Inside Charter Schools

UNLOCKING DOORS TO
STUDENT SUCCESS

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CONTENTS

Introduction:
A New Mandate for School Autonomy

Charter and other autonomous schools present opportunities for new thinking and new diversity in our nation's public education system.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan asserts in *A Blueprint for Reform* that charter and other autonomous schools will play an important part in meeting the Department of Education's priorities for extending the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Secretary Duncan argues that these schools present opportunities for new thinking and new diversity in our nation's public education system,[1] and he has made the expansion of autonomous schools (charter or otherwise) a priority in the Race to the Top program authorized by the Obama administration's economic stimulus program, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.[2]

At the same time, the Secretary and others who promote charter schooling as a reform strategy acknowledge that autonomy alone cannot produce better outcomes for students. In the last 20 years, almost 5,000 charter schools have been established in forty different states.[3] There has been a great deal of research on charter schools, mostly focused on policies such as funding, external accountability, and outcomes. But policymakers and researchers have little information about what happens inside charter schools as a result of their new autonomies, much less how differences (if any) in operating styles, curriculum, or pedagogy might influence student learning. 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.

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.

Allowing a school to…		Can result in…
Develop independently		New expectations for students
Be guided by a mission		Opportunities to foster educational diversity
Have freedom over its budget		New ways to manage teacher and leader talent
Have freedom over hiring and firing		New professional norms for teachers and leaders

1. A. Duncan, interview with B. Schieffer on CBS's *Face the Nation*, September 6, 2009: "Charter schools need real autonomy. These are innovators, they need to be freed from bureaucracy. By definition, they have a different educational vision. You have to give them the space to let them move and run."
2. Priority 6 of the Race to the Top Program reads: "The Secretary is particularly interested in applications in which the State's participating LEAs (as defined in this notice) seek to create the conditions for reform and innovation as well as the conditions for learning by providing schools with flexibility and autonomy in such areas as - (i) Selecting staff; (ii) Implementing new structures and formats for the school day or year that result in increased learning time (as defined in this notice); (iii) Controlling the school's budget; (iv) Awarding credit to students based on student performance instead of instructional time; (v) Providing comprehensive services to high-need students (as defined in this notice) (*e.g.*, by mentors and other caring adults; through local partnerships with community-based organizations, nonprofit organizations, and other providers); (vi) Creating school climates and cultures that remove obstacles to, and actively support, student engagement and achievement; and (vii) Implementing strategies to effectively engage families and communities in supporting the academic success of their students." U.S. Department of Education, *Race to the Top Program: Executive Summary*, 2009. Downloaded October 19, 2010.
3. J. Christensen, J. Meijer-Irons, and R. Lake, "The Charter Landscape 2004-09," in *Hopes, Fears, & Reality: A Balanced Look at American Charter Schools in 2009*, ed. Robin J. Lake, National Charter School Research Project (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2009).

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. 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. (See Box 1 for more information on the research project data and methods.)

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 the charter school movement has matured, achieving more consistent quality has garnered increased attention from advocates and opponents alike. This is an appropriate evolution of the charter movement. As the CRPE 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.

Box 1. Inside Charter Schools: An In-Depth Look at the People and Programs in Charter Schools

Recognizing the tremendous variation across charter schools, CRPE's National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) began a new project in 2006 to look at the variation within the charter school community with regard to the teachers, leaders, and academic programs in these schools. The four-year *Inside Charter Schools* initiative drew together multiple data sources to examine:

- Who is teaching and leading charter schools today and how did they get there?
- How do charter schools select and hire teachers and leaders?
- What is the nature of teachers' and leaders' work?
- How do charter schools prepare for leadership transitions?
- What kind of academic programs are offered in charter schools and do they offer options that were not previously available to the students they serve?
- How do the answers to all of these questions differ across school, state, regional, and organizational contexts?

To answer these questions, 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. Brief descriptions of the data sources are provided below.

Original surveys:

In the spring of 2007, CRPE researchers conducted two separate original surveys. The first survey explored charter school leadership—the background, work, and challenges of charter school principals. This survey was mailed to a random sample of 715 charter school principals in six states (50 percent of charter school principals in each of these states) representing a range of state charter laws: Arizona, California, Hawaii, North Carolina, Rhode Island, and Texas. (These states collectively account for 38 percent of the nation's charter schools.) Leaders from 401 charter schools responded (a 56 percent response rate) with representative response rates in all six states.

