Identifying and Replicating the "DNA" of Successful Charter Schools

Lessons from the Private Sector

by ROBIN J. LAKE

The charter school movement entered a new phase of development recently, with many charter school funders and advocates pushing for a dramatic increase in the number of high-quality charter schools as a central goal, and for the replication of successful charter schools as a critical strategy for "getting to scale." The demand for replicated schools is also increasing, with districts such as Chicago and New York City replicating home-grown models and importing replicas of successful schools from other cities. Faced with mounting performance accountability demands, more urban districts are looking for fast routes to increased performance and a broader array of parent choice options.

The concept of replicating successful schools holds great promise, but it is far from a sure bet. Even in the business world, where replicating best practices is arguably a more straightforward process, the majority of such efforts fail.[1]

This brief summarizes lessons from a review of private and nonprofit sector literature, focused mainly on summary analyses of scale-up and replication efforts. The brief begins with a look at the main problems faced by organizations attempting to replicate charter schools at scale, followed by a summary of lessons from the for-profit and nonprofit sectors about the process of replicating complex organizations. Finally, the discussion turns to how these lessons apply to efforts to faithfully and effectively replicate charter school designs.

THE INTEREST IN CHARTER SCHOOL REPLICATION

Major foundations that invest in charters (for example, the Bill & Melinda Gates, Walton, and Pisces Foundations) are increasingly offering replication grants to help "successful" schools expand the number of schools following their design or model. Efforts to help start new nonprofit networks of charter schools from 2002 through 2004 included a $40 million-plus charter school accelerator run by the NewSchools Venture Fund through donations by the Broad and Walton Foundations and the U.S.

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1. Gabriel Szulanski and Sidney Winter, "Getting It Right the Second Time," *Harvard Business Review* 80 (2002): 62-69

Department of Education.[2] Another $5.7 million gift to Aspire Public Schools from the Gates Foundation was said to be an endorsement of charter management organizations (CMOs). According to Tom Vander Ark, former Executive Director of Education for the foundation, "We have a better chance of seeing a much higher quality of school when schools are part of a network. You get a proven model."[3]

Major urban districts are also interested in the potential of replication. Chicago Public Schools is looking to reproduce successful homegrown charter schools. As Chicago Public Schools CEO Arne Duncan explains, "We will look to ask people—the players who have already done a good job—to replicate their model. So rather than running one school, people would be running three, four, five schools. We have one great charter school that wants to run eight schools over the next six years."[4]

The New York City school system is planning to import clones of charter schools founded in other cities, including the well-regarded and highly publicized Amistad Academy in Connecticut.[5] This demand for reproduction of existing models recognizes that building schools from scratch is difficult and chancy.

There are many reasons for this new focus on replication in the charter movement. Many speculate that the time, energy, and talent needed to create large numbers of "roll-your-own" schools (as one observer has dubbed them) requires a certain mission-driven leadership and staff pool that has been or will soon be tapped out: people willing to put in extremely long hours to work out the inevitable kinks in a new program, recruit families and teachers to a school with no track record, even mortgage their own homes to create their dream school. Replication of proven models, in theory, takes some of this start-up stress away by allowing school leaders to work from an established template with centralized support.

THE CHALLENGE OF CHARTER SCHOOL REPLICATION

The National Charter School Research Project at the University of Washington conducted the first comprehensive analysis of common barriers to effective charter school replication efforts. After interviewing executives from a range of CMOs and charter networks, researchers Lydia Rainey and Guillermo Maldonado found that organizations trying to replicate successful charter schools are encountering many difficulties in doing so at scale.[6]

One of the most common difficulties these organizations encounter is making sure the original design or model school is replicated faithfully. In many cases, organizations fail to insist on faithful replication and struggle with how much to allow sites to adapt the model to fit local desires. As a result, "replicated" charter schools are often of uneven quality, reflecting poorly on the original school or on the umbrella management organization.[7]

As a result of these problems, many CMOs are, after an initial period of very fast growth, slowing or waiting on their expansion plans and instead focusing on improving quality. In this period of contemplation about how to increase the odds of replicating successful schools,

2. David Bank, "California Venture Group Seeks To Fund Charter School 'Brands'," *Wall Street Journal*, April 10, 2002.
3. Joe Mathews, "Charter School Group Gets Gates Grant," *Los Angeles Times*, May 28, 2003.
4. Paul H. Seibert and George A. Clowes, "Chicago Plans to Replicate Charter Schools," *School Reform News*, The Heartland Institute, October 1, 2004, http://www.heartland.org/Article.cfm?artId=15695 (accessed January 10, 2005).
5. Marcia Biederman, "Cloning A Charter School From Connecticut," *Gotham Gazette*, August 2004, http://www.gothamgazette.com/article/education/20040803/6/1076 (accessed January 10, 2005).

