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

INSIDE CHARTER SCHOOLS
from research to practice
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INSIDE CHARTER SCHOOLS
Unlocking Doors to Student Success

OVERVIEW

As the charter movement matures and plays a growing role in education reform, educators need to know about the organizational dynamics autonomy creates, the people who end up working in autonomous schools, and the academic programs they choose to employ. That information is critical to helping the charter school sector grow and mature effectively, as well as helping policymakers understand how school autonomy can best be used as a tool for improving student achievement.

Over the last four years, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) has examined how charter schools differentiate themselves from traditional public schools to attract students and families and how they recruit and manage their staff.[1] In this effort, CRPE researchers saw first hand the promise and potential pitfalls of school autonomy.

The research shows that allowing schools to develop their own mission, granting them freedom over their budgets and personnel, and holding them accountable for performance can have valuable effects in schools and for the educational system more broadly. The freedom given to charter schools can lead to new programs serving diverse needs, to higher expectations for low-income and minority students, to more school-focused professional norms for teachers and leaders, and to new ways to hire teacher and leader talent in schools.

Autonomy unlocks many doors, but new challenges lie behind them. Autonomy shifts responsibility to teachers and administrators in hope of encouraging local ingenuity and entrepreneurship. Lifting contractual mandates for teachers and creating smaller organizations that operate independent of a large district structure elevates the importance of teamwork and relationships in schools. Trust becomes an essential component in a school's success and viability.

Some doors—though unlocked—go unopened. Expectations about what a school "should look like," the stress of tight and unstable budgets, and overwhelming administrative demands are powerful forces pulling charter schools back to traditional practice. As CRPE's research makes clear, autonomy only creates the opportunity for high-quality schools; it by no means guarantees it. Yet the push for more consistent quality could easily lead charters to employ conventional, and seemingly safe, methods and avoid exploring promising but unproven practices.

A NEW MANDATE FOR AUTONOMY

Allowing a school to…
Develop independently
Be guided by a mission
Have freedom over its budget
Have freedom over hiring and firing

Can result in…
New expectations for students
Opportunities to foster educational diversity
New ways to manage teacher and leader talent
New professional norms for teachers and leaders

FINDINGS

Unlocked Doors

The fundamental contract between authorizers and charter schools gives these schools freedom to develop, to follow their own mission, and to make decisions about budgets, staffing, and programs. In exchange, charter schools are held accountable for their performance and operation, not only by their authorizers (who can close the schools) but also by parents and students, whose enrollment choices determine whether the school gets the money it needs to operate. Many of the charter schools observed in this study use their freedoms to:

- Provide focused educational programs serving diverse student interests and needs.
- Increase the access of disadvantaged students to college prep programs.
- Give school leaders new roles as captain of their own ship.
- Craft new compacts with teachers.
- Innovate around staff hiring.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

Autonomy and mission create new options and responsibilities for school principals. These were very compelling opportunities for many of the principals interviewed. In the survey of charter school principals, 86 percent reported that the school mission was one of the most important factors in their decision to join the school, and 71 percent reported that the challenge offered was very important to their decision.[2]

New Challenges Behind Open Doors

The schools that take advantage of the new opportunities unlocked by autonomy often encounter new challenges. With more autonomy comes more responsibility; with smaller organizations comes less structure and more reliance on relationships; and with challenging missions comes greater risk of stress and burnout. Some schools seem to manage these challenges with local ingenuity or support, but others continue to struggle. Posing particular challenges are:

- Expanded leadership roles with limited training and little support from governing boards.
- Schools' reliance on informal structures that makes trust essential.
- Staff stability in schools serving high-needs students in urban schools.

NEW CHALLENGES FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

The new role for charter school principals, although exciting, is also extremely demanding. The role brings with it a host of added responsibilities. Among the principals who responded to the CRPE survey, almost 40 percent said that facilities and finances were serious problems for their schools. Even though charter school principals relish the opportunity to hire their own staff, 36 percent reported that attracting teachers was a serious problem.

Doors Left Unopened

It is clear that valuable opportunities for charter schools remain behind closed doors. The charter school movement is not the first time educational reformers have used autonomy to encourage innovative, resilient, and coherent schools to mixed results. As was the case in earlier efforts to offer "site-based" management and "local empowerment," powerful forces constrain the creativity of charter school leaders, lessen their resolve to make big changes, or overwhelm their efforts to do so.[3]

This examination of how charter schools utilized their autonomy to rethink the academic programs and personnel policies in their schools indicated that:

- Despite few curriculum or practice mandates, school organization, curriculum, and classroom practice look, with few exceptions, very similar to traditional public schools.
- Despite expanded administrative demands, both administrative structure and planning are largely the same as traditional public schools.
- Despite budget freedom, compensation reform is not as widely adopted as expected.

