Working Without A Safety Net

HOW CHARTER SCHOOL LEADERS CAN BEST SURVIVE ON THE HIGH WIRE

Christine Campbell, Betheny Gross

NATIONAL CHARTER SCHOOL RESEARCH PROJECT
center on **reinventing** public education

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON
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Christine Campbell, Betheny Gross

Inside Charter Schools

An initiative of the National Charter School Research Project

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The National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) brings rigor, evidence, and balance to the national charter school debate.

NCSRP seeks to facilitate the fair assessment of the value-added effects of U.S. charter schools and to provide the charter school and broader public education communities with research and information for ongoing improvement.

NCSRP:

- ✓ **Identifies high-priority research questions.**
- ✓ **Conducts and commissions original research to fill gaps in current knowledge or to illuminate existing debates.**
- ✓ **Helps policymakers and the general public interpret charter school research.**

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Introduction

It comes as no surprise that charter school and traditional public school leaders face many common challenges. At both institutions, school leaders must shape a school's vision, foster trust among both adults and children, manage resources efficiently, and balance internal and external pressures. These tasks—and many others—are at the heart of leading schools.[1] Yet leading a charter school is also a distinctively different assignment than leading a traditional public school, the latter of which receives support from the district's central office. For the charter school leader there is no central office to recruit students and teachers. And there is no central office to secure and manage facilities, raise money, and manage the school's finances. Charter schools thus amplify the common tasks of school leadership, but add other challenges, such as managing business operations, that are unique to the charter sector because they happen at the school level.

As the charter movement moves into the latter half of its second decade, the challenges facing charter school directors raise new and pressing questions about how best to attract and support charter leadership. What is drawing leaders to charter schools? What do they struggle with on the job? And what would help them and their schools flourish over the long term?

To answer these questions, the National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) at the University of Washington surveyed charter school leaders in six states in 2007 (see sidebar). NCSRP is also visiting 24 charter schools in California, Hawaii, and Texas to learn more about the real-world experiences behind the survey data—two vignettes from these visits are included in this report. Charter school observers and advocates have long understood the demands of leading a charter school and suspected that the charter school director position posed serious challenges and often suffered from frequent turnover. However, the field largely based these conclusions on anecdotal evidence. This study offers one of the first large-scale surveys of the charter school director, the director's job, and its challenges. The results of the research underscore the centrality of a school

1. Bradley Portin et al., *Making Sense of Leading Schools: A Study of the School Principalship* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2003); Kenneth Leithwood et al., *How Leadership Influences Student Learning* (Minneapolis, MN: Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, University of Minnesota, 2004); Anthony S. Bryk and Barbara L. Schneider, *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002); Kenneth Leithwood, Doris Jantzi, and Rosanne Steinbach, "School Leadership and Teachers' Sense Making: The Case of Government Accountability Practices," (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA, 2000).

mission to charter schools—it is what draws leaders to charters, what keeps them there, and fostering it is what they feel they do best. The findings, however, also highlight the difficulty that charter school leaders have preparing for the future. Caught up in the day-to-day demands of managing their schools, they spend little time on strategic planning—many say they will leave their jobs in the next five years, and the future of their schools appears largely to be left to chance. For policymakers, the survey results suggest the importance of improved training and on-the-job support. For charter school boards and school leaders, this research underscores the importance of delegating leadership throughout the school and making time for long-range succession planning.

WHO ANSWERED THE SURVEY?

In the spring of 2007, NCSRP researchers mailed a survey to a random sample of 715 charter school leaders in six states representing a range of state charter laws: California, Hawaii, Texas, North Carolina, Rhode Island, and Arizona. (These states collectively account for 38 percent of the nation's charter schools.[2]) Leaders from 401 charter schools responded (56 percent response rate) with representative response rates and results from across the states.

To get a sense of how these survey respondents compared with a national sample of school directors, NCSRP compared its survey sample to national data gathered by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).[3] The years of experience and length of service reported by principals in NCSRP's 2007 survey and those in the NCES 2003-2004 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) are largely consistent. And while the NCSRP sample is consistent for the most part with the national sample in terms of race and age of directors, NCSRP's sample included a slightly larger share of white respondents and smaller share of African American respondents. NCSRP's sample also included a somewhat larger share of women than the national sample. (See table 1.)

Table 1. Comparing NCSRP Sample to National Sample of Charter School Directors

	NCSRP Sample of Charter School Directors	National SASS Sample of Charter School Directors
Years of Experience		
Less than 2 years	27%	29%
2–5 years	27%	30%
5 + years	46%	42%
Age		
30 years or under	3%	3%
31–40 years	19%	21%
41–50 years	26%	34%
51–60 years	38%	30%
61 years or older	14%	12%
Race/Ethnicity		
White	68%	57%
African American	11%	30%
Hispanic	10%	6%
Asian	5%	2%
Native American	3%	2%
Other	<1%	2%
Gender		
Female	54%	49%
Male	46%	51%

2. These six states were chosen because they represent a range of variation in charter school laws. They are not necessarily the states with the most abundant number of charter schools, or even states with the most typical charter schools. They do however include a large share of the nation's charter schools. Hawaii and Rhode Island are among the most restrictive in terms of permitting a limited number of charters and requiring that charter schools fall under state collective bargaining agreements. These two states have relatively few charter schools. California and North Carolina are somewhat less restrictive, allowing charter schools to operate outside local collective bargaining agreements, and they have a larger number of charter schools. Arizona and Texas have relatively liberal charter laws that allow schools to operate outside collective bargaining agreements and have facilitated widespread adoption of charter schools.

3. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Principal Questionnaire, 2003–2004.

COMPARING CHARTER DIRECTORS AND TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

In many respects, charter school leaders resemble traditional public school principals. In fact, the NCSRP survey found—somewhat surprisingly—that the vast majority of charter school leaders (87 percent) moved into their current positions from a job already within education. These findings do not bear out the expectation that, with certification restrictions removed, the ranks of charter school leaders would draw heavily from non-educators. Most charter school leaders, in short, are still professional educators. The NCSRP survey shows that three in four charter school leaders earned their highest degree through traditional educational training at colleges of education. Almost 60 percent are, or have been, state-certified school principals. According to the national survey of school leaders, their demographics too—with regard to race and gender—are not much different from traditional public school principals (see table 2).

The key differences separating charter school leaders from traditional public school principals are their experience, age, and length of tenure as school leaders. The NCES data suggest that almost 30 percent of charter school leaders have led a school for two years or less, compared to only 16 percent of traditional public school principals. Moreover, as many as 12 percent of charter school leaders are under the age of 35 (see figure 1). In the case of the younger charter school leaders, almost 40 percent of those under the age of 40 came directly to their jobs from teaching—leapfrogging over the assistant principal position, a common route to principalship for traditional public school principals. On the other hand, some charter leaders are also highly experienced. Nineteen percent of charter directors have more than 10 years of experience as school leaders, while 28 percent of traditional school principals have comparable experience (see figure 2).

Table 2. Charter School Leaders and Traditional Public School Principals Are Similar in Race and Gender

	CHARTER SCHOOL LEADERS	TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOL PRINCIPALS
WHITE	57%	63%
AFRICAN AMERICAN	30%	24%
HISPANIC	6%	9%
ASIAN	1%	1%
NATIVE AMERICAN	2%	1%
OTHER	2%	2%

	CHARTER SCHOOL LEADERS	TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOL PRINCIPALS
FEMALE	49%	48%
MALE	51%	52%

Source: 2003-2004 Schools and Staffing Survey, National Center for Education Statistics

Figure 1. Charter Schools Have Slightly More Leaders Under the Age of 40, and Over 60

