, the effect size nearly doubled from the beginning of the study to the end.

And they cost less than the thing they're competing with/replacing. On average urban charter schools get about 25 to 20% less public resources than the traditional system. They also don't hurt the traditional system – so,

you could be worried you're scaling this and then the traditional schools are losing money, and...

Julia: Yeah, in fact the teachers in Los Angeles who are striking right now... I feel like that was one of their main grievances. That charter schools were leeching funding away from them. Why do you think that's not true?

Neerav: There's a lot of research on this. The last meta study I looked at, they looked at 16 different cities and regions. And out of the 16, they only [found one] negative effect in the existing system and it was very slightly negative, and everything else was neutral to positive.

I think we have pretty decent evidence that you don't see massive drops in academic learning as charter schools scale.

Julia: Oh, I was thinking just narrowly of the funding to the schools.

Neerav: Well, that's true. Though I don't think the point of a public school system is to increase its revenue, it's to increase learning. I think we should think about the public dollars being more associated with children than any one given institution.

I don't view movement of dollars as a moral positive or negative. I'm much more concerned about, I think if we were watching charters grow, and then that was causing crazy academic drops in the traditional system, then we have to think are we hurting some of the people that aren't getting it. And we just don't see that.

Julia: It's just interesting, though... if the public schools have less funding but academic outcomes haven't dropped, that's an interesting result. Although it's funding *per student*, so maybe that's it. The argument I read from the teachers was that our schools have ... A lot of it is a fixed cost, and so if you take away funding per student for each student that leaves to go to a charter school, that [they] suffer more than just proportionately for the students who leave the school.

Neerav: I think I have some empathy with, one kid leaves a school and you can't easily cut the \$10,000 overnight. But I think the union often assumes that labor has a fixed cost. The predominant cost of public education is our labor cost. And in most industries labors aren't assumed as fixed cost.

Julia: Right.

Neerav: In aggregate I'm pretty skeptical of that argument, and I think the evidence is bearing that out. It just doesn't ... We don't see that anywhere, that charter schools are causing negative impact in the traditional system.

Julia: It's also interesting because it suggests ... If you follow that logic it seems to suggest that we should maximize class sizes, and so on, because we wanna get more benefit per dollar.

Neerav: Exactly. When you're thinking about public interventions, I think you should start with the baseline that almost nothing works. Here, with urban charter schools, we have something that works, something that's getting better overtime, something that works more cheaply and is higher productive. Something that's scaling fairly rapidly and something that doesn't hurt the existing system.

That's as close as you get like a miracle in public policy. I've just become a huge believer, and I think the politics of it are unfortunate.

To your original question, what gives me some optimism in these other cities, I think we have a pretty long 20-year track record that urban charter schools are doing really positive things for low income kids. I think the thing we don't know is: Does that hold true at higher levels of concentration? As the city gets to 30, 40, 50, 60% charter, do those results still hold on all fronts?

Julia: Why might they not? Other than just the general, "when things scale up, who knows what happens"?

Neerav: I think, A, that "who knows what happens when things scale" is very real.

I do think one thing I saw in New Orleans -- and I think the charter community needs to be a little more honest about this -- is every time we started serving more kids, the kids were getting a little harder and harder to serve.

The first 10% of kids who go into charters, the parents might have more resources and so forth to find schools. When you're at the 80th percentile of kids, or you're going from 90 to 92% student share, you're getting the kids whose family for some reason or another have kept them in schools that are struggling a lot.

It could be that maybe the model falls apart as you're serving harder and harder to reach kids.

Now, I think New Orleans is strong evidence that we went all the way. That was part of the reason I was morally compelled to try to get the city all the way, is I wanted to show that it could work, and I thought it could work. I actually think New Orleans right now is one of the most equitable public school systems in the country, because it went all charter, and what we're doing for the hardest to reach kids.

Julia: Isn't it surprising, though? That if... as more and more students go to charter schools, the ones who increasingly take that step come from families that are maybe more motivated to find the best education for their child, they're more involved et cetera. Maybe different socioeconomically. That seems like it would imply that the students left behind in the non-charter schools have less involved, or less motivated, parents.