FEW CHANGES TO TRAINING FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

Early on, advocates of the charter school movement expected charter schools to attract accomplished people from outside education in the hopes they would offer creative thinking about public education.[4] However, traditional training programs remain the main pipeline for new charter school teachers and principals. Fully two-thirds (66 percent) of current charter school teachers hold bachelor's degrees from a college of education. For charter school principals, the comparable proportion is three-quarters: 75 percent of current charter school principals have traditional school administration training.[5] CRPE's survey found that more than half of charter school principals' most recent job prior to becoming a charter school principal was in public school administration.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Getting the Most from Autonomous Schools

Striking the right balance between autonomy and accountability is an ongoing challenge in the charter school movement. Backing charter schools with a strong and adaptable support system that builds leadership, teacher, and school capacity may make it easier to find the right balance. For example, good training and support for leaders and teachers will lessen the need to regulate certification. Increased attention during the application process to board makeup and regular new member training would lesson the need for prescriptive board member requirements.

CRPE's research suggests that policymakers and others can help charter schools use their inherent autonomy to become successful schools in the following ways:

- Authorizers should look closely for a clear and achievable mission.
- School leader training programs should provide specialized training for both school leaders and governing boards.
- Charter school supporters should encourage the creation of charter school support organizations to provide administrative services.
- State laws should allow charter schools to operate outside existing teacher contracts.
- States should experiment with lifting traditional certification requirements for charter schools.
- Authorizers should require charter school agreements to include basic protections for teachers in charter schools.

In short, strong support and capacity-building systems can facilitate accountability without closing the door on autonomy and, in so doing, allow the much hoped for innovation and entrepreneurship to flourish in autonomous schools.

NOTES

1. To examine this work, CRPE collected and analyzed data from case studies of 24 charter schools and two original surveys conducted across six states, as well as of state administrative and national survey data. The analyses typically drew together two or more of these data sources into a multi-method analysis. For a complete list of data sources, please see the full report, *Inside Charter Schools: Unlocking Doors to Students Success*, at http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/view/csr_pubs/381.
2. C. Campbell and B. Gross, *Working Without a Safety Net: How Charter School Leaders Can Best Survive on the High Wire*, National Charter School Research Project (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2008).
3. J. Hannaway, "Management Decentralization and Performance-Based Incentives: Theoretical Consideration for Schools," in *Improving America's Schools: The Role of Incentives*, ed. E. Hanushek and D. Jorgenson (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 1996).
4. J. Nathan, *Charter Schools: Creating Hope and Opportunity for American Education* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998).
5. U.S. Department of Education, "Public School, BIE School, and Private School Data Files," 2007–08.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE ISSUES

You can find all of these reports at www.crpe.org:

- *Inside Charter Schools: Unlocking Doors to Student Success*, 2011
- *You're Leaving? Sustainability and Succession in Charter Schools*, 2010
- *Parallel Patterns: Teacher Attrition in Charter vs. District Schools*, 2010
- *How Do Charter Schools Compete for Teachers? A Local Perspective*, 2010
- *Charter High Schools: Alternative Paths to Graduation*, 2009
- *Custom Tailored: Trends in Charter School Educational Programs*, 2009
- *Working Without a Safety Net: How Charter School Leaders Can Best Survive on the High Wire*, 2008
- *Closing the Skill Gap: New Options for Charter School Leadership Development*, 2008
- "The High-Wire Job of Charter School Leadership," September 2008 (available at www.edweek.org)
- *Leadership to Date, Leadership Tomorrow: A Review of Data on Charter School Directors*, 2007

ABOUT THE STUDY

Inside Charter Schools is one of the first systematic studies to focus on the strategies that charter schools are pursuing to establish coherent educational programs supported by high-quality teachers and leaders. It is supported by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) consortium of funders.

The Inside Charter Schools study seeks to answer three major research questions:

- What are the academic programs offered in charter schools?
- Who is teaching and leading charter school programs?
- How do charter schools build a coherent staff, manage growth, and plan for staff and leadership changes?

NCSRP brings 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**.

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center on reinventing public education

The Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington Bothell engages in research and analysis aimed at developing focused, effective, and accountable schools and the systems that support them. The Center, established in 1993, seeks to inform community leaders, policymakers, school and school system leaders, and the research community.

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