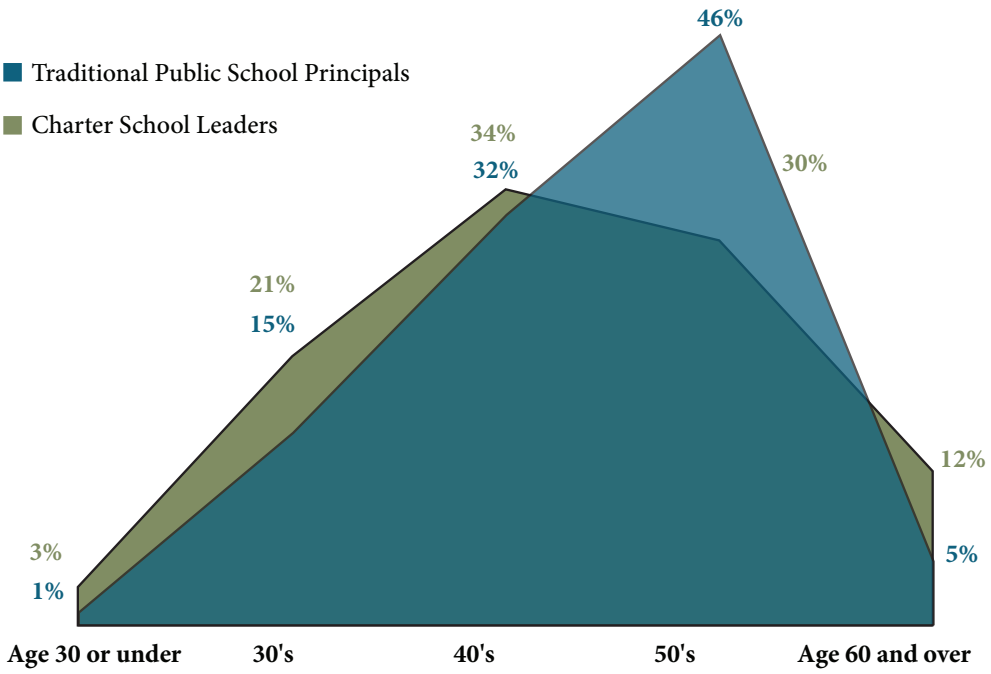
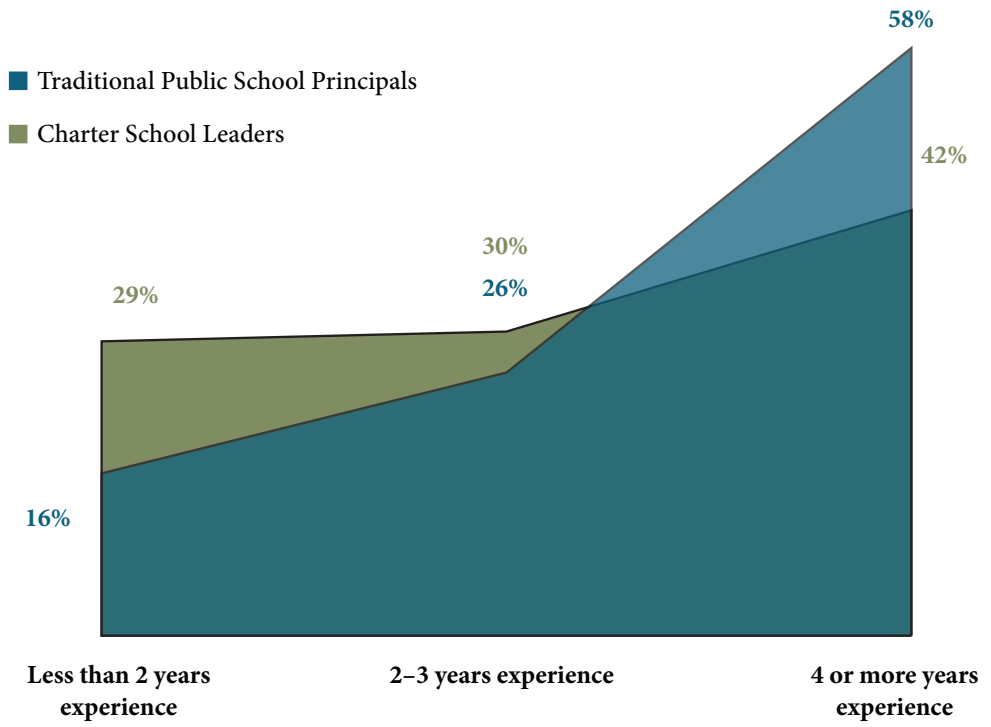


Figure 2. Charter School Leaders Tend to Be Newer to School Leadership



What's Different About Leading a Charter School?

Studies of traditional public schools catalogue an array of critical leadership tasks for principals, including overseeing instruction, tending to the culture of the school, and managing people.[4] Instead of reviewing the extensive literature on school leadership, this report focuses specifically on four areas of leadership and how they are amplified and extended in the charter context. Those four challenges are creating and supporting a vision; developing and supporting human resources; sharing leadership; and using resources effectively.

CREATING AND SUPPORTING A VISION

The ability to create and communicate a common vision for a school is a critical task for any school principal. For charter school leaders, however, it takes on added significance. Charter schools are, by definition (and aspiration), mission-driven organizations. They are places conceived of and built around a specific instructional imperative and often designed to serve a targeted population of students—often at-risk students. Their clarity of purpose is one thing that draws students and teachers to them.[5] Looking ahead—to plan the school's growth and build its capacity—is a critical responsibility for charter school leaders who aspire to have their schools weather change and mature.

DEVELOPING AND SUPPORTING HUMAN RESOURCES

Developing staff and creating a climate of trust within the school community is important for all schools.[6] But in charter schools this task is complicated considerably by the combination of high demands (time and effort), lower pay, and the fundamental

4. Portin et al., *Making Sense of Leading Schools*, 18.

5. Paul T. Hill and Robin J. Lake with Mary Beth Celio, *Charter Schools and Accountability in Public Education* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2002).

6. Bryk and Schneider, *Trust in Schools*.

uncertainty that comes from being a school of choice on a short-term (3–5 year) contract.[7] Recruiting teachers and other staff into this environment, gauging fit, and competing with typically higher-paying districts are major challenges for charter school leaders. To complicate matters further, charter schools must also manage a range of external groups (for example, community groups and governing boards), which can introduce novel conflicts and obstacles.

SHARING LEADERSHIP

Delegating or "distributed leadership"—often held up as an important component of effective school leadership—is arguably even more important in charter schools than in traditional public schools, if for no other reason than charter schools lack the support structures of a district. Charter leaders can wear fewer hats if they can successfully establish administrative teams (for example, business officers, human resource directors) or enlist people across the school into the leadership and management of the school.

USING RESOURCES EFFECTIVELY

Finally, charter schools typically have more freedom to marshal and deploy resources effectively: They hire their own teachers and control their own budgets—though since the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) *Act*, traditional public school principals may also find that they have increased managerial autonomy, too. At the same time, charter school leaders are also more exposed to uncertainty: Budgets are tied to student enrollments, and reimbursements often are not timely or fail to cover the cost of facilities.[8] Securing, paying for, and maintaining an appropriate facility to house the school, in addition to the usual operating expenses of running it, is one of the biggest challenges facing charter school directors. Unlike traditional public schools, charter schools must generally find their own buildings and pay for these facilities and capital expenses out of the education funds allotted per student. Traditional public schools benefit from known sources of

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7. Terrence E. Deal and Guilbert C. Hentschke, *Adventures of Charter School Creators: Leading from the Gound Up* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004); Brett Lane, *A Profile of the Leadership Needs of Charter School Founders* (Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Education Laboratory, 1998); Chester E. Finn, Jr., Bruno V. Manno, and Greg Vanourek, *Charter Schools in Action: Renewing Public Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Jeffrey R. Henig et al., *Growing Pains: An Evaluation of Charter Schools in the District of Columbia, 1999–2000* (Washington, DC: Center for Washington Area Studies, George Washington University, 2001).

8. Chester E. Finn, Jr., Bryan C. Hassel, and Sheree Speakman, *Charter School Funding: Inequity's Next Frontier* (Dayton, OH: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 2005).

students, funding, and administrative and managerial support, none of which can be taken for granted in the charter sector.

