



# You're Leaving?

SUCCESSION AND SUSTAINABILITY  
IN CHARTER SCHOOLS

*Christine Campbell*

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

 **UNIVERSITY OF  
WASHINGTON**

# You're Leaving?

## SUCCESSION AND SUSTAINABILITY IN CHARTER SCHOOLS

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Christine Campbell

### **Inside Charter Schools**

*An initiative of the National Charter School Research Project*

**National Charter School Research Project**

Center on Reinventing Public Education  
University of Washington

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center on **reinventing** public education

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# Executive Summary

Seventy-one percent of charter school leaders surveyed for this study say they expect to leave their schools within five years. For the nation's 5,000 charter schools, this raises important questions. Who will be ready to take over? How will the school maintain its instructional program and culture from leader to leader? How does a school survive founder transitions? Where will new leaders come from and how can they be ready to lead existing schools?

The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) at the University of Washington spent four years studying charter school teachers and leaders: CRPE's survey of 400 charter school leader respondents and fieldwork in 24 charter schools in California, Hawaii, and Texas has yielded important insights into these questions and the future of maturing charter schools.

CRPE's research finds that many charter schools are unprepared when it comes to leadership turnover. Only half of the charter school leaders surveyed for this study reported having succession plans in place, and many of those plans are weak. Though most school leaders affiliated with charter management organizations (CMOs) reported that their school had a succession plan, there was some confusion as to who would make final decisions—school leaders or CMO leaders. For the few schools with strong plans, two elements were common: the school leaders (all with prior business experience) had taken charge of future plans, and these schools were not in the midst of crisis.

This report concludes with important steps charter schools can take to stabilize a school and better position it to choose the best possible leader. Specifically:

- Charter schools can learn about effective succession management strategies from the nonprofit sector.
- Governing boards need to own one of their most important duties: recruiting and selecting school leaders.
- Authorizers should request strategic plans and emergency leadership replacement plans as part of the application and renewal process.
- Current school leaders need to mentor next-in-line leaders and leadership team members.
- Leaders should consider succession management—an emergency replacement plan, a strategic plan, and strategic development of leadership capacities organization-wide.

## Introduction

Charter schools have evolved from being an educational novelty to becoming a mainstream option in most states, particularly in urban school districts. In the last decade, charter schools have received attention as a federal solution to persistently low-achieving schools under the *No Child Left Behind Act*, and more recently, through the U.S. Department of Education's Race to the Top challenge, which provides funding for states that support and encourage charter growth. Though hundreds of new charter schools open every year, some of the earliest schools are now approaching twenty years old, and issues associated with start-up and implementation should be giving way to best practices and standards of operation. One of these best practices is long-term planning for the school, especially leadership succession.

Charter schools, like every other organization, need to prepare for leadership turnover. Unlike traditional public schools, however, they may have no ready source of leaders waiting in the wings. They also have very specific roles to fill. Many charter schools are still ramping up, trying to get stable facilities and funding, keeping an eye on test scores and figuring out how best to educate their students, all of which distracts school leaders from future planning, relegating it an afterthought.

Schools succeed or fail based largely on who is leading the organization. This study found that charter school leadership regularly turns over, but the leaders themselves are often too mired in everyday demands to put strategic and leadership planning on the agenda. Charter school governing boards often take a backseat role on this issue, and authorizers have also ignored it, playing a hands-off role once schools are given the green light to operate.

Emergency succession planning is like risk management, and just as every school needs to have plans in place for natural disasters, it also needs to have an emergency plan in place for losing its leader. But schools also need to do more strategic, long-term succession planning. As the charter school movement has matured, leadership succession has become an essential piece of the reform's approach to sustainability.

## Leading a charter school is different

Charter schools rise or fall based on fidelity to their mission. Whether they were founded to serve African American teens at risk of dropping out, to provide a liberal arts education to inner-city children, to propel first-generation Latino students to college, or to offer project-based learning in middle school, charter schools stand apart from traditional public schools and from each other because of their mission. Charter school leaders are the keepers and promoters of this mission, and finding the right person to lead the school is one of the most crucial decisions a school will face.

The challenge for schools with unique missions and culture is that, when it comes to school leaders, one size does not fit all. Whereas in a traditional school district one principal can be moved between schools with relative ease, finding the right leader for a drop-out recovery school or a college prep high school requires a deep pool of passionate and talented people. As detailed in *Working Without A Safety Net*, charter school leaders have to do the difficult job that all principals face today—creating and supporting a vision, overseeing instruction, developing and supporting staff, sharing leadership within the school, and using resources effectively.<sup>1</sup> They also need expertise in governance and management, public relations, and regulatory issues.<sup>2</sup>

But charter school leaders have to do each of these tasks with more challenges (often less money and fewer staff) and higher stakes (attracting students/funding and needing to demonstrate improvement in student test scores to secure charter renewal). Because charter school leaders play such an integral role in their schools, and because the right mix of skills and passion are such a crucial part of their success, every charter school should be planning for its next leadership transition.

There are nearly 5,000 charter schools open in 2010 and an additional 400 opening each year.<sup>3</sup> When the regular turnover of current charter school leaders is considered in those figures, it becomes apparent that leadership succession is a growing concern.

What are charter schools doing to prepare their ranks for inevitable change? What struggles are they encountering? What is promising and what is troublesome? What can be learned

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1. Christine Campbell and Betheny Gross, *Working Without a Safety Net: How Charter School Leaders Can Best Survive on the High Wire*, National Charter School Research Project (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2008).