How could it be that we don't see educational outcomes dropping in the regular public school system?

Neerav: It's a great question. I'd say partly, very few cities have gotten to scale, so I think this is one of the things we're testing. That effect probably wouldn't hit the aggregate until you're getting to 30, 40, 50, 60%.

Now, I think one thing that's positive that is going in the opposite direction of what you're saying is the effect of competition. If you take a city like Washington DC, charters there are about 45% of total students served. And as the charters were growing, the district kept on getting better and better, and we really got to an "all boats rising" situation.

That's my hope, is that the competition creates more nimbleness in the traditional system, and that's better for the kids and educators in that system too.

Julia: Is the competition mostly in the form of: charter schools that are underperforming get shut down, whereas in the previous traditional system, underperforming schools weren't shut down?

Or is it more in the form of: parents looking at their options, and choosing to send their kids to the schools that perform better?

Neerav: I think both of those are really important. Then I would add a third, of having proof points that things can be different. If the government is running all the schools and a lot of them are mediocre, it's hard to know that things could be better.

When you have a couple of charters that are doing amazing things for low income kids it raises the political question of, why aren't the other schools like this?

Julia: Right. Do we have any evidence about how parents make these school choice decisions? Like, do they actually tend to look at the stats and use test scores as their main deciding factor, or what?

Neerav: Yeah. We're starting to get a lot of evidence, which is really exciting, I think both for policy makers and then for families that are using more transparent systems.

In about five of the cities we worked in, they've created online unified enrollment systems that are very easy to enroll in.

If your kid is starting kindergarten, [you can] look at every school in the city. It's on one website. You can compare, and then you rank your top 7. Then the government gets all that data aggregated, so we can see what schools are being ranked highest.

In economic terms, we have revealed preference, rather than focus group and polling preferences. Which is amazingly useful. And what we're seeing is three to four main factors in these cities -- which are generally urban environments. I don't want to [overstate] the external validity of the different environments.

They care about the government performance labeling system. If there's an A through F system, or the state gives every school a star system, they look at that. And the higher performing, the more that matters to them.

Julia: These revealed preferences, are these like coefficients in a regression showing up ...

Neerav: You have an association. We take all the schools, label them on their performance, the extracurriculars they offer, and so forth. And then you [can look at] what characteristics of schools are correlated with high parent demand.

Julia: Okay.

Neerav: The correlations are:

A high score on the state regulatory system, based on test scores usually.

Distance. Parents, all things equal, would rather send their kid down the street.

Extracurricular activities, football, band, things like that.

Sibling preference. If your kid's in the school, you wanna send your other kid.

You could also come up with interesting equations on how far parents are willing to make these tradeoffs. I think in New Orleans it was roughly,

parents who were willing to travel an extra mile or two for ever letter grade bump in the school.

Julia: Interesting.

Neerav: I think that really made a ... There's a human element where families have complicated lives and they're making a bunch of tradeoffs. And through these systems you can get a better understanding of the things they're trading off.

I'll say one thing that came out of the study in New York, which has a similar system, that is either interesting or troubling depending on your perspective: Parents care more about absolute student achievement than academic growth.

There's a set of schools in New York that are famous. They all knock it out of the park. But there's also a bunch of schools in New York that are taking kids in at a lower place, but moving much faster.

And the high demand schools were the famous, absolute achievement schools.

Now, it's an interesting question of whether families are drawn to the schools because they actually think they're the best -- but had they known that there are these other schools that have high growth they'd pick them? Or, if families care so strongly about peer effects, they're actually saying, "We actually don't care how much our kids are gonna learn, we just want them around a bunch of other high flyers."

Julia: Or, this could also be evidence for Bryan Caplan's signaling model of education. Where the main value of the education is not in increasing human capital, in what you learn, but instead having that on your resume that you went to that school, to show employers. Then we would expect to see parents valuing the schools like the star schools.

Neerav: Exactly.

There's a couple of ways you can respond to this as a policymaker. You could say, this is what parents want, so we should give them this information, and let them choose these high achievement schools.

You could also say, "Actually parents should value how much their kids are learning, and so let's create an accountability system that gives A through F scores that's mostly based on growth."