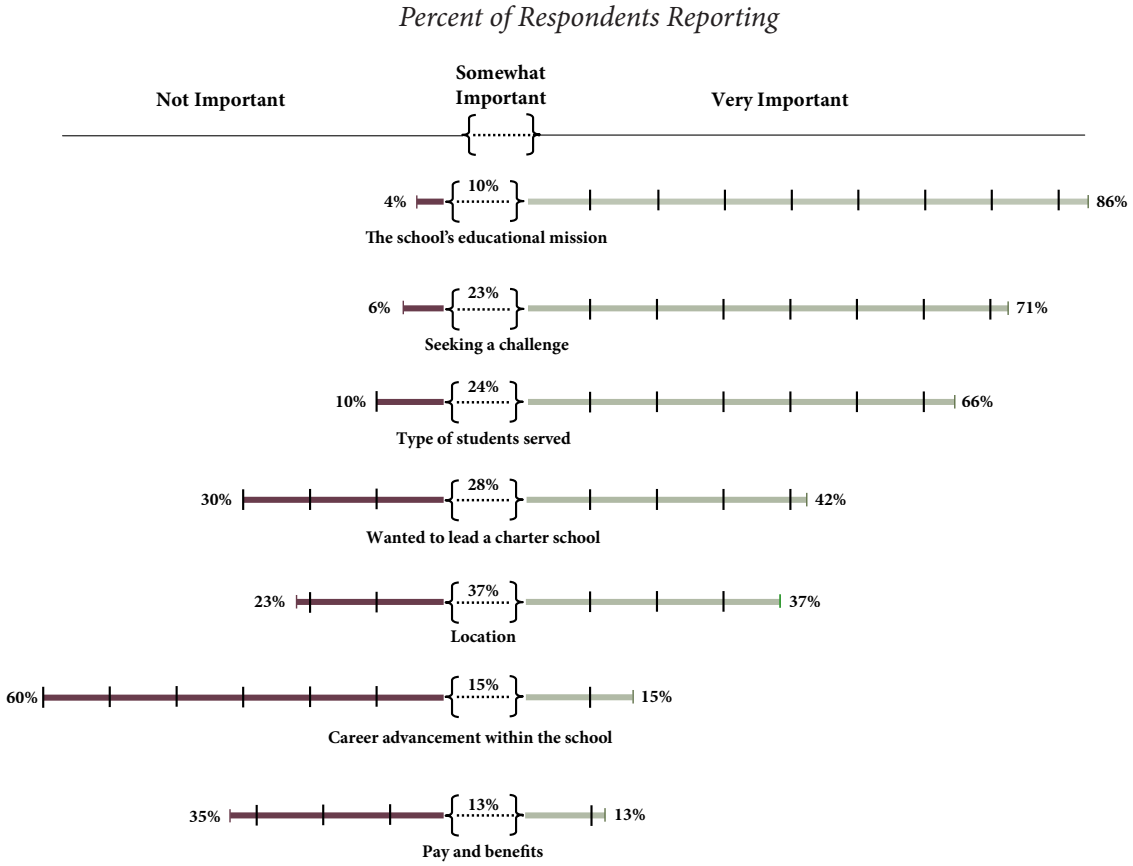
Leading any school is a demanding and sometimes crisis-driven job. Leading a charter school is all that, on a high wire. Why do charter school leaders attempt this balancing act and what obstacles do they confront as they try to navigate the high wire?

Why Do They Do It?

PASSION DRIVES CHARTER SCHOOL LEADERS TO SEEK OUT THE JOB

Charter school leaders are drawn to their school's mission, the opportunity to serve a particular type of student, and the challenge of leading a charter school, as evidenced in the NCSRP data reported in figure 3.

Figure 3. What Drives Charter School Directors to Take the Job



Source: Importance of each factor when asked, "How important was each of the following factors in your decision to accept your current position at this school?" From the NCSRP six-state survey of charter school leaders.

THE FOLLOWING VIGNETTE ILLUSTRATES THE DRAW OF SERVICE FOR MANY CHARTER SCHOOL LEADERS:

Dr. Raul Rodriguez is in his first year of leading a small charter school run by a management organization. He has, however, decades of leadership experience behind him. A former superintendent of several medium-sized school districts, he was recruited out of retirement to head up a small charter school targeted toward at-risk students—many have been expelled or are former dropouts, and, according to a school administrator, more than half of the students have children themselves. As a public school principal and superintendent, Rodriguez always wanted to build a school devoted to students who had dropped out or were at very high risk of dropping out, but he could never rally the support for this goal in his former school district. The chance to follow this dream in a charter school led him to dive back into school leadership. Though he loves the school and students, he will retire again in the next couple of years.

NOTE: The vignettes in this report are derived from site visits to 24 schools. All names have been changed to provide anonymity.

Charter school leaders are a passionate group. They are also very confident in their ability to rally their staff around a common vision: When asked, 94 percent said they were very confident or mostly confident in their ability to "engage staff to work toward a common vision." (See appendix A for the complete list of tasks and director's confidence.) It is striking that few charter school leaders rank "pay and benefits" as a very important factor in taking their job; in fact, about 25 percent reported taking a pay cut when they took their current job. The average (typically urban) charter school director salary in the 2003–2004 school year was about $66,800. By comparison, the average salary for a traditional urban public school principal was $82,600.[9]

9. Salaries were compared to urban public school principals because most charter schools are located in urban areas.

WHY THEY STAY

Of course, what draws leaders to charter schools is only half the story—the other half is why they stay. Charter school leaders describe several sources of ongoing satisfaction in their jobs, depending in part on their previous work experience. Charter leaders who have previously held school leadership positions point to the increased autonomy and collegiality in their current posts as the most satisfying elements of their work. For others—former teachers, those who came from non-education careers, and those under 40—their on-the-job satisfaction is sustained by the opportunity that first attracted them to their charter schools: namely, the chance to serve a targeted group of students. These leaders feel committed to the school's students and to generally making a difference with young people.

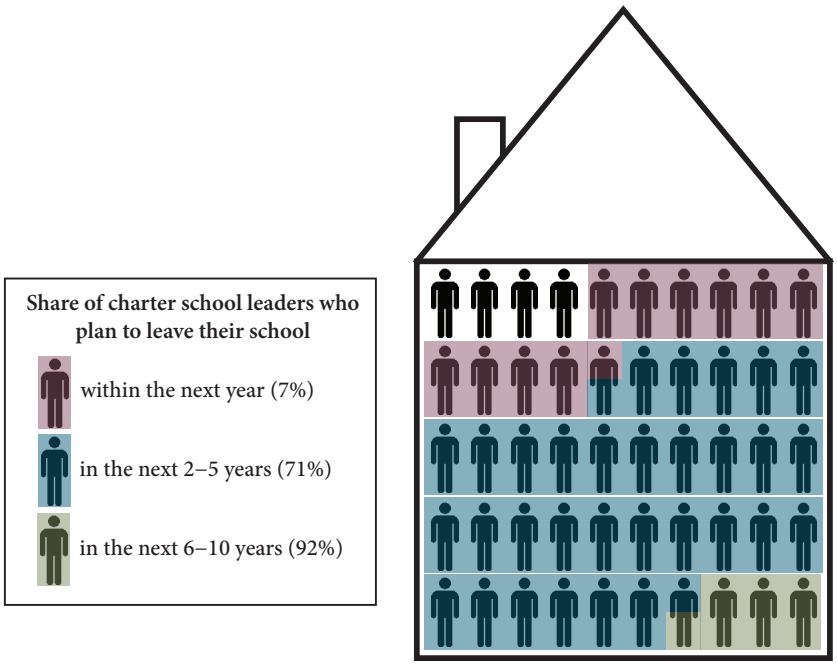
WHY THEY LEAVE

Turnover among charter school leaders has long been thought to be a problem, though up until now, not much data has been available.[10] Turnover in traditional public schools varies by state and district. A 2004 study of school administrators reported that turnover in Illinois from 1987 to 2001 was 14 percent per year, while in North Carolina the figure was 18 percent per year.[11] According to NCSRP's survey, almost 10 percent of charter leaders leave each year. These figures are distributed evenly across age groups and across tenure at a school (for example, not any higher for new leaders compared to experienced leaders). Despite the lower turnover, charter schools may be particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of leadership turnover because they are so mission oriented. When asked in 2007 about their plans for staying on as leaders of the school, almost half of the directors (43 percent) say they expect to leave within three years, and nearly three-quarters (71 percent) expect to be gone in five years (see figure 4). It may be that charter school leaders view their jobs as short-term, three- to five-year assignments because the school cannot provide long-term benefits. Often, the job does not easily accommodate changes in lifestyle (having a family, changes to spouses' careers), or provide good retirement and healthcare plans. It may also be that charter school leaders, like many young professionals today, aspire to careers that enable them to try out several different jobs during their working lives.