2. Brett Lane, *A Profile of the Leadership Needs of Charter School Founders* (Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Education Lab, 1998).

3. National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, "More Than 170,000 New Public Charter School Students Bring National Enrollment to 1.5 Million," Press Release, September 3, 2009. Available at <http://www.publiccharters.org/node/1144>.



from the nonprofit sector to inform charter school efforts? This report provides details on these questions, drawing from an original survey of charter school leaders, in-person interviews with charter school leaders and governing board members, and a review of literature and current research in the education and nonprofit sectors.

As part of the Inside Charter Schools initiative, under the direction of the National Charter School Research Project at the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE), researchers have taken a close look at charter school leadership from several angles. An original survey conducted in 2007, with over 400 responses from charter school leaders in six states (Arizona, California, Hawaii, North Carolina, Rhode Island, and Texas), provided information on leaders' background and training, their experience on the job, and their future plans. In addition, over the three-year study, researchers visited a total of 24 charter schools three times each, in California, Hawaii, and Texas, interviewing school leaders, board members, and teachers. Through the combination of these methods, researchers gathered important information on the lives of charter school leaders, the reasons they choose the job, what they find challenging, and the future of their leadership.<sup>4</sup>

The most notable finding is that, while the rate of leadership turnover is similar in both charter and traditional public schools, the impact of turnover is potentially higher for charter schools. Where traditional schools are often assigned a principal from a pool of candidates determined by a central office, charter schools choose a leader that "fits" the school. The downside to this is that charter schools are often starting from scratch when it comes to finding a leader's replacement. As mentioned previously, turnover is certain, but many charter school leaders find themselves concentrating on the day-to-day business of running the school, leaving them little time to focus on strategic planning and leadership succession. Many governing boards themselves have abdicated their responsibility on this issue, playing a hands-off role when real leadership is needed. Of the schools in this study that have developed succession plans, the utility of some of those plans is questionable.

Charter schools are dangerously vulnerable with their future left open to chance. The wrong leader or an unsuccessful transition can cause the school to flounder and lose ground. But there are important steps charter schools can take—from making leadership succession a priority to developing sound plans—that can stabilize the school and better position it to choose the best possible leader.

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4. Campbell and Gross, *Working Without a Safety Net*.

## Findings

For years, policymakers and those paying attention to charter schools worried about the possibility of too-frequent leadership turnover, whether charter schools could either mitigate or prepare for it, and where the next leaders would come from. However, little data was available to create useful policy responses. CRPE researchers set out to gather data about leadership turnover and to learn more about efforts to stabilize and grow the schools through transition. By analyzing the responses of 400 charter school leaders in six states (Arizona, California, Hawaii, North Carolina, Rhode Island, and Texas) and by interviewing the leaders, governing boards, and other staff at 24 charter schools, researchers yielded data that begins to answer these questions.

### School leader turnover heightens charter school vulnerability

Charter school leaders do not stay long in the job. In fact, most of the charter school leaders in the 2007 survey (71 percent) expected to leave their school within the next five years. This may seem like a high rate of turnover, but according to several studies it is actually similar to, or lower than, rates among traditional public school principals, though rates vary by district and state.<sup>5</sup>

Interviews in charter schools reflected these active turnover rates. During the two years in the field, the research team encountered turnover among 20 percent of the leaders interviewed. Of 24 schools, 5 changed leaders—and 1 of those schools had three leaders during that two-year period. Four other leaders were planning on imminent departures within the year or two following the study.

Leadership turnover in charter schools may be similar to traditional public schools, but charter schools are particularly vulnerable for the reasons cited earlier—the importance of finding a leader with the right “fit,” and because charter schools are often independent and unable to tap into a pool of ready candidates when it comes to hiring.

Charter schools are also vulnerable to outside pressures when turnover happens. Some charter schools operate in politically antagonistic environments, and successful leaders often must become adept at lobbying, activism, and networking to protect their own school and others. When turnover occurs, they leave a hole that can be very difficult to fill. Charter school leaders in Hawaii, for example, have networked to influence the state

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

on what they feel are hostile policies. Schools with seasoned political and influential leaders benefit because they are better able to lobby against unfriendly charter policies and prepare internally for policy and budget changes before they happen. This kind of leadership takes time to develop, and turnover can set a school back.

## Founder transitions present a unique challenge

Many charter schools are still led by their original founders, and when they leave, the transition can be tricky. In many cases, the school mission is so closely tied to the founder that replacement can be very difficult, often forcing the school into an identity crisis. Sometimes founders stay on in a background role that results in the new leader never really taking over. Sometimes founders stay too long, and then leave abruptly before a solid transition can take place.<sup>6</sup>

There are a host of issues that schools face when considering a new leader, but they are heightened when a founder is leaving because the school has never been through a transition before and the school's identity is often so closely linked to the founder. When founders leave, it is common to learn that school values and finances hinge on the departing founder's vision and connections, and that organizational weaknesses have long gone unnoticed or unattended. Staff also may worry about being disloyal to the founder when a new school leader takes over.<sup>7</sup>

Of the 24 schools surveyed in this study, 10 were still led by their original founder, and when the question of the next leader was brought up, most founders expressed anxiety as to how the school would fare without them. This can lead some founders to stay too long, which can have ill consequences. One school experienced a painful departure when the needs of the school outgrew the skills of the founder, who was asked to leave. He had great entrepreneurial skills and was a charismatic recruiter of teachers and families, but he did not possess the ability to address persistent academic and management problems.