6. National Charter School Research Project, *Quantity Counts: The Growth of Charter School Management Organizations* (Seattle: National Charter School Research Project, Center on Reinventing Public Education, August 2007).
7. See, for example, Steven Wilson, *Learning on the Job: When Business Takes On Public Schools* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

looking to other sectors' experiences may be especially helpful.

LEARNING FROM BUSINESS REPLICATION EFFORTS

"There are only two choices in building a new organization: Leveraging knowledge or innovating. You can't have both. Leveraging knowledge through replication should be done with humility and respect for the care that went into creating the original successful enterprise."

Szulanski and Winter, 2002

Gabriel Szulanski and Sidney Winter explain that identifying and importing the essential "DNA" of a successful organization is extremely difficult to do.[8] Surprisingly, most lessons from the business replication experience have less to do with the actual process followed than the human attitudes involved. In some cases, people try to replicate a program that succeeded more by luck than by a formula that can be copied. In other cases, overconfidence among the "locals" adopting the program causes the adopters to tinker too much with the model, thinking they can improve it or only need adopt one piece. Szulanski and Winter offer the following lessons for successful business replication:

1. Make sure you are trying to replicate something that can be copied and is worth copying

Some organizations have succeeded for reasons that are not replicable (for example, great interpersonal relationships among staff, or an extremely charismatic leader). Other organizations have better reputations than they deserve due to good press or self-promotion. For these reasons, people interested in replicating any successful organization should first ask the following questions:

8. Szulanski and Winter, "Getting It Right."

Does this activity have a proven track record? Is it really important enough to copy? Will merely replicating those results be good enough for us?

2. Observe the original model directly

Given the possibility that an organization's founder or leader may not have a complete understanding of why the organization works as well as it does, it may be unwise to solely rely on that same person or team to lead replication efforts. To truly understand the key elements of success, those trying to imitate a successful organization need to observe it *directly*. Szulanski and Winter recommend consulting key experts and documents at the original model, but to not "fool yourself that they hold the keys to the kingdom."

3. Copy the original model as closely as you can

Copying complex organizations is possible, but one should copy the components *and* how they fit together. The replica will be coherent only if the template is. Because nobody, not even the founder, is likely able to anticipate which parts of the model matter most and how they interact in subtle ways, the best thing to do is to err on the side of copying *everything*.

4. Adapt only after achieving acceptable results

Customizing or adapting might be acceptable and even appropriate given local contexts, but the template must be right before adapting it. Consider demanding exact replicas for a year and then allowing specific customizations.

5. Keep the template in mind, even as you adapt

No replication effort will ever succeed perfectly on the first attempt or be the right fit for every new locale or context. Even in the corporate world, adaptation to local cultures and expectations matters. Since imperfections are inevitable, look to the original to help identify gaps in the replication and troubleshoot. When something goes wrong, it will likely be because something went wrong in the copying process. Once that factor is ruled

out, other possibilities, such as the need to adapt the model, should be considered.

A FINAL LESSON FROM THE NONPROFIT WORLD: AVOID FALSE CHOICES

David Racine, a specialist in nonprofit replication strategies, identifies a common pitfall in the nonprofit world: believing that one must choose between a cookie-cutter approach and a community-specific approach.[9] As Racine writes, the truth is there never can be absolute replication of an original model, nor can replication efforts ever be successful if the adapters do not adhere to the model. The key is in capturing the essence of what made the original model successful, while still allowing for some local adaptation.

APPLYING THESE LESSONS TO CHARTER SCHOOL REPLICATION

Based on these lessons, those trying to replicate successful schools should:

- ✓ Insist on third-party evaluations and test-score analysis before investing in replicating what appears to be a success story for the students currently enrolled.

- ✓ Consider pairing founders with outside observers to identify successful practices.

9. David Racine, "Dissolving Dualities: The Case for Commonsense Replication," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly 32*, no. 2 (June 2003): 307-314.

- ✓ Outline the expected level of fidelity to the original model in a school's charter, contract, or memorandum of understanding, but also create sufficient flexibility to allow for "tinkering" with the model when it is appropriate.

- ✓ Emphasize the point that innovation should never be for the sake of innovation alone, but only to improve on what others have failed to achieve. In that way, the right to innovate should be earned and justified on the basis of better student outcomes.

- ✓ At least initially, insist that charter replication efforts involve hard-nosed critiques and objective analyses to identify whether and how a replica school has strayed from the original model.

CONCLUSION

The experience of the business and nonprofit sectors makes it evident that replicating successful programs and organizations is never easy, especially for complex organizations like schools.

As the charter school movement grows and seeks higher quality and more reliable outcomes, those involved will continue to struggle with the idea behind replication, which runs counter to the "craft-culture mentality" of many of the earliest charter school founders and many teachers. What is clear, however, is that if the charter movement hopes to expand in numbers adequate to create public value and meet the demand from parents and authorizers for more high-quality schools, it must find ways to leverage existing knowledge and not just rely on school-by-school innovations. The first step is recognizing the human tendencies and idiosyncrasies that will inevitably come into play.

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