10. Henig et al., *Growing Pains.*

11. Susan M. Gates, *The Careers of Public School Administrators*, RAND Education, Research Brief, RB-9054-EDU 2004.

Figure 4. Most Charter School Leaders Will Leave Within 5 Years



We also asked directors what they planned to do when they left. One-third say they plan to retire—a not-altogether-surprising finding since 30 percent of charter school leaders are already over 50 years old. Yet half of those leaving their charter school jobs plan to stay in the education field. They anticipate working for the district or state, consulting, or leading other schools, both charter and traditional. Few say they will leave education entirely. This ongoing commitment to K–12 education is good news because it suggests that the departure of charter school leaders from their positions has more to do with the demands of their current job or personal career expectations than a lack of interest in the field itself. Mitigating those demands and challenges could have an effect on how soon a director decides to leave or extend their stays in their current posts.

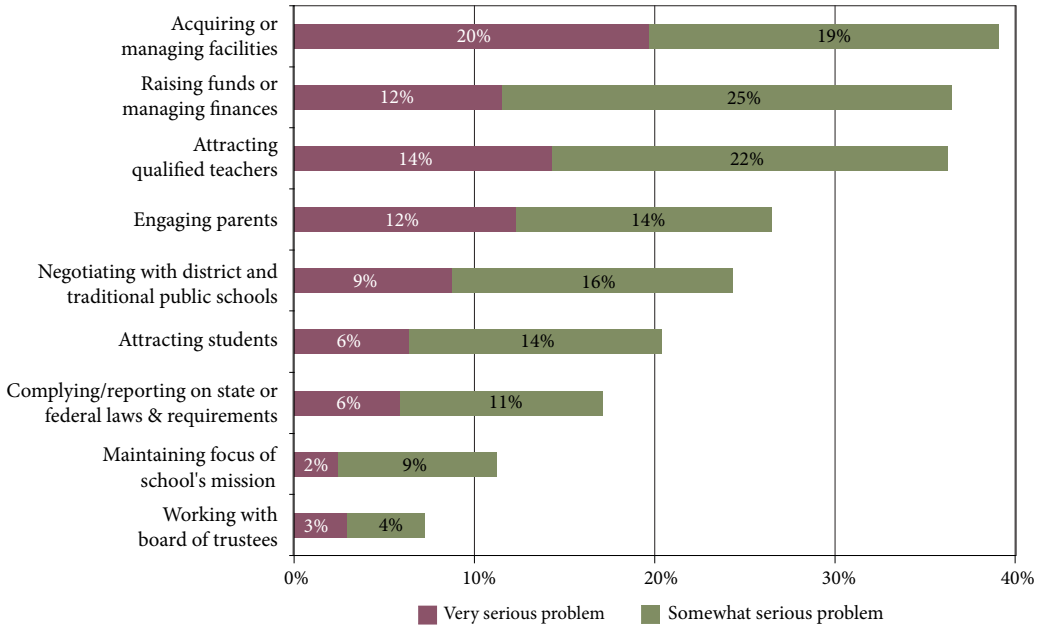
What Are the Challenges?

Familiarity with running a charter school and its attendant challenges is a prerequisite to providing better support for charter school directors. The NCSRP survey queried leaders about the problems they face at their schools, as well as their confidence in their abilities to handle an assortment of charter school leadership responsibilities. Several themes emerged from the survey.

CHARTER SCHOOL LEADERS STRUGGLE WITH FACILITIES, FINANCES, AND HIRING

When asked what organizational issues are problems at their school, charter school leaders generally report that they do *not* struggle with mission or governance issues. By contrast, many school leaders lack confidence in addressing the issues of facilities, hiring teachers, and finances—the practical side of running a charter school (see figure 5).

Figure 5. Charter School Leaders Report Serious Organizational Challenges Facing Their Schools



The good news in figure 5 is that charter school leaders report little trouble maintaining their schools' focus on mission. Moreover, very few report conflict with their boards, and only one in six school leaders say that compliance and reporting on state and federal laws is a problem.

Many charter leaders, however, report facing serious organizational management problems at their schools. Because they are responsible for finding, funding, and maintaining their own facilities, it is no surprise that this issue rises to the top of serious challenges facing charter schools. In the NCSRP survey, leaders from mature schools (those in existence for at least five years) report that facilities are less of a problem than leaders from newer schools—presumably those issues have already been ironed out at mature charters. Notably, there is some chance that local conditions, such as the real estate market or state laws, may exacerbate the challenges of acquiring and maintaining facilities. School leaders in California, Hawaii, and North Carolina are more apt to report acquiring and managing facilities as a problem than were school leaders in other states.

Attracting good teachers, raising funds, and managing finances are the three other areas charter school leaders cite most often as serious challenges at their schools. These are also areas that leaders express less confidence in their own ability to perform. (See appendix A for more on charter school leader confidence.)

Attracting teachers is of increasing concern for charter schools, owing in part to the new requirements for "highly qualified" teachers contained in NCLB. Up until now, charter schools were, depending on state laws, free to hire talented teachers with no teaching credential, and many did. These schools now face the prospect of sending their teaching staff back to school or letting them go. School leaders who previously held jobs in the education system report less difficulty attracting teachers than those who came from non-education fields (19 percent versus 30 percent). Unfortunately, our data cannot tell us why previous job background matters in teacher recruitment. Possible explanations for this gap include familiarity with sources of teachers in their local district and region, or partnerships with teacher training organizations. It is also possible that directors with previous experience in education may be *less* discerning in selecting teachers. NCSRP's pending fieldwork on teacher-hiring practices will hopefully provide more details on these disparities in teacher recruitment.

As might be expected, leaders with prior financial management experience or training—which includes 86 percent of responding directors—are less likely to report concerns around raising and managing funds than those for whom these are new responsibilities (34 percent compared to 52 percent).

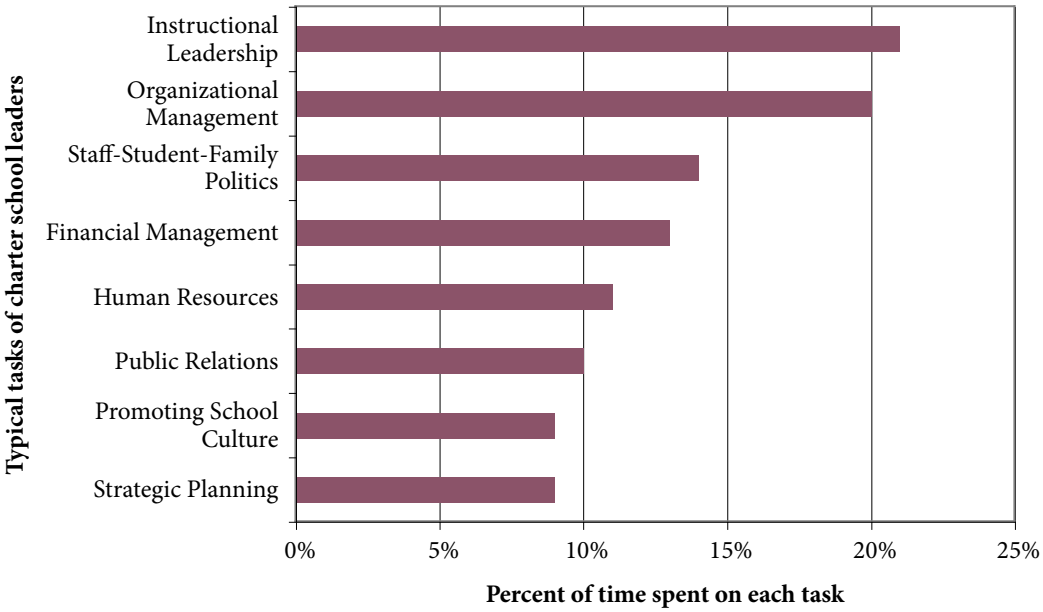
CHARTER SCHOOL LEADERS HAVE LITTLE TIME FOR STRATEGIC PLANNING

Leaders express considerable frustration with how they spend their time. Charter school leaders work long hours and have many competing responsibilities. When asked how many hours they work during a typical week, full-time directors reported spending about 60 hours a week at school, working 12-hour days, or working on weekends.[12] Directors in new schools might be expected to work the longest days, but the average workweek is approximately the same across new and older schools. Similar to their traditional public school peers, the weekly schedule of charter school leaders is stretched across a variety of responsibilities, including instructional leadership and the school's day-to-day operations (for example, schedules, safety and security.) Still, the highest concentration of time directors devoted to a single task , instructional leadership, during the workweek was only 21 percent (about 13 hours of a 60-hour week), though nearly two-thirds of respondents wished they spent more time on it. The next largest time allocation (20 percent) went to organizational management (school schedule, enrollment, facilities, safety and security, student discipline, and transportation). By contrast, a full third of leaders felt they were devoting too much time to organizational management.