The second survey explored the teacher human resource activities and policies in charter schools. This survey was mailed to 718 charter school principals in the same six states as the leadership survey (the remaining 50 percent of charter schools leaders in these states). For comparison, CRPE researchers mailed a similar survey to 330 human resource directors in school districts that were geographically matched to one or more of the charter schools in the sample. The final database for the second survey includes responses from 373 charter schools (a 52 percent response rate) and 214 school districts (a 65 percent response rate).

Case studies:

CRPE researchers conducted three separate field visits to 24 charter schools in six cities in California, Hawaii, and Texas. The sample included only schools that had been in existence at least five years and demonstrated demographics (percentage of low-income and minority students) similar to those of the public school districts in which they were located. A mix of elementary, middle, and high schools was sought, along with schools operated independently and through charter management organizations (CMOs). During the visits, the study team interviewed teachers, principals, other administrators, and charter board members. In total, the team conducted 255 in-person interviews.

State administrative data:

To examine broad patterns of teacher turnover, the study used teacher-level longitudinal administrative data from the State of Wisconsin from 1997 to 2006. These data represent every public school teacher (charter and traditional) in the state, allowing researchers to reconstruct individual teacher careers over time to show mobility behavior (teachers who move from school to school) and attrition behavior (teachers who stop teaching).

National Schools and Staffing Survey 1999-00, 2003-04, 2007-08 (SASS) and Schools and Staffing Teacher Follow-up Survey 2000-01 (TFS):

The U.S. Department of Education administers the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and the Teacher Follow-up Survey (TFS) to a nationally representative sample of the nation's teachers every four years. The TFS is administered to a subsample of the baseline SASS respondents. The combination of SASS and TFS allows researchers to identify teachers who remained in their schools.

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. The vast majority of the schools 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.

Charter schools provide focused educational programs designed to meet specific student interests and needs

Charter schools have a mission to serve a specific population of students (for example, low income, at-risk, or immigrant students) or to deliver a specific educational program (for example, core knowledge or project-based instruction). They do not expect to be a good match for every student in the surrounding community.[4]

Defining a mission is essential if a charter school is to be viable. First, as part of the initial application, charter schools are expected to define who they are, who they will serve, and the educational programs they will adopt. Second, they must offer a program that is attractive to students and parents. To offer a compelling alternative to conventional schools, many charters seek to fill an educational niche.

Traditional public schools, especially high schools, offer considerable diversity in educational programs (such as programs for gifted children, English language learners, or special educational needs). But most of these programs exist as sideline or alternative programs in most traditional public schools.

Charter schools, with their freedom of mission, find that they fill a niche by turning these sideline programs into mainline programs in their schools. Among sample schools in this study were schools devoted to the education of immigrant children, returning dropout students, native Hawaiian students, and African American students who lived in highly impoverished neighborhoods. A wider review of 48 school charters across six states revealed that more than half of the schools in the sample targeted their school program to a specific group of students.[5] (See Box 2 for examples of diversity of missions among charter schools.)

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4. J. Christensen and L. Rainey, "Custom Tailored: Trends in Charter School Educational Programs," Research Brief, National Charter School Research Project (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2009); S. Yatsko, B. Gross, and J. Christensen, *Charter High Schools: Alternative Paths to Graduation*, National Charter School Research Project White Paper Series, No. 3 (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2009).
5. Ibid.

To provide these programs, charter schools often stay small so they can adapt to the individual needs of their students. On average, charter elementary schools have about two fewer students per class (and high schools have about three fewer students per class) than traditional public schools. In addition, many charter schools extend the school day with before- or after-school programs, while 35 percent of charter schools extend the school year beyond the standard 180 days.[6]

Box 2. Charter School Missions Are Serving Diverse Needs	
Odyssey Charter School	Employs highly prescriptive "community-focused" instructional approach
Aloha Ohana High School	Mission to serve students from high-poverty indigenous Hawaiian families. Hawaiian traditions, art, culture interwoven into curriculum
La Escuela da Las Estrellas	Instruction designed to reach Spanish-speaking children who are recent immigrants and prepare them for postsecondary education
Discovery Charter High School	Attracts and accepts students who have multiple prior failed attempts at high school

