*Last Week Tonight*: Charter School Take Down

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In my opinion, the 2000s were the golden age of American political comedy. The heyday of George W. Bush’s presidential administration was ample fodder for Jon Stewart’s *The Daily Show* and Stephen Colbert’s *The Colbert Report.* Those two shows mercilessly satirized politicians, media pundits, celebrities, religious figures, and just about anyone else who got in their crosshairs. The heir apparent to both Colbert and Stewart is the former *Daily Show* pundit, and part time host, John Oliver. Oliver’s style is different from both Stewart and Colbert’s in that his talk show takes a full episode to delve deeply into one subject at a time. Unlike Stewart, who was a nearly real time media critic, exposing the vice and hypocrisy of daily events, or Colbert, who cleverly wielded a Swift-like persona, Oliver has a madcap way of looking at deeper issues and systems of injustice or folly.

Take, for instance, John Oliver’s video essay on charter schools. In it, Oliver’s unique brand of irony, sarcasm, sneer, and are on display with wickedly delightful effect. Oliver looks at several important aspects of charter schools exposing the quality, the lack of accountability, and downright malfeasance at many charter schools across America. Oliver uses satirical devices to expose the absurdity of evil and incompetence in present day America.

Oliver’s look at charter schools, schools that are publicly funded but privately managed, finds funny ironic examples of the kinds of things happening in charter schools. Schools are supposed to be places where people, especially teachers, are held to a high standard—both ethically and intellectually. The ironic reality could not be further from the truth. Ironic examples include: one of the applications to open a charter school was clearly plagiarised and copied from another school’s earlier application. Oliver pointed out that, based on the school’s plagiarism policy, the application for the school was enough to get you thrown out of the school. Second, Oliver exposed a school that turned into an illegal night club after hours; pointing out that both elementary school kids and drinkers at a club are the most prone to vomiting. Third, Oliver also explored a school that didn’t have enough classroom space, so it put kids on daily field trips. Finally, Oliver scoffed at Philadelphia magazine’s suggestion to Google school CEOs to see if they had plead guilty to any crimes before signing their kids up. In each case, the belief that schools should held to a high standard fell ironically, and woefully, short. Oliver’s use of satiric irony is clearly on display in this episode.

In several caustic examples, Oliver proves master of sarcasm. From the top of the program Oliver, like a smarmy teacher, corrects the famous line from Pink Floyd’s *The Wall:* “It’s we don’t need ANY education—you’ve undermined your point.” In a conference on Florida charter schools, Pitbull, the Miami rapper, praises Bill Cosby admitting he also loves Jell-O prompting Oliver to say: “...but to be fair, it was not commonly known at the time that Jell-O was responsible for dozens of cases of sexual assault. Turns out Jell-O is a monster.” Oliver’s deft sarcastic conflating of the dozens of monstrous allegations against Bill Cosby and a famous children’s dessert is pretty amazing. Later in the show, when an embezzling school executive quotes the Bible and suggests that in order to be a better educator she would have to have many experiences, like those she paid for with stolen funds, Oliver says: “that is AMAZING! She’s just spouting a bunch of vague bullshit about inspiration, crossing her fingers and hoping people will buy it.” His joyful sarcastic declaration ‘that is AMAZING’ takes the sting out of behavior so egregious it is absurd. Oliver then describes how non-profits can become “authorizers” for charter schools creating their own schools with little or no oversight. In his example a non-profit called ‘kids count’ fraudulently padded school’s attendance numbers. “30 kids showed up and the school claimed they had four hundred and fifty—which doesn’t speak well of an oversight group called KIDS COUNT!” In the end Oliver’s sarcasm is powerful and cutting—illustrating the hypocrisy and folly of many charter school systems.

John Oliver’s British sneer is at its best in this piece when exposing the hypocrisy of powerful people. When Ohio governor John Kasich makes an analogy comparing schools to pizza shops Oliver rips him saying: “The notion that the more pizza shops there are the better pizza becomes is effectively undercut by the two words: ‘Papa Johns.’” Pennsylvania’s state auditor said that Pennsylvania has the worst charter school law in the United States. Oliver responded that “it’s not like having the worst of something is new for Pennsylvania. Remember this is a state that has: the worst football fans, the worst bells, and THE worst regional delicacy. Yes, if I wanted Cheez-whiz on my steak sandwich I’d eat a kiddie cafeteria—the restaurant run by six-year olds.” Oliver is relentless in his insulting sneer. When he finally looks at online charter schools and the studies that show students lost 180 days of learning math during the course of a 180-day school year Oliver quipped: “…and a hundred and eighty minus hundred and eighty is, as those kids might put it, three.” Oliver’s razor-sharp wit is manifested in his sneering contempt for the wicked hypocrites supporting poorly operated charter schools.

In the end John Oliver masterfully weaves irony, sarcasm, and sneer in an attempt to make the issue of charter schools more accessible to the average viewer. He is a true master of satire and satirical devices. In this educational yet entertaining milieu, Oliver, with his long form deep dives, is the emerging star of political talk-show comedy. In an age of relentless, reality defying, terrifying political news, Oliver uses satire to propose alternative social and policy options. *Last Week Tonight* is a truly hilarious educational voice for the next generation of liberal progressives.

Works Cited

*Last Week Tonight*. “Charter Schools: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO).” *YouTube*, YouTube, 21 Aug. 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=l\_htSPGAY7I.