The daily demands on time mean that important long-term tasks for charter directors lose out. In the end, charter school leaders reported spending an average of only 9 percent of their time on strategic planning—developing a school improvement plan, including a vision, mission, and goals (see figure 6). Almost half of the directors surveyed (45 percent) said they wished they spent more time on strategic planning. Next highest on their wish list, 36 percent of directors would like to spend more time on promoting school culture (organizing celebrations or school traditions) and 36 percent would also like to spend more time on public relations (representing the school to the community, recruiting students, advocating for the school's interests, and dealing with the school's parent groups, authorizer, district, board of trustees, or management organization).

12. Nearly nine in ten respondents (88 percent) work full-time.

Figure 6. Charter Leaders Spend Least Amount of Time on Strategic Planning



Caught up in the day-to-day demands of managing their schools, most directors spend little time on strategic planning or thinking strategically about the future. Yet the importance of strategic planning is heightened by additional data from the NCSRP survey. The survey shows that few charter schools are preparing for leadership transitions with succession plans: Just over half (52 percent) of charter school leaders reported having a succession plan in place for their eventual departure. Of the leaders who say they have a plan, 10 percent are unsure what the plan is (perhaps the board knows) and another 13 percent say the plan is to have the school district assign a principal. Charter school leaders of charter management organization (CMO) schools are more likely to report that their school has a plan for leadership succession. (By comparison, traditional public school principals, for better or worse, often have little say in who succeeds them. Whether they prepare for this transition or not may thus have little impact.) But given the expected rate of turnover of charter school leaders, and the critical importance of fit and experience, it is troubling that so few are spending time on long-range strategy, including thinking about to whom and how to hand over the reins.

HOW BEING TOO BUSY FOR STRATEGIC PLANNING HAS LEFT ONE SCHOOL RUNNING IN PLACE:

Leo Matsui left graduate school two years ago with a degree in cultural studies and the next year helped to open a charter school based on teaching particular cultural traditions. A year later, he is now leading this school. Matsui never planned to be a director and has never been a teacher, but no one else from the school was willing to step up. His youth and passion are both a strength and weakness. He leads the school through a full consensus model: everyone must agree on all school decisions or a decision is not made. Debates range from whom to contract with for trash removal, to whether to fire a teacher. Matsui, younger than almost all of his teachers, lacks the experience and confidence to lead them. He is reluctant to delegate work and instead ends up working 12 hours a day, seven days a week trying to get everything done, leaving him exhausted. He feels he has no time for planning ahead—only dealing with the immediate tasks at hand. Despite his long days, the school is struggling academically and may be slated for intervention.

NOTE: The vignettes in this report are derived from site visits to 24 schools. All names have been changed to provide anonymity.

What Helps?

Charter leaders are drawn to the job because of desire to invest themselves in a particular mission or serve a target group of students. They stay in the job because of the autonomy, the students, and the challenge of running their own school. Yet day-to-day realities make the job difficult. Directors seem most frustrated by basic issues of organizational management—raising funds and getting the facilities and teachers they need. They invest little time thinking of or planning for the future. But there are some leaders who have more tools to work with than others.

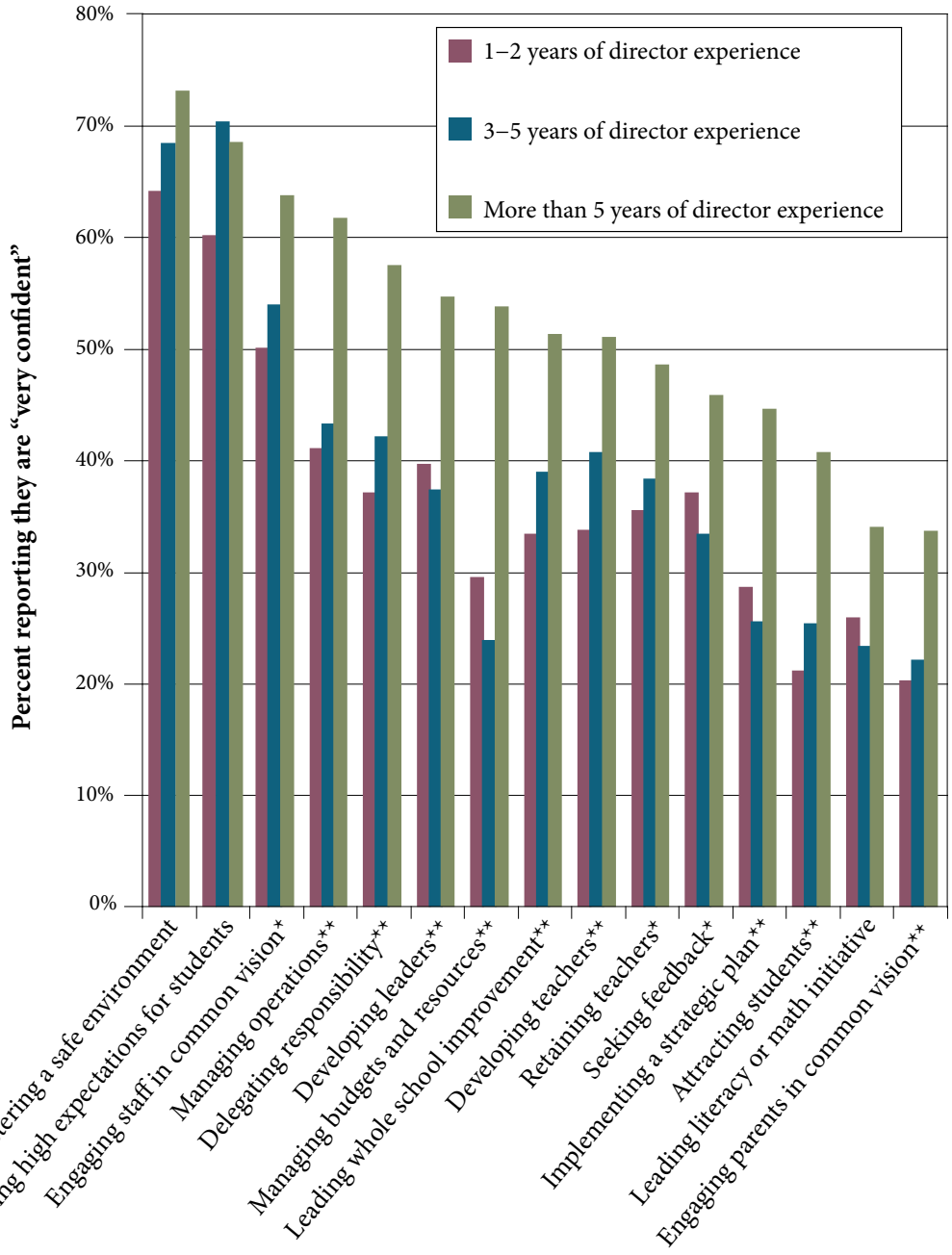
ON-THE-JOB EXPERIENCE HELPS

Tenure in the job is the number one factor in building confidence in charter school leaders, even more so than specialized training and experience (see figure 7).

Not surprisingly, confidence plays a critical role in leaders' perceptions of their records, too. Many of the highest-ranked challenges listed by school leaders are obstacles that must be managed but may sometimes be out of a leader's control. Some examples include the quality of the teacher hiring pool, inadequate available facilities, fluctuating student enrollment, and fluctuating per-pupil funding. Adept charter school leaders are able to creatively solve problems and nimbly maneuver through a myriad of challenges, and this is where on-the-job experience helps build confidence and success.

The role of previous experience figures heavily as well in determining charter school leaders' confidence. Prior experience and training in financial management seems to build confidence in the financial aspects of leading schools, while prior training from traditional colleges of education seems to build confidence in overseeing instruction and curriculum. But leaders who previously held positions in school administration (in traditional public, charter, or private schools) are the most confident in both organizational and instructional matters.