Contrary to expectations, charter schools rarely adopt novel instructional models. Few use alternative instructional approaches such as block schedules, team teaching, or multi-age classrooms. Charter schools rely on smaller size, smaller classes, and more time to enable teachers and administrators to individualize and customize learning approaches for their students.[7]

Charter schools increase disadvantaged students' access to college prep programs

In 2009, RAND researchers published a study showing that students who attended charter schools were more likely to matriculate at an institution of higher education than similar students attending traditional public high schools.[8] This is a new finding in the outcomes literature, but not surprising given what the research reported here reveals about charter school programs and culture. Many charter schools make it their mission to prepare their targeted student population for college and offer support beyond high school graduation—a significant shift in expectations for many disadvantaged students.[9]

6. B. Gross and K. Martens Pochop, "How Charter Schools Organize for Instruction," in *Hopes, Fears, & Reality: A Balanced Look at Charter Schools in 2008*, ed. Robin J. Lake, National Charter School Research Project (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2008).
7. Ibid.
8. R. Zimmer, B. Gill, K. Booker, S. Lavertu, T. Sass, and J. Witte, *Charter Schools in Eight States: Effects on Achievement, Attainment, Integration, and Competition* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009).
9. Gross and Pochop, "How Charter Schools Organize for Instruction."

Analysis of the national Schools and Staffing Survey reveals that charter schools with high concentrations of minority students are more likely to offer a college prep curriculum than are traditional public schools with similar enrollments. Charter schools rarely provide students with Advanced Placement classes or International Baccalaureate programs—high-quality but costly college prep programs. Instead, charter schools offer college prep as their mainline curriculum, developing honors-style classes in-house, providing extensive extra help for struggling students, and, in some cases, establishing relationships with local community colleges to provide students with advanced curriculum options.[10]

Getting disadvantaged students into college, especially those from communities where few others have attended college, requires more than academic preparation.[11] Charter schools that are trying to get disadvantaged students into college state plainly that they need to cultivate a college mindset and provide students with the social relationships and tools to navigate both the college application process and the collegiate experience.

One California high school visited by CRPE researchers held enrollment in a four-year college or university as the "singular goal" for its students, all of whom were low-income Latino students who would be the first in their family to attend college. All students were placed on an academic path to college. Typically this began with extensive remediation in the 9th grade and ongoing monitoring through the school advisory program. During their four years at the school, all students completed the state's college prep curriculum (University of California A-G curriculum). Juniors and seniors with a 3.0 or higher GPA visited California universities and presented what they learned to the school's 9th grade class—a powerful exercise for both the older and younger students.

Charter elementary and middle schools in this study also made college preparation part of their mission. One notable middle school systematically shaped students' expectations, experiences, and academics toward college attendance, even though most of the students in the school came from a poor Hispanic urban community and few had parents or siblings with any postsecondary schooling. In this school, where pennants from every major university in the country decorate the walls, students not only receive an accelerated curriculum that aims to get them on the academic track to college, they also participate in community service projects and city competitions to build their college resume. The school takes students on trips out of the city so that they have that experience to share with their current middle school and future college friends. Trying to avoid the possibility of the students' progress stalling in high school, the school also has a "high school placement" director who helps students and parents find the most appropriate public or charter high school after leaving middle school.

10. Ibid.
11. M. Roderick, J. Nagaoka, V. Coca, and E. Moeller, *From High School to the Future: Potholes on the Road to College* (Chicago, IL: Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago, 2008).

Charter schools give school leaders new roles as captain of their own ship

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.[12]

Principals who had successful careers in traditional public school districts remarked that they came to their charter school, sometimes out of retirement, because the school offered them the opportunity to pursue a program about which they were truly passionate. Time and again these principals reported that what they were doing in their charter school—whether focusing on a specific student group, hiring the teachers they wanted (and sometimes dismissing those they did not), working with their staff to determine the best curriculum, or restructuring the school day—was not easy (or even possible) in traditional public schools.

Charter school principals are also given a unique opportunity to rethink what it means to be a school leader. Traditional leadership training emphasizes the instructional leader model. Under this model, the principal has a background and expertise in instruction and pedagogy and devotes a significant part of the job to classroom evaluation, professional development planning, and instruction and curriculum development in the school.