Interestingly, few teachers in the fieldwork schools reported giving much thought to the idea of the founder leaving, saying they would rather not think about it and hoped that the school leader had a plan. With hundreds of new charter schools opening every year, the question persists of how to mitigate the effect of their founders' eventual departures.

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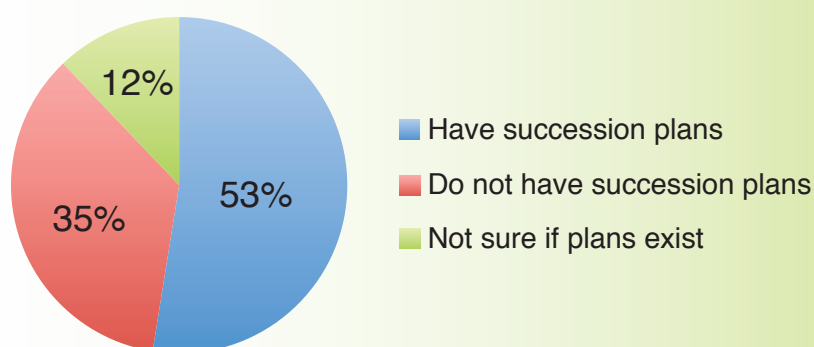
6. Tom Adams, *Founder Transitions: Creating Good Endings and New Beginnings* (Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2005).

7. Ibid.

## Many charter schools are in denial when it comes to leadership turnover—half have no transition plan

The regularity of charter school leadership turnover heightens the importance of strategic planning and preparing for the future. Yet when asked in the survey about strategic preparation, current charter school leaders said they spend little time on strategic planning or thinking about the future.<sup>8</sup> In particular, the survey shows that only half (53 percent) of the charter schools are preparing for leadership transitions with succession plans, while 35 percent have no plans in place, and 12 percent are unaware of whether there is a plan (see figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Succession Plans Are Not Common in Charter Schools



*Source: 2007–08 six-state survey of charter school leaders conducted by the National Charter School Research Project at the Center on Reinventing Public Education.*

Charter school leaders affiliated with charter management organizations (CMOs) were more likely to report that their school has a plan for leadership succession, with 74 percent of leaders in CMO-managed schools saying there were plans in place for leadership transition. Perhaps having non-school-based staff devoted to the management of schools, like a mini-central office, means that someone can be assigned the work of preparing schools for the future. The CMO strategy is actually very similar to that of school district central offices, where principals are assigned to schools.<sup>9</sup> This practice, of course, has potential downsides when it comes to “fit.” However, CMOs have the advantage of

8. In the survey, charter school leaders reported spending an average of only 9 percent of their time on strategic planning, defined as developing a school improvement plan, vision, mission, and goals.

9. Robin Lake, et al., *The National Study of Charter Management Organization (CMO) Effectiveness: Report on Interim Findings* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2010).

being able to recruit and hire more people who could be prepared for leadership positions and assigned to any one of their schools. CMOs also have resources to recruit and hire leaders with reputations for success, which was evident at several CMO-run schools in California and Texas that recruited from out of state.

## **There is too little leadership planning**

### **Many schools have no plan at all**

When asked whether the school had a leadership succession plan, more than half (14 of the 24 schools visited) admitted they had no plan for succession—emergency or otherwise. Several schools were led by strong, charismatic founders, and the common reaction at these schools to the question of leadership departure was joking denial from all sides, saying, “Don’t even talk about that!”

However, the story of one troubled school in Hawaii might explain why so many schools do not get around to developing a plan. This school was plagued with problems: the school had been “homeless” for years, occupying as many as eight different sites (some simultaneously) over the last several years, with no assurance of being able to secure a permanent location in the near future; the school’s off-site learning center was receiving strong push-back from wealthy neighbors who did not want them there; they overextended themselves on rent and were facing financial woes; and the board members were mostly new and trying to get up to speed. The layers of crises were crippling the school and its leadership, requiring the school leader to put out one fire after another. So when the school leader announced her plans to leave at the end of the year, she was met with numbed silence by the staff and board. She placed an ad for the position, which attracted only one resume, and she never heard whether the board contacted that person or not.

This example may seem extreme, but many charter schools face similar daily crises, and future planning never seems to make it on the day’s agenda, never mind ideas for how to attract a strong candidate—or any candidate—to take over challenging schools. Regardless of whether it is considered unthinkable, as in the case of a beloved school founder leaving, or too overwhelming, turnover is not something that can be ignored.

## Schools have plans that are often incomplete

A little less than half of the schools visited in this study (10 out of 24) reported that they did indeed have some kind of succession plan. However, upon further questioning, it became evident that only five of those plans had any depth to them. These not-quite-there succession plans ranged from simple, logistical “who would open the doors in the morning” plans, to efforts to stabilize the school as a step toward preparing for a future new leader.

Most of the schools with weak plans suffered from faulty assumptions and failures in communication. For example, at one school in Texas, the associate principal expected that she would take over most of the responsibilities should the school leader leave, but she was not sure. At this school, there was a lot of attention paid to documenting how things were done and creating resources for a successor if there were a transition. The school leader kept a thick binder of instructions and advice for how to operate the school. She believed the people in the school would know how to carry on if she left. When asked if she was receiving any kind of preparation in the event of having to take the lead, the associate principal said, “I’ll refer to the binder.”<sup>10</sup>

Beyond lining up who would open the doors and sign for payroll, other plans took the form of shoring up weaknesses, without actually getting to the point of a succession plan. One Hawaiian charter school founder is regularly recruited to start or run other schools but has stayed at his school because he does not believe it is ready to transition to a new leader. His succession strategy has not been to prepare for new leadership per se, but to strengthen the instructional side of the school, to encourage the governing board to “take the reigns” a little more and not rely on him to set the direction of the school, and to continue efforts to lobby on behalf of all of the state’s charter schools.