Figure 7. Experience in School Administration Yields Confidence in School Leaders



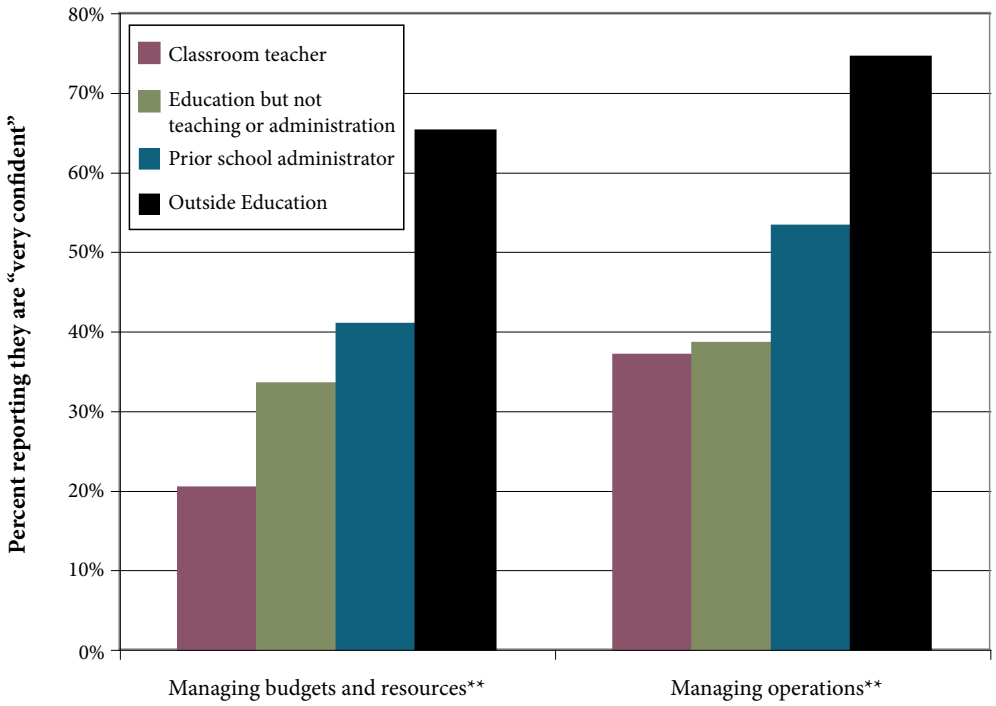
* Indicates statistically significant difference at 90 percent level of confidence

**Indicates statistically significant difference at 95 percent level of confidence

Similarly, prior jobs can both strengthen and weaken charter leader confidence. Figure 8 shows that directors who came to the position straight from teaching were *least* likely to be fully confident in managing their budgets and operations. These "teacher to principal" leaders accounted for 25 percent of the charter leaders in NCSRP's survey. Skipping

over the on-the-job training of the assistant principal position puts these leaders at a disadvantage when it comes to managing people, money, and school systems. Leaders who moved to the directorship from businesses or nonprofit organizations seem most comfortable with these management tasks.[13]

Figure 8. How Experience Matters: Most Recent Jobs and Confidence in Management



**Indicates statistically significant difference at 95 percent level of confidence

TRADITIONAL TRAINING HELPS WITH EDUCATIONAL ISSUES; NON-TRADITIONAL TRAINING HELPS WITH MANAGEMENT ISSUES

Leaders with traditional background and training express less confidence in financial and management issues, but they feel more comfortable with instructional issues. Charter school leaders with education degrees more commonly reported that they were "very confident" in instructional issues, such as engaging staff toward a common vision, attracting teachers, developing leadership in the school, facilitating staff toward whole school initiatives, implementing long-range plans, and establishing high expectations for students (see figure 9). However, the value of traditional training seems somewhat

13. Approximately 8 percent of the NCSRP sample reported that they at some point had led a nonprofit or private business.

limited. Three-fourths of charter school leaders who arrive on the job with a degree in education have exposure to some important instructional aspects of operating schools, but are lacking in the operations and management side of the job.

Figure 9. Traditionally Trained Leaders Are Confident in Instructional Issues

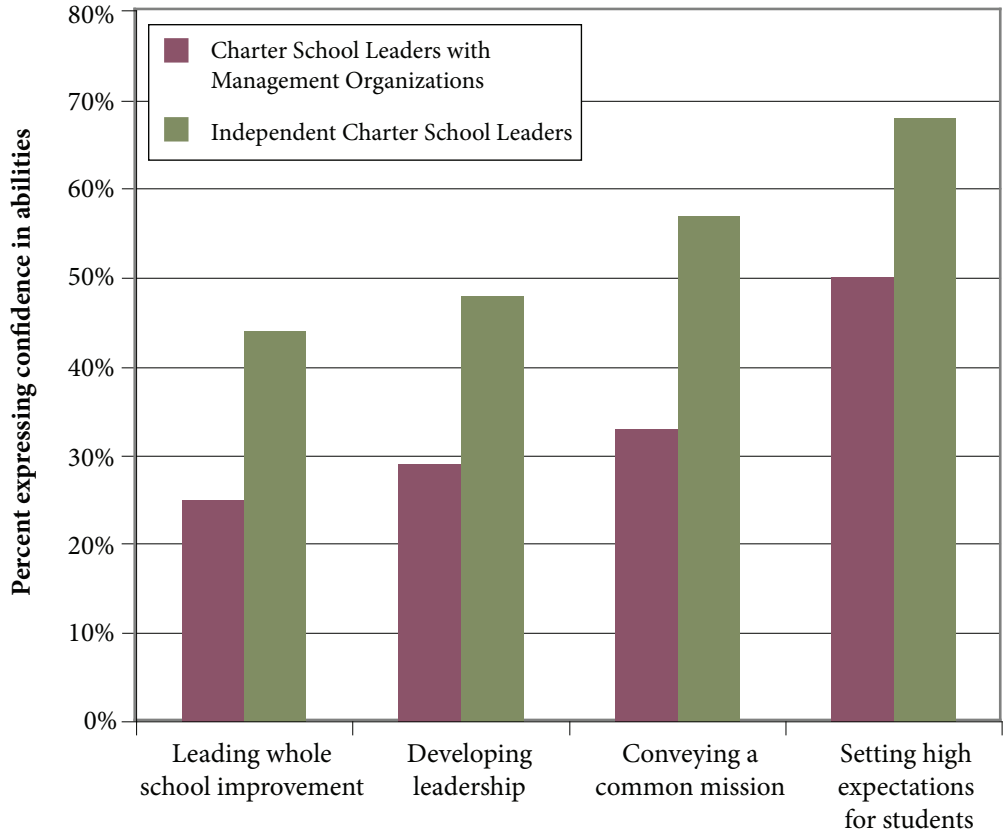
NOTE: All differences are statistically significant at a 95 percent level of confidence

CHARTER MANAGEMENT ORGANIZATIONS MAY NOT BOLSTER CONFIDENCE

Could these traditionally trained educators get the organizational and management support they need from an umbrella management organization? Despite the logical appeal of such a complementary arrangement, the survey responses from charter school directors who are part of charter management organizations (CMOs) raise questions about the impact of those organizations. One would expect leaders of schools run by management organizations to feel more supported and confident than leaders in stand-alone schools, particularly in the areas of operations management, budget management, strategic planning, and recruiting teachers for the school—all functions that CMO headquarters can provide. However, the NCSRP survey did not show a statistically significant difference in the confidence of CMO and non-CMO school leaders in these

areas. Although CMO directors in the survey were not more likely to report organizational problems than other charter directors, CMO school leaders were *less* confident in areas where management organizations provide little assistance. Relative to comparably aged directors in non-CMO schools, school leaders in CMO schools were *less* likely to report that they were very confident in conveying a common mission for the school, developing leadership, leading whole school improvement, and setting high expectations for students (see figure 10).[14] One explanation for these findings may simply be increased pressure felt by directors at CMO schools. Not only do they have to satisfy the state, their board, parents, students, and teachers, but they also have expectations put on them by their management organization to perform well, burnish their CMO's image, and support their fellow schools. They may also start with higher expectations of themselves. In the end, the survey responses do not reveal why these directors appear less confident, but the disparity is intriguing and worth further investigation.

Figure 10. Management Organizations Do Not Improve Charter School Leader Confidence



14. The relative confidence of CMO and non-CMO directors given in the description controls for the age of the director, since CMO directors, on average, were younger than non-CMO directors.

ADDING UP THE LEADERS' CHALLENGES

The charter school leader's job is perhaps even more demanding than that of a traditional public school principal, with responsibilities that extend from championing the school's mission to instructional leadership to long-range strategic planning to daily organizational management. Charter school leaders, as is typical of all school leaders, divide their time among a variety of issues and are often forced into uncomfortable trade-offs between short- and long-term goals. What sets the job apart from the traditional public school principalship is that charter school leaders operate without a safety net—no local district supplies teachers or facilities in a pinch, and funding and laws can change abruptly.