Free to organize as they choose, charter schools are not bound to a traditional school leader model. This study found some principals who provided strong organizational management or acted as the political buffer between the school and broader educational community, leaving the role of instructional leadership to other administrators or teacher leaders. Principals in this new style often did not have classroom experience but brought with them the experience and management expertise of leading other organizations.[13]

Examples of other approaches also exist. One charter school principal became deeply involved in instructional leadership. She spent nearly all of her time engaged with teachers through classroom observations, team meetings, and professional development and evaluation. In this school, organizational and management issues were left to a team of administrators.

The job of the charter school principal is broad but flexible. Within the charter framework there is considerable room for leaders to both rethink the way the school staff and community engage in leadership activities and to develop new partnerships to help support the school. The examples given above are notable, but it needs to be stressed that they are by no means typical of the schools visited. The leadership arrangement is one area in which many possible routes are not followed, a point discussed in greater detail below.[14]

Eighty-six percent of charter school principals reported that the school mission was one of the most important factors in their decision to join the school.

Charter schools leaders have room to both rethink the way the school staff and community engage in leadership activities and to develop new partnerships to help support the school.

12.   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).
13.   S. Yatsko, "Distributed Leadership in Charter Schools," Research Brief, National Charter School Research Project (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, forthcoming).
14.   Ibid.

Charter schools craft new compacts with teachers

When teachers join charter schools they opt into an organization in which the mission guides all activities and trumps individual preferences. As such, teachers make two professional trade-offs. First, teachers' professional development and growth are tightly linked to the school's mission and needs, but the mission is typically one that most teachers support. Moreover, they are offered opportunities for professional growth within these organizations. Second, they forego job guarantees but are given agency and influence in their classroom as well as the school.[15]

With only a few exceptions, the charter schools studied focused professional development entirely on the needs of the school. Traditional district pay structures typically link teachers' pay and certification status to professional development activities that provide incentives for individualized professional development. Under these compensation systems, teachers seek out learning experiences that prioritize their own interests and needs over what will best serve the school. By contrast, the typical professional development planning in most charter schools visited for this study started with the school's needs and "backed into" the professional learning that would address these needs.

Teacher professional development in charter schools is typically communal. Because budgets tend to be tight in charter schools and because most do not have access to district-supported professional development, charter schools tend to develop and implement most of their professional development in-house by teachers.

Some teachers of course need individual attention. New teachers almost uniformly need personal attention and mentorship. Every school visited described at least one struggling teacher who needed support improving weak skills. In these cases, schools typically enlisted colleagues to oversee their fellow teachers; occasionally school leaders provided this oversight. The oversight, however, was generally informal and often was made available only after the new or struggling teacher requested help.

Although charter teachers generally find that their professional growth and development is focused on the school and its mission, most teachers in this study welcomed this focus. One teacher summed up this sentiment with the comment:

> *I wanted to teach inner-city kids and [this charter school] definitely allows me to do that. And so I stayed because I loved working here. The staff that I work with, I feel, really care about our mission and what it is that we want to do for the students.*

It was also evident that charter schools, especially expanding charters, offer teachers room for professional growth within the school. It was common to hear about enterprising and committed teachers moving into leadership positions in the school, to seed new schools as the school added new campuses, and to take on central management roles as schools expanded to form charter management organizations operating several schools

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15. The 12 percent of charter schools that are operating with collectively bargained agreements generally offer their teachers tenure and have specified due process provisions.

collectively. A good example of this career-building approach is evident in an organization that today operates seven different schools after beginning with just a single school 15 years ago. As the school expanded to its first new campus, the administration strategically ensured that the new school had the core of a solid teaching staff by "seeding" it with some of the best faculty from the original campus. In every expansion since, new school staff included core staff from existing schools. In addition, the organization's schools were the source of all the central administration and building leaders—teachers from the schools were offered the opportunity to grow professionally by assuming leadership roles.

The second key trade-off in this new teacher compact is that charter school teachers who do not teach in a unionized charter school are not offered job guarantees. Instead, they are offered a great deal of flexibility to meet their students' needs and influence the direction of the school. Charter school teachers, who are rarely represented by collective bargaining agreements, generally work under one-year renewable contracts. Each year, school principals evaluate teachers and make individual decisions about whether to retain them or not. The absence of job guarantees or tenure means that charter schools can and do efficiently dismiss teachers who are not working out. The six-state survey reveals that charter school principals removed nearly all teachers for which they sought dismissal, while traditional public schools removed only 86 percent of those they attempted to dismiss.