Four of the schools in this study were run by very small and relatively new CMOs, and staff at each of these schools reported confusion as to who would make decisions about future leaders. One school in California had two very different possible internal candidates who could take the helm, and while the school leader felt the quiet, well-liked, long-time administrator would be the best choice for the school, he surmised that the CMO would probably lean toward the newer, more extroverted manager. When asked, no one knew how the decision would be made and the CMO had yet to decide on a process.

The school leader at a CMO-run school in Texas was working to groom several possible candidates. However, the succession visions of “corporate” and the school leader were

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10. All direct quotes in this report draw from interviews with 24 charter school leaders; however, no names are used to assure confidentiality.

not exactly aligned, as the CMO planned to look outside for new leadership, while the current school leader was actively grooming a candidate from within. Again, those at the school believed that the school leader would be the one to make this decision, a belief that was contradicted in an interview with the president of the CMO.

Incompleteness and uncertainty resulting from poor communication were hallmarks of these weaker plans. School leaders felt undermined, ambitious staff wondered if their efforts would pay off or if they would need to look elsewhere for leadership roles, and schools where people expected things would be fine would likely be in for a turbulent transition if unprepared staff were thrust into leadership roles.

## **Strong plans make a difference**

Out of the 24 schools visited, 5 could be said to have developed durable, strategic succession plans. These plans considered the direction of the school, understood its current strengths and weaknesses, included both emergency plans and succession plans, alerted potential staff and groomed them when appropriate, or developed accurate job descriptions for recruiting from outside. The plans took staff, parent, and student perspectives into account, but made it clear the final decision would be made by the board.

Strong succession plans do not need to be complicated. One school in Texas had a very straightforward plan: in the event of the CEO's sudden departure, one of the two principals would take over and the CFO would provide guidance. For an eventual planned departure, the current CEO would have a hand in the succession process, but ultimately the board would decide. They had a strategic plan in place; they were recruiting to fill gaps in instructional leadership and developing the leadership team to groom possible candidates for future openings.

The leader at another school in California announced in September that she would be leaving at the end of the year, and the school began planning for a leadership change. The board and the leadership team analyzed the school's strengths and weaknesses and determined that the next leader should be someone who could provide more instructional support to their group of smart, autonomous, and capable teachers. The leadership team included the human resource director, who used this opportunity to support organizational development, which led to strategic thinking about the transition: planning the announcement of the school leader's departure, assessing the leadership needs of the school, and coordinating the recruitment and timing of a replacement.

Finally, at an inner-city school in Texas, the school leader was preparing not only for leadership succession but for growth, as they considered scaling up to another school. The school leader tapped teachers for important leadership roles, from managing and analyzing state testing data to being elevated to the assistant school leader role. These teachers knew they were on a growth plan and said they felt even more invested in the school.

Leadership succession is clearly all over the map at charter schools. As previously discussed, more than half of the schools visited had no plan at all, and of those that said they had plans, most were weak or rudimentary. Newer, small CMOs confounded the issue by injecting more uncertainty into decisionmaking. There were, however, two common elements present among those schools with strong plans:

- The schools had leaders who personally put planning on the agenda—and, in rare cases, had boards that chose to do this. None of these leaders were educators; each came from a business or legal background.
- None of the schools were in crisis on other fronts. It is hard to say whether a school needs to be running smoothly to get strategic planning on the agenda, or whether a leader who can find time for strategic planning and succession is also able to address crises in other areas. It is safe to say, however, that none of the schools that were struggling to stay open had any kind of future plan beyond the next day or week.

## What gets in the way of good planning?

### School leaders often do not make time for planning

One reason that few charter schools have succession plans is that school leaders are pulled in many directions and have trouble putting “future planning” on their daily to-do list. As one school leader interviewed in Texas related,

*The management piece can kind of take over your time if you're not careful. Today I spent tons of time just managing people—like little pawn pieces on the chess board. My janitor was out so I had to call the evening janitor to come in. Since he's never here in the daytime, I've needed to guide him all day. 'Can you go set up the tables for lunch?' And I'm not alone in this. My other school leader friends tell me this, too. It's all of the little stuff, by the time the end of the day comes around they've spent their whole day on that management piece and nothing else happened.*

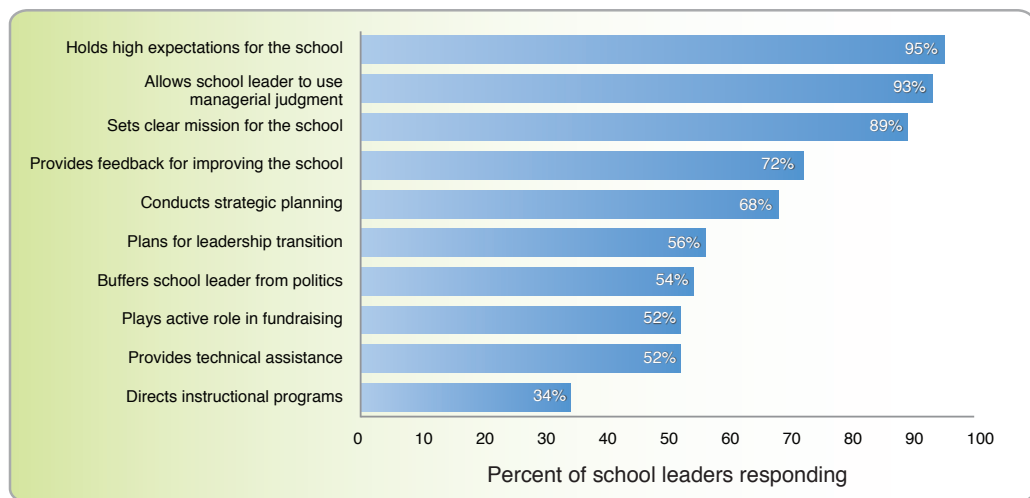
Principals in traditional public schools can probably cite the same interruptions, but they count on their superintendent to take care of replacement strategies for them.