Most charter school leaders have training from schools of education, which seems to serve them well in overseeing the instructional elements of their school. Yet many are still relatively inexperienced in school administrative positions and in management in general. In addition, there will be many more new directors, with or without leadership experience, taking the helm at charter schools, since 71 percent of NCSRP survey respondents expect to leave their current position in the next five years. Only a few of these leaders (8 percent) expect to transition to other charter school director jobs. Some will retire and others indicate that they will become school consultants, join charter management organizations, work in school districts or state departments of education, or work as educational advocates.

This professional "greenness," coupled with the expanded organizational demands of the charter leadership job, is raising important concerns for charter school leaders. Linking up with a management organization does not necessarily make charter school leaders feel more confident that they can tackle their toughest challenges. Ultimately, it is experience that gives these directors the most confidence.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The scale of turnover among charter schools and the continued growth of new charters suggest that the K–12 education system is much in need of a national strategy for preparing and supporting charter school directors in the years ahead. Each year, the number of new charter schools continues to expand: over 330 new charter schools opened in the 2006–2007 school year alone, bringing the total to more than 3,800 charter schools nationwide.[15] The demands of the job leave leaders vulnerable to burnout. Some school-level changes, such as delegating leadership and deliberate and thoughtful planning for succession, can go a long way toward alleviating some of the burden borne by current charter school leaders and better prepare the new leaders to come.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS, CHARTER ASSOCIATIONS, AND PHILANTHROPIES

A number of other policy and school-level reforms may improve training and support for charter leaders. They include:

Expand specialized charter leadership training programs

NCSRP's research findings show that leaders who have gone through traditional principal training programs lack confidence in financial management, while those who have backgrounds in financial management lack confidence in core educational leadership. Prospective charter school leaders are turning to traditional colleges of education, since in many cases these providers are their only option for principal training. Though specialized charter leadership training programs exist, they are few in number. One solution may be to expand fledgling charter leadership programs that successfully prepare leaders for both managerial and instructional challenges.

15. Robin J. Lake, ed., *Hopes, Fears, & Reality: A Balanced Look at American Charter Schools in 2007*, National Charter School Research Project (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2007).

In 2007, NCSRP identified 13 programs aimed at training charter school leaders.[16] (Five are full-time charter school principal preparation programs; the other eight offer part-time workshops and enrichment courses.) The 2007 study found that charter school leader training programs are quite different from traditional preparation programs, and from each other. They are more carefully tailored to the needs of charter school directors and share a similar approach to preparation:

- Programs offer a wide array of ways to learn (light on lecture, emphasis on field observations, some include year-long assistant principal-type internships).
- Programs target the expanded responsibilities required of charter leaders (finance and operations).
- Programs differentiate based on individual leader's needs, and roles (principals vs. chief business officers).

These training programs differ from each other in size (some serve 10 people, others serve over 100), goals (some are training instructional leaders, others are preparing directors with viable charter school applications), duration (one week to two years), and cost ($600 to $120,000). But their differences are overshadowed by a shared characteristic: namely, that the current capacity of the programs is woefully inadequate to meet demand. Investing in more new training programs, scaling up successful programs, and working with current executive training programs at universities are ways to increase supply in this burgeoning field.[17] Including meaningful on-the-job training opportunities—the experiences that clearly benefited principals in the NCSRP survey—will also go a long way toward filling the charter school leader skill gaps.

Create more local mentoring and problem-solving opportunities for leaders from different types of schools

As in many fields, the best practical advice and support often comes from those engaged in the same work, and charter school leadership is no different. In the NCSRP survey

16. The 13 programs identified are not inclusive of all existing programs, but include the most prominent initiatives. The 2007 study focused on programs intent on training charter school leaders. There are many other programs—both traditional and alternative—where charter school leaders train but that is not the emphasis of the program itself. In addition, new programs are opening each year. For example, New York City's Center for Charter School Excellence opened an Emerging Leader Fellowship program in summer 2007 that prepares charter school teachers to become assistant principals. High Tech High (HTH) Graduate School of Education in San Diego is training both charter teachers and principals. The program started in fall 2007 with current HTH staff, and is open to all in 2008. See http://gse.hightechhigh.org/ for more on their proposed training plan.

17. See Christine Campbell and Brock Grubb, *Closing the Skill Gap: New Options for Charter School Leadership Development*, National Charter School Research Project (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2008).

of charter school leaders, 55 percent said that informal meetings with other charter school leaders were their most valuable resource. State charter association events/networks, state resource centers, and meetings with their authorizers were the next most helpful resources. Creating more of these opportunities, especially since most states lack organized programs to foster these connections, would provide a big boost for current directors. In California, many directors consider the state's Charter School Development Center's Summer Institute to be a mandatory first step for newly appointed charter school directors. This "crash course" in technical, organizational, and interpersonal skills also provides important mentoring opportunities. New and seasoned charter leaders in California report leaning on each other for years after meeting for one week over a summer. Yet California is one of only a few states that offer this kind of training and networking for charter school leaders. Expanding peer-mentoring opportunities for leaders is an easy, effective, and relatively inexpensive way for new leaders to learn and gain support from more experienced peers.

Invest in further research about management organizations as support systems

It came as a surprise in the NCSRP survey responses that directors in charter management organizations were not more confident than other charter leaders. Management organizations are intended to be a conduit for training, networking, and back-office support to free charter directors to be more effective as instructional and building leaders. However, by adding another layer of bureaucracy, it is possible that these organizations could add extra pressure, demands on time, or greater expectations to charter leaders, thus producing less confident leaders. This is somewhat counterintuitive and points to the need for more research into the influence of CMOs on charter school leadership.

Use incentives to attract and keep promising leaders

The NCSRP survey shows that charter school leaders who feel they have a handle on both instruction and administration and who report fewer serious organizational problems tend to be people who have dealt with these issues before. It is a case where experience really does matter. As a result, policymakers need to do more to reward experience and perseverance among charter directors and build the management capacity necessary to cultivate longevity among charter school leaders.

Creating incentives for leaders to stay in a position, or providing sabbaticals that would let them refresh and return, might be some ways to keep good leaders on the job. The

occasional sabbatical might be good for both the leader and the school. Better health and retirement benefits packages and flexible jobs, or job sharing that can accommodate leaders with young families, might allow more leaders to stay, too.

Finally, creating stronger incentives for experienced school leaders to try charter schools—providing, for example, paid charter-specific training and mentoring—might attract the kinds of leaders who can bring stability to schools. Funding leadership training for promising teachers would also help to grow a deeper pool of talented leaders. Some charter school networks and management organizations (for example, KIPP, Aspire Public Schools, and High Tech High) have developed their own leadership training programs. Regions and cities such as New York City have done the same and more may wish to follow that example.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHARTER SCHOOL BOARDS AND LEADERS

Delegate leadership throughout the school

Charter school leaders report that their time is spent on many activities—sometimes more than they would like on managing less than they would like on instruction, and not as much as they would like on preparing the school for what lays ahead. Fortunately, charter schools have more freedom than traditional public schools to re-imagine their administrative structure in ways that would make the most sense. Alternative administrative structures often include hiring a financial officer or a dean of students, or take the form of a director working closely with a team of teachers with a wide distribution of responsibilities, from hiring to leading the school's culture.

Investing in shared leadership may be the best way to eliminate the problems of burnout and the turmoil of leadership change. Some charter schools have split the numerous tasks of school leadership between the traditional principal position and other leadership roles, such as that of an executive director (who might manage school fundraising, community relationships, strategic vision, etc.), an operations manager (who might manage school operations and finances), or an instructional leader (who might manage curriculum and instruction). In the resource-constrained environment of charter schools, these staff resources can be admittedly hard to come by. In the NCSRP survey, 18 percent of these directors lead their schools without other school administrators and 26 percent had only one other administrator to help them, resulting in almost half of the directors operating

with little or no help with the many duties of leadership. Even taking school size into account, schools with no administrative staff had an average of 141 students—still sizable schools.