Between the 1999-00 and 2000-01 school year, 13 percent of teachers who left a charter school reported being involuntarily dismissed or encouraged to leave.[16] Every school visited told stories of teachers that "just didn't work out." While it is common for the dismissal process to take years in traditional public school districts, these schools all removed the failing teacher within a year (more often in a matter of months). In one notable case, a school dismissed a new teacher who failed to engage in the summer professional development before classes even started. They did this because it foretold an ill fit and a risky investment, even though it put the school in the difficult situation of having to recruit and hire a teacher only days before school started.

Interestingly, teachers working under one-year agreements expressed a great deal of trust in their school leaders and did not find this situation unjust (even though few of the schools visited described particularly robust evaluation procedures). These teachers felt that they should be continually held accountable for their performance with students. When asked to comment on the job guarantees offered to their school district peers, these teachers said that school mission combined with the flexibility and influence they felt they had in the school made it worth giving up the guarantee. Although this kind of influence is not promised in a charter school, the 2007-08 Schools and Staffing Survey shows that more than half of all charter school teachers (about 5 percent more than traditional public school teachers) felt that they have at least moderate control over curriculum, instructional materials, and instructional practice.[17] (See Box 3 on how charter school teachers view their influence.)

16.   B. Gross and M. DeArmond, *Parallel Patterns: Teacher Attrition in Charter vs. District Schools*, National Charter School Research Project (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2010).
17.   U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), "Public School, BIE School, and Private School Data Files," 2007–08.

Charter school teachers trade job guarantees for flexibility to meet their students' needs and influence the direction of the school.

Teachers working under one-year agreements expressed a great deal of trust in their school leaders.

Box 3. Charter School Teachers Influence Their Schools

I feel like I'm part of this process and the progress that's been going on here so it would be hard to leave. I have been looking into moving just because I want to move out of this city. I'd like to move somewhere else but that's the hard part—leaving my job. That's the only thing that's keeping me here is my job.

I don't feel like [administrators in this school] say 'you're in a classroom and that's where we want you to stay.' That's how I felt at my last job [at a traditional public school] because when I actually pursued doing more administrative work, I was immediately shut down because that was not what they wanted. They said 'We want you to stay in the classroom' in so many words and I felt like, 'Okay, well, this is not the place for me.' There's a glass ceiling apparently and I want to be where I am encouraged to do that, want more, as opposed to 'Well, we know you want more but right now maybe it's not a good time, you know, that type of thing. And I don't know when the right time is.'

Teachers in charter schools also realize that working in these schools means accepting a great deal of uncertainty about what their job responsibilities will be. Charter school teachers routinely staff before- and after-school programs (often without additional pay), advise student activities, or develop and teach elective classes outside their primary field. Principals also ask teachers to be flexible about what they will teach—sometimes moving teachers to new classes, even within the school year. These demands can wear down even teachers with deep commitment to the school and its mission.

Charter schools pursue staff hiring differently

The match between staff and school mission is critical, and this is reflected in the way charter schools approach recruiting and hiring teachers. The freedom to hire their own staff is potentially one of the most powerful opportunities offered to charter schools. In addition, many states waive—in total or in part—teacher-certification requirements, although "Highly Qualified Teacher" provisions in federal law have over-ridden these waivers for some schools. Charter principals embrace this hiring flexibility even though recruiting and hiring can be time consuming and onerous.

Charter schools face a substantial hiring challenge. First, most charter schools are relatively small and have a very low profile compared to neighboring traditional school districts. Jobs in charter schools are known to be demanding and lacking job security. (Even if the teacher is willing to give up tenure protections as described above, the charter school itself can be shut down or lose funds, leaving everyone without a job.) On top of that, many charter schools cannot match local district salaries. Charter school principals responding to the six-state survey pay a new teacher about $2,200 less, on average, than he or she would be paid in the local school district.[18] In addition, most of the charter

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18. B. Gross and M. DeArmond, "How Do Charter Schools Compete for Teachers? A Local Perspective," *Journal of School Choice* 4, no. 3 (2010): 254-277.

schools visited sought teachers with very specific experiences, skills, and interests. This study found charter principals who looked for teachers who shared a common childhood experience with the Latino and African American urban students they served; teachers who had taught in a project-based school; or teachers who were fluent in Hawaiian and skilled in native cultural practices.[19]

To deal with these challenges, many charter schools take an entrepreneurial stance toward recruitment. Charter school principals reported constantly scanning relevant environments for new teachers and building relationships with organizations they felt would be a good pipeline of teachers for their school.[20] One principal recruited a fellow surfer to join his school that serves high school students in a rural Hawaii community. The surfing connection meant that he now had a teacher who could advise the school's surf club—as well as a teacher who had a relationship with the students he struggled to get from the beach into school every morning.