Julia: Right. Has anyone yet proposed a nudge system, where we try nudge parents to pick the schools that actually improve scores more?

Neerav: There are experiments being run right now about how you show information to parents in these systems, and figuring out what that means.

Now, again, you want a balance. Do you know what the right thing to show is? Because if you're nudging, that means you have an opinion on how parents should be making decisions.

Julia: Right.

Neerav: Versus, do you want to be a little more humble and say, "We're just gonna show the information as neutrally as we can and let you know"? Those are pretty complicated decisions for policymakers, on how to design choice systems.

Julia: Yeah.

I'm just trying to think about other objections that I've heard to charter schools, that we haven't yet covered.

... Well, one of them is the claim that charter schools increase segregation. Or that they're bad for diversity, because people are gonna choose to send their kids to schools with other people of the same race, et cetera. Or maybe just white parents are gonna try to send their kids to charter schools that just have white kids in them, et cetera.

Is that something you're concerned about? If not why?

Neerav: Out of all the things that have caused segregated public schools in America, I would put charter schools at the far bottom of the list.

We have a very unfortunate history of segregated schools in this country. *Brown v. Board* took a big dent into that problem, and then we saw *White Flight*, where a lot of white people moved to the suburbs to basically get segregated public schools.

Public schools unfortunately in this country have been a bastion of segregation, not much in solving the problem.

I just find it really disingenuous when people say charter schools are the reason we have segregated public schools, rather than a long history of racism in our country.

I think there's two questions. How much does this matter? In other words, should we just focus on making schools better regardless, or is integration in and of itself a value? Then, to the extent you believe integration is a value, how would you move further in that direction?

Speaking for myself personally, I do find integration to be a value. I want that for my own child, and I think it's healthy for society. We're all in this together, in some sense, and having kids grow up together is an important component of that.

But I think what *Brown v. Board* showed us is the limits of what government can do to force [integration] if people don't want it. It's gonna be a much longer path, but I think we have to choose integration. And I think charter schools can be a model of that.

One small anecdote: There's a school called the Bricolage Academy in New Orleans. It was a teacher who worked at a KIPP school who thought that school was just phenomenal for the kids who it served. He had two daughters. He was living in New Orleans. He put them in one of the elite private girls schools in the city, which was a phenomenal school, and then was just trying to resolve this dichotomy of, "I think there's this amazing school of KIPP. My daughters are in that school. Is there a better way?"

He decided to found a school that would be intentionally diverse. And he went to wealthy white families across the city, and black wealthy families, and said, "Will you pull your kids out of private school if I can also recruit low income kids and we can be in this together?"

He successfully did that. It's about a 50-50 mix. I think last year it was one of the top three most in-demand schools in New Orleans. I think that's the future, is we have to figure out a way to choose this together, and say it's a value. I'm highly skeptical that we can force our way into integrated systems.

Julia: That is exciting, as a model for how charter schools could reduce segregation.

I'm just curious if your position is, A, there's no reason to think charter schools are making the problem worse, but here's how they could make it better? Or B, charter schools do make segregation worse, but that's inevitable for the present and not the main reason segregation is bad?

Neerav: Got it. I don't know enough outside of cities to answer the evidence on integration. Within most of the cities we work, it's a moot point, in that they're all low income minority systems anyways. And so we are working in cities that have unfortunately already been segregated, and we're just trying to make the schools better.

Julia: Got it. I guess the last objection that I can think of off the top of my head to charter schools, that we haven't covered, is just: parents who put their kids in charter schools then having less stake in the public school system, and being probably less inclined to vote for superintendents who are gonna do a good job, et cetera. Is that something you're worried about?

Neerav: If forcing people to attend crappy schools is a way to increase civic engagement to then fix the schools, we've run that playbook. And it hasn't worked. I think I question the premise that that is the fastest and best way to improve public schooling.

Julia: Well I suppose it could always get worse. It's not literally the worst it could possibly be yet.

Neerav: I have found through relatively small experience in New Orleans and other cities that charter schools can actually be a way to increase civic engagement on a couple levels.

I think the act of actually having to choose a school puts parents in a position of more civic power. Having choice, having the ability to exit is a form of political activism that I think is empowering. I view it as a civic activity.

