

KCET's 'Gamble' Probes Charter Schools

■ **TV review:** The Valley's Fenton Avenue shines as a success story, but the popular reform movement does have a dark side.

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Once, it might have seemed like a radical idea: Individual schools—not centralized bureaucracies and boards of education—know what's best for their students and ought to be freed to meet their needs.

Now, though, it's a truism. Freedom, so the mantra goes, produces innovations, efficiency and, ultimately, results.

Well, maybe yes, maybe no. That's the central message of John Merrow's latest documentary-commentary on education, airing tonight on KCET-TV Channel 28.

Titled "Education's Big Gamble," the show examines the rapidly spreading phenomenon of charter schools, public schools liberated from bureaucratic strictures in a bid to improve performance. Although Merrow offers dramatic examples of charter schools that have improved—prominently featuring Fenton Avenue School in the San Fernando Valley in that

regard—he also points out that this is not always the case.

Before becoming one of Los Angeles' first charter schools in 1994, Fenton produced abysmal test scores. Attendance was poor. Student turnover was high. It was considered one of the two worst elementary schools in the Valley.

Now, though, Fenton is in the midst of a heartening turnaround and was named this year a California Distinguished School.

The asphalt playground has been repaired, hundreds of new computers are in use, attendance is up and so is parent enthusiasm. Since the school began using a new phonics-based reading program, test scores have soared. And the school had money left over to pay the teachers bonuses.

"The people inside the charter school are in charge," says Joe Lucente, one of the school's co-directors. "That's the secret of our success."

But freedom also can lead to chaos—educational as well as financial. Drawing a sharp contrast to Fenton, Merrow examines the outrageous case of the Phoenix charter school known as Citizen 2000.

Arizona's charter school law is one of the loosest in the nation. So it makes sense that the state would

have more than a third of the 600 such schools operating nationwide. But some of those schools have run into trouble and, as Merrow reports, the Arizona Board of Education has been slow to step in.

Citizen 2000 had a ridiculously ambitious agenda from the start. Students in the central city school were to be taught "international protocols," not to mention horseback riding and ballroom dancing.

In an extraordinary interview, the school's founder, Lawndia White Venerable, admits to Merrow that she used the school's money to pay her mother's mortgage, buy jewelry, renovate her home and cover the cost of her divorce attorney.

That interview alone makes this documentary worth watching. Even though Merrow does not prod, Venerable digs herself into a deep hole attempting to justify her misappropriation of funds. In doing so, she offers an unmistakable warning that freedom must be accompanied by another watchword—accountability.

This is the first of four "Merrow Reports" airing on successive Fridays this month. In the second and third, he examines the controversial reform efforts of Philadelphia Supt. David Hornbeck over the last three years. Hornbeck, too,

preached accountability. But he ran into serious opposition from union leaders, who argued that teachers could not be held responsible for the academic achievement of their students.

Hornbeck had a point, certainly. He was politically clumsy, though, which weakened his position and did little to win the union over to his side. Clearly, it's easier to reform one school, like Fenton, than it is to reform the fifth-largest school district in the nation.

The fourth program in the series, "Elementary Confusion," is a moving revisit to two schools Merrow focused on a year ago. In the original piece, Merrow monitored the effectiveness of the methods used at the two schools by periodically questioning their students on math and asking them to demonstrate their reading skills.

This time, Merrow questions the same students again, finding that they made substantial progress. But both schools' efforts are undercut by factors beyond their control. At one, a quarter of the students move on every year, enrolling in schools elsewhere that may or may not be striving to reach the same high standards. The other school, having made dramatic progress, is shut down.

As always, in all four shows, Merrow offers reporting that is clear, balanced and passionate.

■ "The Merrow Report" airs tonight and on the next three Fridays at 10 p.m. on KCET-TV Channel 28.