Other principals built relationships with faculty in local teacher education programs. These programs fed the schools with applicants, but also gave school staff the opportunity to weigh in on the curriculum that the education students (and possibly future teacher candidates for their schools) received. These entrepreneurial efforts meant that the most skilled recruiters end up with an applicant pool better suited to the school.

A longstanding critique of traditional public school hiring is that policies and hiring strategies can make it very difficult for schools to build a coherent staff. Typically, school district teacher candidates are only interviewed on one occasion and rarely asked to demonstrate their teaching skills. Instead, district or school hiring teams focus on general background factors such as certification, teacher exam scores, and years of teaching experience.[21] In these cases, districts and schools hire teachers with little direct knowledge of how the new teacher will practice in the classroom or fit with the school's program.

Common policies such as centralized district hiring (in which teachers are assigned to schools without consent of the building principal) and seniority preference (that allows senior teachers to specify in which school they would like to be placed—again, without principal consent) only make it more difficult, if not impossible, for traditional public schools to get teachers that match the school.

19. B. Gross, and M. DeArmond, *How Do Charter Schools Get the Teachers They Want? Recruiting and Selecting Teachers in Charter Schools*, National Alliance for Public Charter Schools Brief (Washington DC: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, forthcoming).
20. Ibid.
21. E. Liu and S. M. Johnson, "New Teachers' Experiences of Hiring: Late, Rushed, and Information-Poor," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (2006): 324-360.

By contrast, this study revealed charter schools employing an approach to selection that is very rich in information. In the charter schools visited, candidates usually spend extended time on campus engaged in interviews with multiple members of the staff and students. This extended exchange is intended to benefit the applicant as much as those making the hiring decision. As one principal explained—in a school that had candidates spend an entire day in the school doing interviews and shadowing a teacher—it is important for candidates to get a "real" look at the school to make sure they want to teach in it.[22]

In addition to the time on campus, it was also common for charter schools to request some demonstration of teaching practice. In the survey of charter school principals, 58 percent reported that they asked teaching candidates to demonstrate a lesson (only 40 percent of school districts requested lesson demonstrations). Charter schools visited for this study also illustrated more creative ways for candidates to demonstrate their work. One school required candidates to submit an essay explaining their educational philosophies and how those matched that of the school. From this exercise, the school gleaned writing skill, the candidates' philosophy, and whether the candidates were enterprising enough to learn about the school. A prominent project-based-instruction school that attracted hundreds of applicants each year brought several candidates to campus simultaneously, then created teams of these candidates to design a project; this approach gave the hiring team a chance both to see how the candidates worked with colleagues and to assess their creativity in project design.[23] (See Box 4 for examples of creative interview tactics.)

Box 4. Creative Interview Tactics in Charter Schools

Assessing and evaluating job candidates is not easy, especially when it comes to teachers. To improve the interview process and increase the odds of making a good hire, charter schools employ several tools, some of which are rarely used by school districts. These include:

- Structured interviews that are keyed to the school's vision of teaching.
- Performance tests and work samples (e.g., teaching a sample class; writing a letter to a parent).
- Interviews that involve grade-level or subject-area teams and other members of the school community.
- Opportunities for candidates to spend significant time at the school so school staff and candidates can assess their fit.

When it comes time to select a candidate, charter schools are very focused on how well the candidate fits in the school and how they would perform in the classroom. After proving good classroom management skills (a universal desire across all types of schools), charter principals responding to the survey reported that they valued skills unique to the school, rapport with students, and performance on the sample lesson (for those requesting the sample). Principals were least concerned with the candidates' length of teaching experience, certification status, or degrees beyond the bachelor's degree.[24] By emphasizing factors related to the school, principals focused on candidates' quality and fit rather than on general credentials.

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22. Gross and DeArmond, *How Do Charter Schools Get the Teachers They Want?*
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.

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.