I think having a bunch of nonprofit boards that are made of community members increases the amount of people who are actively engaged.

Julia: In the charter schools, though, not in the regular...

Neerav: I'm working on trying to scale the charter school governance to talk in New Orleans. Then I would just look at the voting turnout rates of school boards. They are not very high. I have not found school board elections to be the high point of civic engagement. I'd encourage you to go to school board meetings. They can be very-

Julia: I'd rather not.

Neerav: ... disillusioning. I think that's an idea that might be a good talking point but it doesn't really hit reality when you look at the unfortunate lack of democratic accountability and civic participation.

Julia: Do you think that American public schools in general have gotten better or worse or stayed roughly the same in the last, let's say, 40 years?

Neerav: I think it's a generally positive story, and that they are getting better in the sense that ... There's a test called NAEP which is the only nationally normed test that we have that has a large enough sample across the country. In younger ages, we have seen gains in reading and math over the past 40 years. In 12th grade we have not.

That is still positive to me, and that's a sign to me that more people are gaining basic literacy in math skills even if they're not knocking it out of the park in Algebra 2 or some of the harder high school things.

We've seen even more improvement in Hispanic and African-American students, which depending on the grade and test, have roughly closed halfway the achievement gap with their white peers.

When I think of our work, I think of our work as the next wave of improvement in public schools, not as "We're on a 40-year decline that we're trying to reverse."

I will say in the cities we're working, not all of them benefited from those gains. So places like New Orleans and DC unfortunately still had extremely awful public schools, 10 to 15 years ago.

Julia: We talked a little while ago about how you have changed your mind about what the main "secret sauce" of charter schools is going to be, and you come around to thinking that it's more about the governance than you thought, less the innovation.

Is there anything else that you've changed your mind about, with respect to charter schools or just education in general, since you started working in this field?

Neerav: Yeah. A couple of things. This probably goes to another critique of our work which we try to grapple with.

I think I came into the work thinking charter schools are best used as pockets of innovation, that would then do all this amazing stuff and then the traditional system could adopt them. Because I didn't think they could scale at the level to reach every kid.

I have since changed my mind on that, and I think they're much more scalable, if you think across appropriate time horizons, than I'd originally thought.

There's, give or take, 10 to 15 million kids in poverty in public schools in America. Over a 30-year period, if it works -- we shouldn't scale it if it doesn't work, but if we follow the evidence and they continue to do great things, I think there's no reason charter schools can't serve the vast majority of those low income kids.

Julia: Why is that relevant to a critique of your work? This sounds like a good thing.

Neerav: The critique is that charter schools aren't worth doing because they're not scalable. And I used to agree with that critique, and so I've now changed my mind and that I do think they're scalable.

Julia: Got it.

Neerav: Over a time horizon of 20 to 30 years. But when you're thinking about changing something as big as public American education, I think that's reasonable. Again, only should expand if the results hold.

Other thing that I changed my mind about... I think I've decreased my belief in the importance of test scores. I just used to think that was the way you evaluate public schools, and now I'm much more of a "That's one piece of the puzzle."

Julia: What else would you look at?

Neerav: I'm a big believer in parent demand, I think, for a couple of reasons.

One, again, the connection between test scores and long-term outcomes is in some sense intuitive. Like if you can do basic reading and math, that's probably not gonna hurt you at some point...

[But] It's unclear to me that going from pretty decent test scores to absolutely amazing test scores is the best margin to work on, once you reach a certain threshold. Rather than things like character, values, contentiousness, agreeableness. That seems to be pretty important in the modern economy.

I think I have now a more holistic understanding of the things schools could potentially work on. Those things are also really hard to measure, so I'm less likely to say we should have government metrics on some of the more important aspects of schooling.

That leads me to parent choice as another way to understand schools are doing. Something that's not perfect in of itself, but useful.

Julia: I mean, that also feels... that rings true to me too, but doesn't that lead to this problem where, if we wanna know whether charter schools are working, we just ... It seems circular. Where like, "Well, parents are choosing these schools and that's our metric of whether they're working, therefore the schools are working."

