

One reason the Harry Potter universe is so compelling is that it offers lessons and parallels that ring true in our own. Harry Potter's school offers lessons from its experience through the series that can help charter navigate and avoid the same pitfalls.



Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is probably a charter school. It's supported by the public, albeit the magical public, of Great Britain, but operates outside the traditional public education system. You might argue that the school is authorized as a charter by the Ministry of Magic. It has its own 12-member governing board to whom the school director reports.

It also has some of the same challenges that charters in across the country have faced—Some tension between the director and the board (Dumbledore is removed in *Chamber of Secrets*), teacher turnover (no one stays in the Defense

Against the Dark Arts position for more than a year), and a biased media (*The Daily Prophet*).

Instruction

Many lessons come from *The Order of the Phoenix*, in which the government interferes with the school's operations, changes the curriculum and philosophy, and uses politics and rumor as the basis for making decisions. Hermione Granger, early in the movie, notices, "The Ministry is going to start interfering at Hogwarts."

Dolores Umbridge, as the Ministry-appointed teacher of Defense Against the Dark Arts must be one of the worst teachers ever. Her approach to instruction is that students should learn "in a secure, risk-free way," and that "a theoretical knowledge will be sufficient to get you through your examinations, which, after all, is what school is all about."



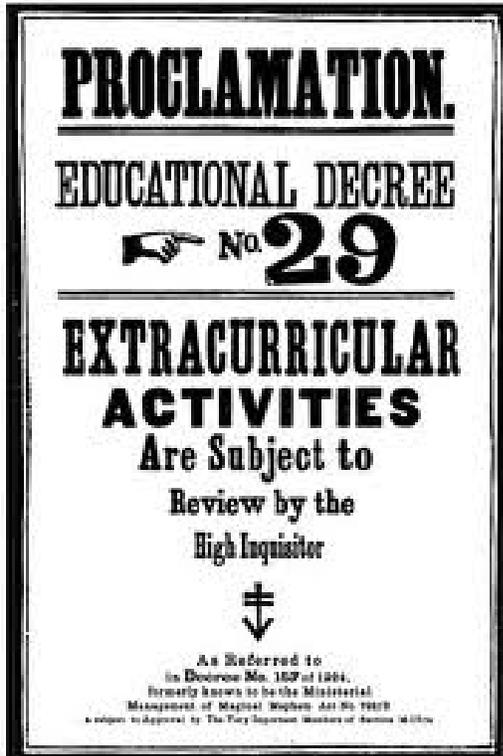
It ought to be obvious to any educator the many educational mistakes Umbridge makes in this short introduction to her class. First, she is preparing students only for an exam, and not for success beyond school. If success in school is the only reason for school, we spend way too much on it. Second, she misses the key aspect of any lesson: application. Students need to apply knowledge to their own reality, learn it based on their own experience, and use it to be successful in their own future.

But then, Umbridge is teaching a "ministry-approved" curriculum. Haven't we all experienced politicians approving standards and methods based on political considerations?

Governance

The reason Ms. Umbridge is such a poor teacher is that she’s not a teacher at all. Instead, she’s a spy inserted into the school so the Ministry can keep tabs on the director, whom they think is a political opponent. Schools usually don’t set things up this way, but if board members aren’t

careful, this same situation can creep into schools, undermine the administration, and destroy the school’s culture.



A lesson for board members: Don’t entertain staff members or parents who undermine the administration by operating outside the school’s structure and expect the board to solve every problem. Such a situation creates the same poisonous culture as if the board had placed a spy on purpose.

Hogwarts’ culture becomes worse when Umbridge becomes the High Inquisitor. With that power, she makes a mistake that we see often in schools, companies, and governments. That is, solving performance problems by passing more and more policies.

As public schools, we have seen the effects of such action from those who oversee us. One school has a rogue or incompetent employee who makes a public mess of things, and then higher-ups get all up in their

danger and pass a new requirement forbidding schools from doing something that only one idiot did. So then all schools have to adopt new policies, fill out new reports, and generally waste time.

Most often schools get in trouble due to individual mistakes, ignorance, or malfeasance. Creating new policy solves none of those problems. School leaders should handle poor performance through training or discipline, not through changing the rules for the majority who do their jobs well, which creates a culture of distrust and dependency.

Learning from Others

May I suggest that you either rewatch or reread *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, and relearn these lessons that can help your school avoid the negative culture and consequences present in Hogwarts during Harry Potter’s fifth year. It is possible to learn from the mistakes of others—even those that take place in the fantasy world of British magic.