## Governing boards have abdicated responsibility

When schools in this study reported having a succession plan, in many cases it was initiated and carried out by the school leader. It could be argued those plans should actually be generated and driven by the governing boards, the people who actually do the hiring and evaluating of the school leader. According to school leaders surveyed, a surprising number of charter boards do not appear to be involved in what might be considered central functions for a governing board: one-third reported that their boards do not provide critical feedback, and—relevant to succession planning—one-third reported that their governing boards do not involve themselves in strategic planning activities (see figure 2).

**Figure 2.** School Leaders' Perceptions of How Their Board Functions



In addition, interviews revealed that many boards were weak on school leader evaluation, with school leaders repeatedly asking to be evaluated. When it did happen, the process looked more like a self-evaluation, offering little in the way of constructive criticism, goal setting, or feedback. In fact, it was not uncommon for boards to behave as figureheads, with members recruited by the school leader—necessary for the organization's nonprofit status, but neither skilled nor encouraged to lead. This was especially true for schools run by founders. Founder-led boards can be flawed in their composition, where members are friends of the founder, or are there merely to lend their name rather than to roll up their sleeves and work, lacking a clear understanding about the time commitment involved in a start-up.<sup>11</sup> Founding boards among nonprofit organizations exhibited similar weaknesses, as these boards met less frequently, with founders more likely to control the board

11. Marci Cornell-Feist, *Top Ten Mistakes of Charter School Founding Boards*, Meetinghouse Solutions, 2007. Available at <http://www.meetinghousesolutions.com/>.

agenda, and with less board infrastructure and accountability.<sup>12</sup> As one school leader in Hawaii remarked, “It’s kind of awkward because they treat me as their employer.” Indeed, one board member confirmed this by saying that she would never seriously question the school leader, who was assumed to be much more knowledgeable.

Boards were just as affected by turmoil at the school as school leaders were, citing the difficulty of prioritizing crises and focusing on one thing. One board member, after describing a very rough couple of years at the school, remarked with amazement, “We just had a board meeting last night, and for the first time, I feel like we finally got something done.”

## Where will you find your school’s next leader?

### Many charter schools are trying to grow their own replacement

For many reasons, it makes sense for schools to look for their next leaders from within. Charter schools with very specialized missions, specific instructional approaches, or a unique culture find it most helpful to groom their leadership replacements internally. Hiring committees will have ready evidence of the “fit” of candidates, their passion for the school’s mission, and their understanding of the culture and relationships of the school. They will also be available at a moment’s notice to take over, sparing the school from a protracted search for a leader and from parent and staff fears of the future.

As noted in the fieldwork descriptions of strategic planning, many charter schools are considering internal hires for the next director. In fact, of the 24 schools visited, half of them (12 schools) were grooming or considering current staff as possible leaders.

Several factors seem to differentiate schools that consider hiring from within from those that seek external candidates. In particular, some CMOs in this study have found that familiarity with the school’s model and culture is a good bet for future leadership. These findings are mirrored by others, as the co-founder of Aspire Schools noted,

*We have come to the conclusion now, after nine years, that we do our best work for our kids when we hire from within, and we make a plan to grow the leadership in advance. We have retained 100 percent of the school leaders who we grew from within the organization, and we’ve retained 40 percent of the ones we brought in from outside. We found out it’s far more important to understand the culture of the organization from the ground up.<sup>13</sup>*

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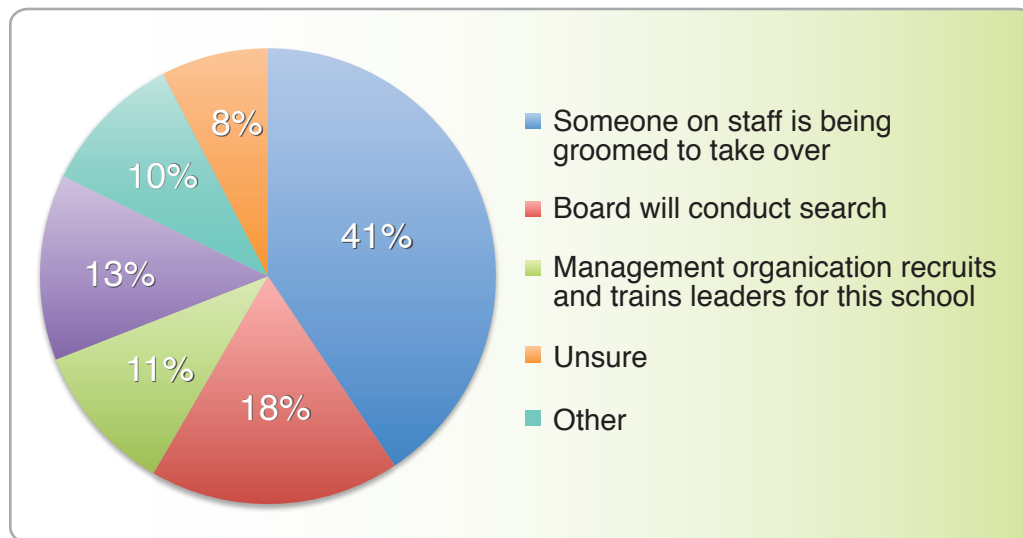
12. Adams, *Founder Transitions*, 2005.