But parents would choose some schools. And so it seems like whatever happens, that metric would lead to the conclusion that charter schools are working.

Neerav: I think I'm a pluralist on this. So I think we should look at both test scores and parent demand. In other words, if parents were all choosing schools that had very negative test score effects, that would make me very curious and a little hesitant.

Now, it could be the parent is seeing something that test scores aren't picking up. But it would make me uneasy. And it would make me worried that the parents might be missing something, but it would be complicated.

I think with urban charters we're seeing both. We're seeing positive test score effects, and parents are choosing them -- like a charter school can exist and lets parents make an affirmative choice to go there. They're passing both tests. The research test and the parent demand test.

Both of those things together make me increase my confidence.

Julia: Do you think that a good metric of how much to trust parent choice would be how robust parent choice is to the kind of reorganizations, of how we present the information about schools? Maybe if parents aren't really selecting carefully or thoughtfully, or whatever, then they're gonna be more likely to pick whatever school is listed at the top or something like that?

Neerav: I think this is a hard part in working with complicated public systems. You really have to let that unfold for many years to have hard opinions -- like, you're building a market, so to speak, and it's gonna take a while for parents to figure out what they want. And then they're gonna tell their friends and based on that ...

Julia: They're gonna look at the outcomes of the school after it's been around for 10, 15 years.

Neerav: Exactly. I think you just have to be thoughtful and give information as best you can, be a little humble and assume that overtime you'll get into a good equilibrium.

Julia: Cool. That's probably a good place to wrap up. Neerav, before I let you go, I like to ask my guests to nominate some resource -- be it a book or website or even a person like an author -- who they have substantial disagreements with, but nevertheless respect. Or think is worth reading or engaging with.

Anyone come to mind, or anything come to mind, for you about education or otherwise?

Neerav: Definitely. A lot. One line of thinking that I try to grapple with, and it's something I respect but I'm probably not solely in the camp...

Think of charter schools as generally central-left, a little technocratic -- still saying, "We wanna be part of a public system," but a little entrepreneurial, a little free market. But still in the centrist camp.

The libertarian critique is: As long as you're taking state tests, that means you're basically dictating what should be taught... If you want real innovation, it's not gonna happen through the charter model.

If you want real parent choice, you need to let it rip a little bit more. You need way more risk taking and opening and closing schools.

Jay Greene out of the University of Arkansas is a big proponent of that thinking. Then related to that is the Bryan Caplan line of thinking, where the thing you're maximizing for is foolish. I think Bryan has a much more sober take on what schooling can actually do at scale. I've moved a little bit on that too, so I think ...

Julia: Towards Bryan's thinking?

Neerav: Yeah, I think ... Luckily this lines up with the core of our work. I think of a deeper belief based on Bryan's work that getting high levels of basic math and literacy is one of the more important things public schooling can do, and being a healthy babysitter so parents can work and being in a safe place with good values. That's really the pre-K 8 through part of the world. I think Bryan would be a little more skeptical of whether we should teach advanced mathematics to all these kids and make them suffer in junior and senior year.

Julia: Right.

Neerav: I do think the bulk of our work, and the most important of our work, is really in: So many kids and so many of these cities have just not been not given an educational opportunity where they can be prepared for the workplace, and to lead choice meaningful lives. Bryan's work has I think refocused my emphasis along those lines a little bit. The Bryan Caplan, Jay Greene line of thinking -- I think anybody who starts with my set of beliefs would do well to grapple with those ideas and be influenced by them.

Julia: Great. We'll link to ... Do you have a particular work by Jay Greene or should I ...

Neerav: He runs a blog.

Julia: Okay, great.

Neerav: We can link to his blog and Bryan Caplan's book on education as well worth reading.

Julia: Great. I'll also link to Neerav's blog, relinquishment ... Is it dot com?

Neerav: Dot org.

Julia: Dot org. Great. relinquishment.org which has some great blog posts and links to Neerav's other interviews and writing. It's been great having you. Thanks so much for coming on the show.

Neerav: Thank you. It's been wonderful to be here.

Julia: This concludes another episode of Rationally Speaking. Join us next time for more explorations on the borderlands between reason and nonsense.