Principals sometimes master the exceptional demands placed on them, but the model of one-person leadership may ultimately be unsustainable. By contrast, delegated management and split leadership roles build long-term management capacity and encourage interest in others to aspire to be school leaders. However, distributed leadership also requires a stronger level of coordination and communication across the leadership team and faculty to ensure that strategy, hiring, instruction, finances, and other matters reflect a common vision.

As part of *Inside Charter Schools*, NCSRP is investigating the promise and challenge of shared leadership in charter schools, which, when done well, can offer significant payoffs in principal effectiveness and staff satisfaction.[18]

Plan for leadership turnover

Charter schools, like all schools, experience regular leadership turnover, reflecting a mobility common in many fields. Though educators have some policy options that can reduce stress and increase job longevity, charter schools will inevitably have turnover in their school leaders. The best strategy for dealing with this turnover is to expect and plan for it, and to preserve the culture, operational knowledge, and instructional practice of well-run charters.

Unfortunately, nearly half of charter schools in NCSRP's six-state survey do not appear to be planning for these leadership transitions, and many charters are not even minimally prepared for them. In addition to the importance of long-range planning for the director's position, schools might invest time in the strategy of "succession management," which acknowledges that the success of a school is ultimately contingent upon much more than continuity in principal leadership. Staff members who serve in a variety of core leadership roles, and who have a common understanding of mission and model, also critically sustain successful schools. The importance of protecting and carrying the school mission forward is one reason that charter schools are more vulnerable to leadership turnover than traditional public schools. NCSRP is looking deeper into this

18. See Nina Bascia and Andy Hargreaves, *The Sharp Edge of Educational Change: Teaching, Leading, and the Realities of Reform* (London: Routledge, 2000); Michael G. Fullan, "The New Meaning of Educational Change," *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* 2, no. 4 (1991): 336–343; and Sarah Yatsko, *Shared Leadership: A Charter School Leadership Solution*, National Charter School Research Project (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, forthcoming winter 2008).

issue of succession management and exploring ways to manage staff transitions *across* key leadership positions.[19]

Succession management is a *practice* of building a talented and flexible staff with an intimate understanding of their charter model that can respond smoothly to their schools' changing leadership needs. Succession management happens when organizational leaders look toward the future and identify what areas (for example, professional development, financial development, curriculum revision) will need oversight and guidance for the organization to be successful. Leadership then identifies, grooms, and recruits the talent needed for these functions instead of just fitting pegs in soon-to-be open positions. These activities prepare the school for change by focusing on what the school wants to be two, three, or five years out. Succession management assumes that a school can improve and evolve through managed change in leadership and guides current decisionmaking toward a desired future state. Succession management can be a key to long-term sustainability as well as an effective form of risk management.

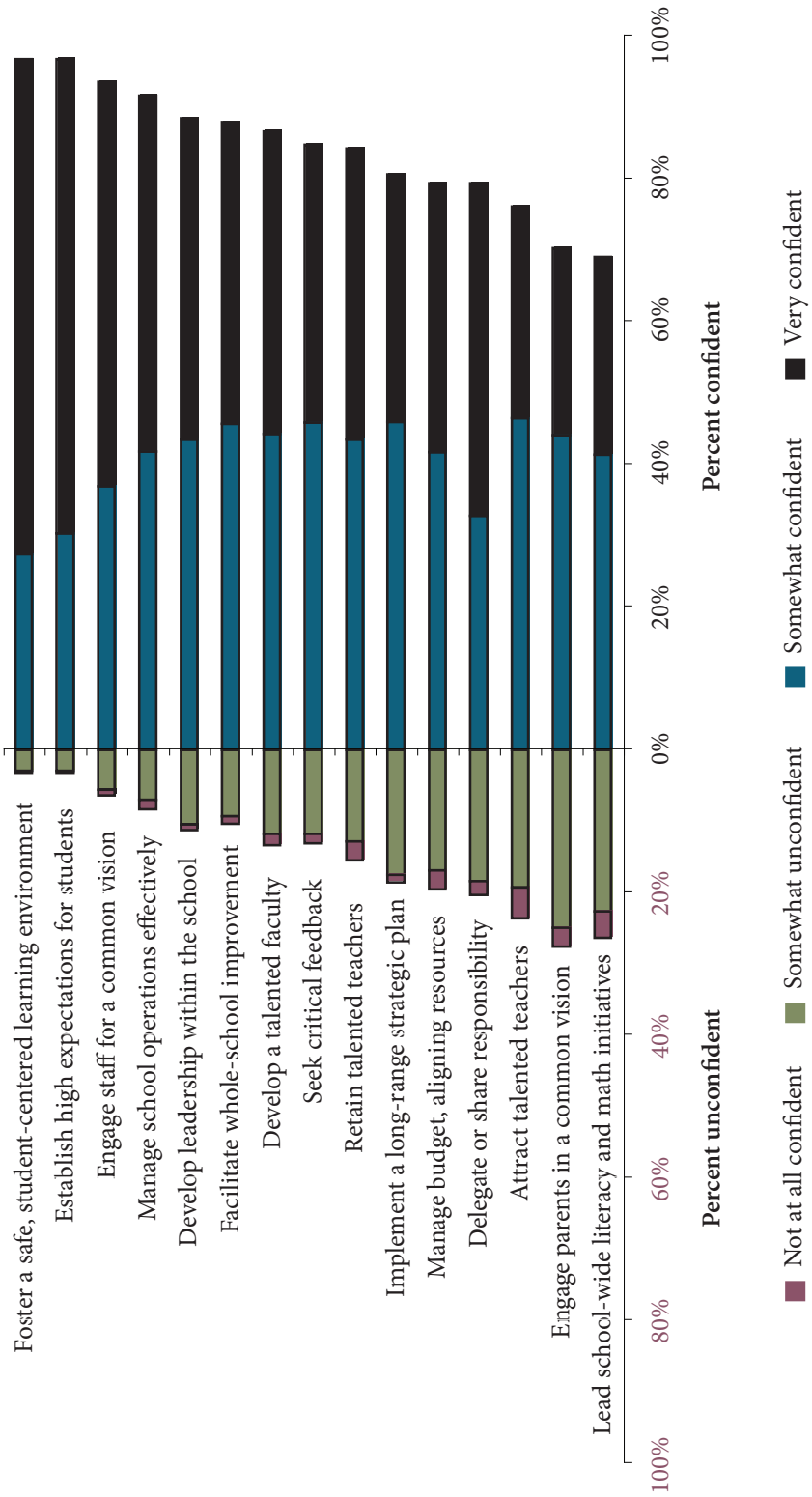
19. See Michael Foote, *How to Keep Charter Schools Going . . . and Going . . . and Going . . . Practical Succession Management*, National Charter School Research Project (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, forthcoming fall 2008).

Conclusion

The high-wire job of charter school leadership is attractive to many people, educators and non-educators alike. From recent graduates to those nearing the end of their careers, hard working, passionate, and enterprising individuals are stepping up to the job to give back and to improve the outcomes for today's youth. In their new posts, however, these idealistic leaders often struggle with the everyday demands of the job, particularly hiring, managing finances, and securing appropriate facilities. Charter school leaders who seem best equipped to handle the challenges of the job are those who have taken on similar challenges before—experience, in short, matters.

Nonetheless, few charter leaders are in the positions for long. Pairing up current school leaders with supports like peer mentoring, nurturing shared leadership, and bolstering school planning for transitions will all help to stabilize their jobs. At the same time, providing better training for new leaders will give them a leg up before they assume their new roles. For the charter movement to successfully sustain itself and grow, the commitment of charter school leaders needs to be reciprocated with new support from the education community.

Appendix A


How confident do you feel in your ability to perform each of the following tasks effectively?
Foster a safe, student-centered learning environment
Establish high expectations for students
Engage staff for a common vision
Manage school operations effectively
Develop leadership within the school
Facilitate whole-school improvement
Develop a talented faculty
Seek critical feedback
Retain talented teachers
Implement a long-range strategic plan
Manage budget, aligning resources
Delegate or share responsibility
Attract talented teachers
Engage parents in a common vision
Lead school-wide literacy and math initiatives
100% 80% 60% 40% 20% 0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%
Percent unconfident
Percent confident
Not at all confident
Somewhat unconfident
Somewhat confident
Very confident

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The National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) aims to bring rigor, evidence, and balance to the national charter school debate. For information and research on charter schools, please visit the NCSRP website at www.ncsrp.org. Original research, state-by-state charter school data, and links to charter school research from many sources can be found there.

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