13. Lynn Olson, “Cultivating a Taste for Leadership,” *Education Week*, April 16, 2008.

Independent charter schools have their own reasons for looking for leadership talent internally. Not surprisingly, schools with administrative strength in their current staff preferred to groom from within. Similar to some of the CMOs, schools with very specific curriculum, instructional philosophy, or values tended to look within first rather than risk hiring someone who would make a bad “fit.” Finally, schools with a history of leadership turbulence seemed to turn within for a fast, though often unprepared, replacement. In fact, of the twelve schools that mentioned plans for internal candidates, seven would be considered to be actually grooming candidates, with the candidates aware of this plan and actively learning new leadership skills. The other five simply cited a history of emergency replacement from within, and seemed on track to use that method in the future.

Consistent with the findings in the fieldwork, the survey of charter school leaders revealed that, of the 53 percent of schools that reported having succession plans, the most common plan cited (41 percent) was that a staff member was being groomed to take over. Other plans included a board search for a new school leader (18 percent), and, in an unexpected response, selection of a new leader by the school district (13 percent). (See figure 3.) The expectation and passive acceptance of a new leader assigned by the school district seems to suggest that these schools were charter or conversion schools in name only.

**Figure 3.** School Leaders' Views of Their School's Plan for Leadership Succession



However, if school leaders feel they have very good candidates in mind, they need to do more than make note of it. They have to communicate this choice both to the candidates as well as to other decisionmakers, and surprisingly, that does not always happen. At one school in Texas, the long-term interim school leader spoke very highly of a teacher who she had determined would be her replacement when she left the next year. When this teacher was interviewed, he reported in confidence that he would be leaving the school at the end of the year because he felt that he was undervalued, wanted a chance to be a school leader somewhere, and had thrown his hat into the ring at other schools. The school leader had never told him that she hoped he would take over at the school.

### Not all leaders are found within

While there are convincing reasons to look within a school for the next leader, there are drawbacks to employing this practice as well. Some schools just do not have the “bench” from which to pull. In other cases, the personality and skills of a prospective candidate do not always coincide with the school’s immediate requirements, and it is possible that the next step the school needs to take (capital campaign, evaluation of teaching and curriculum, clearing the school of a toxic culture) does not mesh with what the known candidate has to offer.

Interestingly, some of both the strongest and weakest schools in the fieldwork reported that they would conduct external searches. Some schools in very remote places or with the most struggles internally said they would choose to seek candidates from outside as a way to import ready-made talent. As one school leader from a remote charter school in Hawaii

remarked, “If I were to leave tomorrow, this school would come to a screeching halt. I have business and nonprofit leadership skills, and experience creating and sharing a vision. Not to sound arrogant, but no one else here can do that.” For schools like this one, there are no obvious future leaders working in the building and no network from which to draw.

Schools about to transition into a new phase of growth or development also found it useful to look beyond the school for new leaders. Each of the schools with organized leadership teams and coherent operations reported that as they reflected on their strategic plan, it became clear they would want to look outside the school for its next leader. For these schools, seeking outside candidates was seen as a way to address the life-cycle changes of a school. At one mature school in California, this meant a new emphasis on instructional leadership. For a newer school in Hawaii, going from start-up to stable meant a different kind of leadership need. As this founder mused,

*We’re soon going to be moving from needing an entrepreneur to an implementer and stabilizer. We’re still in the capacity-building phase, but I’m kind of hoping to work myself out of a job at some point. Then maybe the transition would not be about finding someone that looks like me and does what I do. What we would actually need would be something different, someone to take the school to the next place.*

In these cases, an outsider was viewed as someone who could bring something that was currently missing at the school. Charter school leadership expert Marci Cornell-Feist notes, “The next school leader doesn’t automatically mean filling the exact same role of the current leader. If the organization has grown, then it should re-evaluate the skills and experience needed for the job.”

# Recommendations

## Charter schools can learn a lot from nonprofits

Individual charter schools have a lot in common with nonprofit organizations when it comes to preparing for turnover and hiring a new leader. Nonprofits tend to be small, with few leadership positions, and have a similar rate of turnover among their leaders (75 percent plan to leave within five years).<sup>14</sup> Their all-volunteer boards also struggle to prioritize succession planning and other general human resource issues. While very little has been written about succession planning in charter schools, the nonprofit sector has been much more studied, offering a variety of approaches—from immediate emergency succession planning, to more long-term strategic leadership development, to helping founders prepare to leave. Many resources are available for free, including examples and templates.<sup>15</sup>

## Governing boards need to step up

The National Association of Charter School Authorizers highlights the importance of good charter school governance and suggests that authorizers “emphasize that the board holds the school charter, not the school leader,” and, among other things, “ensure that the board understands their role in accountability and oversight.”<sup>16</sup> Too many governing boards have ignored their strategic planning responsibility, either by not understanding this to be their role or by not being prepared to fulfill it. Cornell-Feist, founder of the governing board consulting group The High Bar, also draws attention to the role a board should be playing in evaluating the top of the organizational chart: “It may be time to bring on a CFO now that you are an 8 million dollar organization, not a 1 million dollar organization any more. Or what about a development director now that you are trying to do all of that fundraising? And what about a CEO instead of a principal now that you have 89 staff members not the founding 18?”<sup>17</sup>

One of the most important duties of the board is to recruit and select the school leader. The leader and other staff can support the board and make headway on action items related to strategic planning, but thinking about leader succession is something that needs

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14. Jeanne Bell, Richard Moyers, and Timothy Wolfred, *Daring to Lead 2006: A National Study of Nonprofit Executive Leadership*, A Joint Project of CompassPoint Nonprofit Services and The Meyer Foundation, 2006. Available at <http://www.compasspoint.org/content/index.php?pid=19#Dlead>.

15. This source is a good example of what is available free on the internet: <http://foundationcenter.org/getstarted/topical/succession.html>.

16. Marci Cornell-Feist, “Steering the Course for Success: Authorizers and Effective Charter Governance,” Authorizer Issue Brief, Number 9, National Association of Charter School Authorizers, September 2005.

17. Comments from email to the author, June 24, 2010.

to start with the board. Governing boards can take advantage of the tools available for nonprofits to prepare for leadership succession. As many organizations learn, preparing and putting plans for succession into effect takes time. Directing and charting progress on these plans should become a regular item on a board's agenda. Board training can help; however, even with the best of board preparation, school leader turnover is tricky. Eric Premack, whose Charter Schools Development Center trains boards in charter school management, says, "Luck, timing, availability of charter administrative talent, a good search process, and continuity of other administrative staff, etc., all play a role in a smooth transition."<sup>18</sup>

## **Authorizers need to expect more organizational preparation from charter schools**

The National Association of Charter School Authorizers suggests that "authorizers need to connect renewal to governance, not just academic performance."<sup>19</sup> As part of their application and renewal process, authorizers should be asking schools to show them their strategic plans and, at the very least, an emergency leadership replacement plan. Authorizers must accept that leadership turnover will happen at every school, and after an emergency plan is made, they should ask for a more detailed leadership succession plan. Few authorizers consider this. However, Chicago Public Schools, which has a long history of authorizing, has a section in their Request for Proposal that asks for a description of the "organization's four-year plans for recruiting, hiring and developing school/campus leaders."<sup>20</sup> This doesn't specifically address leadership turnover, but could include it.

Charter schools often bristle at their paperwork and compliance obligations, but a strategic leadership succession plan will materialize only if it is required in the process of application and renewal. Authorizers should view this as one more aspect of the good governance that is to be expected of good schools. In fact, in their 2008 report, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools urged authorizers to address succession planning during the renewal process, to consider career paths for teachers as part of this process, and to require proposals from charter networks to articulate their leadership pipeline.<sup>21</sup> Because getting the right leader and ensuring a smooth transition is so critical for school stability, requiring schools to prepare for leadership turnover might be one of the most important requests an authorizer can make.

18. Comments from email to the author, April 20, 2010.

19. Cornell-Feist, "Steering the Course for Success," 2005.

20. See [www.ren2010.cps.k12.il.us/docs/Invited.pdf](http://www.ren2010.cps.k12.il.us/docs/Invited.pdf).

21. National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, *Charter School Executives: Toward a New Generation of Leadership*, November 2008. Available at <http://www.publiccharters.org/newleadersreport>.

## School leaders need to make time to mentor

Authorizers and boards have important roles to play in asking for and developing plans for succession, but school leaders have responsibilities, too. With so many of the surveyed school leaders and fieldwork schools citing their plans to replace from within, it is vitally important that the leader does more than acknowledge an heir apparent. These next-in-line leaders need opportunities to shadow, learn, and be tested. School leaders need to make time to mentor. Even in schools where the next leader is not likely to come from within, school leaders need to prepare staff for an emergency replacement plan if the leader were suddenly to be absent. They also need to prepare staff to manage the transition so that instruction, evaluation, and teacher support continue as the new leader comes on board. Being prepared gives confidence to staff and teachers and helps things continue to run smoothly. In addition, sharing more leadership opportunities with staff brings a host of benefits to the school.<sup>22</sup> Teachers report greater satisfaction and empowerment, staff are more content as they experience chances to grow, and school leaders feel less burdened and exhausted.

## Succession management should be thought of in parts: emergency and long term

It may seem daunting to a governing board to sit down and draft a succession plan. In fact, there is a series of steps that a school can take to make the process easier.

### The emergency replacement plan

Every school should start with an emergency replacement plan. It ensures that key functions can continue unimpaired if the school leader were suddenly absent. An emergency replacement plan answers questions about who is in charge of the organization and who can make decisions about finances, hiring, facilities, and reports to the board and parents.

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22. Sarah Yatsko, *Distributed Leadership in Charter Schools*, National Charter School Research Project (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, forthcoming 2010).



## The strategic plan

After putting together an emergency replacement plan, the next step toward succession planning is to review the strategic plan. If the school does not have a strategic plan, now would be a good time to put one together. There are online templates, grant opportunities, volunteer business leaders, and other resources that can help a board craft a working strategic plan. It may be hard for schools in crisis to believe they have time for this, but the fact is that stable organizations became that way because they anticipated problems and dealt with them. The school leader can draft a plan that can be refined by the board, or the board can draft a plan. Regardless of how the plan is prepared, the process of putting it together will allow the board to assess the organization's strengths and weaknesses and to take these into account as they consider how to replace the current leader.<sup>23</sup>

## Preparing for a planned departure—or, succession planning

Retirement, relocation, career change, burnout—these are common reasons for current leaders to announce that this will be their last year. Some schools know their leader is leaving at the end of the year, while at other schools it may be years before the leader leaves. Succession planning, however, means schools are always preparing for the inevitable.

After reviewing the strategic plan, and considering the challenges facing the school, the board and school leader will want to set a timeline for the recruitment and selection process, including getting the perspective of students, parents, and teachers. These opinions will help to shape the selection process, but ultimately the board will make the final decision.<sup>24</sup>

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23. Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink, *Sustainable Leadership* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 72.

24. For one example of a leadership succession plan policy, see <http://www.worthingtonlibraries.org/about/policies/executive-succession-plan>.

## Succession management as professional development

Succession management is the latest thinking on succession planning. It takes succession planning a step further and uses the assessment of a school's strengths and weaknesses as a chance to develop more fully the talent at the school, beyond replacing the school leader. Succession management is an ongoing, mission-driven, professional development process of building a capable and flexible staff, including personnel sufficiently capable of serving in multiple critical positions. It involves strategic development of leadership capabilities organization-wide. Because it relies on a "bench," this kind of preparation may be best suited for organizations large enough to have a leadership team.<sup>25</sup>

Succession management may not be clear about who the next leader is, but that is deliberate. The idea is that several candidates with various strengths are in the running to take over the position, and that when the time comes, the board will be able to choose the leader who can take the organization to the next level. Deciding too far in advance leaves the organization little flexibility if new issues arise that suggest the need for a different kind of leader with a different skill set.

The benefits of succession management include building staff capacity across the organization, which over the long term creates a pool of ready candidates within the school to fill a variety of vacancies beyond the leader's position. There are other benefits, as well, including increased job satisfaction, the potential for reducing turnover, and the creation of day-to-day flexibility of staff in covering positions.<sup>26</sup>

Done well, succession management goes beyond risk management of a possible emergency change in leadership and can enhance the overall effectiveness of an organization. "The executive's job becomes more 'doable' because leadership is shared."<sup>27</sup> Additionally, shared leadership and teachers trained to take on greater administrative responsibilities stand to create a greater pool of potential charter school leaders.<sup>28</sup>

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25. Tim Wolfred, *Building Leaderful Organizations: Succession Planning for Nonprofits* (Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2008).

26. Mark Busine and Bruce Watt, "Succession management: Trends and current practice," *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources* 43, no. 2 (2005): 225-237.

27. Wolfred, 2008.

28. National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, *Charter School Executives*, 2008.

## Communicate the plan across the school

It may seem an obvious next step that, once the school leader has decided on an emergency plan, it would be shared with both the board and the people expected to take over in an instant. It may also seem obvious that, once a teacher or staff member has been identified as a potential future leader, they would be told about this. However, whether it is because of distraction or awkwardness, replacement plans are often known only to a relative few and, not surprisingly, this causes problems which could easily be avoided.

Sometimes the confusion lies in who ultimately is responsible for making the replacement decision, especially in schools run by CMOs. At one California CMO-run school, the school leader had determined she was ready to move on and had identified a staff member who she thought would make a great replacement. She spent an entire year grooming her candidate for the position, having her shadow her at work, sit in on meetings with teachers, get to know parents, and be part of executive decisionmaking. When asked how the CMO chooses new leaders, the school leader said the CMO director would probably make the decision himself. She hoped he would take her recommendation into account, but there were no guarantees, and she had yet to tell the CMO director that she would be leaving and that she had someone in mind.

To some, having discussions about the future seems in poor taste. It means talking about leaving and critically assessing the skills of colleagues, and it makes change seem real. But communicating succession plans minimizes the impact of rumors, allows staff to make decisions about their own professional growth and future plans, and can generate new energy about the next phase of the school.

## Facing the Future

The leader at a California charter school, who started as a teacher there nine years ago, recalled the former leader of this ambitious inner-city high school telling her, “If you give us two or three really hardworking years and then decide to move on, we’re going to be okay. I just want you to know that.” Nine years later, with four of those years as the school leader herself, she has outlasted that timeframe and has now decided it is time to move on:

*When I played high school basketball, the expectation was that you start and play hard the first two quarters and then when you’re tired and not playing as well, it’s time to sit out—but you give it your all for those first two quarters. I’ve been leading the school for four years, and it’s longer than I thought, but now it’s time to leave and let someone else give it their all for the next two quarters.*

Whether due to burnout, retirement or better job prospects, bad fit or disagreements with the board, charter school leaders regularly move on. Some charter schools are poised to succeed in this transition, yet too many are not. For these schools it is time for their boards and school leaders to sit down and talk through a transition plan. What would happen if they were suddenly faced with the loss of their school leader? Who is ready to take over in an emergency? Are there staff who have the skills needed to carry on the school’s instructional program and maintain the school’s culture? How will the new leader be selected? School leaders and governing boards in these schools need to look beyond daily demands and regular crises and make planning for the future a priority.

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## About the Author

Christine Campbell is a Research Analyst at the University of Washington Bothell's Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE). She has researched and analyzed district-wide reform efforts for use by districts and philanthropies, examined the role of superintendent leadership and central office operations, and written teaching cases for school board training. She has also studied the ways districts and traditional public schools can respond to competition from school choice. Ms. Campbell's current work focuses on the charter school leadership pipeline, from recruitment and training to retention and succession planning. She is also studying the implementation of portfolio district management in New York City and Washington, D.C. She is co-author with Paul Hill on *It Takes A City* (Brookings Press, 2000). Ms. Campbell holds a B.A. in English from Villanova University and an M.P.A. from the University of Washington.

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