Charter school principals' roles are expansive but many have limited training and little support from their governing boards

The new role for charter school principals, although exciting, is also extremely demanding. The role brings with it a host of added responsibilities. Creating a vision, supporting it, building a staff, and managing a budget represent just the initial challenges. Charter school principals also have to deal with payroll and facilities management, reporting requirements, and the school's marketing and student recruitment. In addition, they even have to be active advocates for charter schools in local and state politics.[25]

Many charter school principals struggle with these demands. Among the principals who responded to the survey, almost 40 percent reported 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. Time for strategic planning tends to be crowded out by daily operational demands (despite the 60-hour weeks school principals reported working).

Experience on the job certainly helps. The longer principals are on the job and in the same school, the better they seem to handle the many demands. However, the study reveals that 70 percent of current principals expect to leave their school in the next five years—and only a fraction of schools are preparing for this transition.[26] Moreover, based on the loosening of state legislative caps on charter schools at the end of 2009, CRPE researchers estimate that as many as 955 new schools (with new school principals) could open in the next few years.[27] The combination of anticipated principal turnover in existing charter schools and the need for leaders for new schools means that the charter sector will require hundreds, if not thousands, of new school leaders in the relatively short-term future.

Almost 40 percent of charter school principals reported that facilities and finances were serious problems for their schools; 36 percent reported that attracting teachers was a serious problem. Time for strategic planning tends to be crowded out by daily operational demands.

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25. Campbell and Gross, *Working Without a Safety Net.*
26. Ibid.
27. Christensen, Meijer-Irons, and Lake, "The Charter Landscape 2004-09."

Good training is useful to all school principals. The survey indicates that, with regard to instructional leadership and teacher hiring, school principals with traditional educational leadership training felt considerably more comfortable than those with other backgrounds. On the other hand, principals with prior management experience or training seem to handle issues of organizational and financial management better than those with only educational training and experience.[28] For these reasons, training programs that combine the two diverse skill sets seem most promising. Unfortunately, the survey of school leadership training conducted as part of this study reveals two significant shortcomings. First, there are not enough leadership training programs to meet current demand, much less the future demand described above.[29] Second, the programs offering a more comprehensive approach that covers all the diverse skills required of a charter school leader are few and far between. New leadership training programs continue to emerge, but these programs have a substantial gap to fill.

Governing boards are meant to support school leaders by providing oversight, raising funds, and planning for the school's future. This study indicates many boards are unprepared and uninvolved. Only half of the charter school principals in the survey reported that their governing boards helped develop new sources of revenue, buffered the school from politics and controversies, or were involved in planning for leadership transition; one-third of respondents reported that their boards were not involved in strategic planning activities.[30] When governing boards abdicate this responsibility, the future of individual charter schools is left to chance.[31]

Charter schools' reliance on informal structures makes trust essential

Charter schools, because they tend to be small and have few of the formal structures and rules of traditional public schools, also tend to be relatively informal organizations relying heavily on mutual trust for stability. Nowhere is this informality and dependence on trust more evident than in the relationship between teachers and the school administration.

Most charter schools form with little formal codification of teacher protections or grievance procedures. Green Dot Public Schools, UFT-operated schools, and charter schools that operate within district or state contracts, while notable, are exceptional cases. Fairness and trust are the glue that holds most charter schools together. For example, because teachers give up job guarantees, their continued employment depends on their evaluation by their principals. However, very few of the schools that were visited used well-developed evaluation tools that teachers could use to guide their practice. Instead, charter school teachers had to trust their principals' evaluation and feedback on performance.

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

29. C. Campbell and B. J. Grubb, *Closing the Skill Gap: New Options for Charter School Leadership Development*, National Charter School Research Project (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2008).

30. C. Campbell, *You're Leaving? Sustainability and Succession in Charter Schools*, National Charter School Research Project (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2010); Campbell and Gross, Working Without a Safety Net.

31. Campbell and Gross, Working Without a Safety Net; C. Campbell, "Missed Opportunity: Improving Charter Schools Governing Boards," in *Hopes, Fears, & Reality: A Balanced Look at Charter Schools in 2009*, ed. Robin J. Lake, National Charter School Research Project (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2009).

Teachers in many charter schools also find that their job constantly changes in both focus and scope as they are asked to change classes or take on new students or new activities.[32] These teachers have to trust that principals will restrain the impulse to make new demands if a teacher is struggling.

Of course, trust between teachers and administrators is important and valued in all schools. When this trust is lost, any school can become contentious. The informality of charter schools makes them particularly vulnerable to internal disagreements because there are few established rules or principles to fall back on to resolve a dispute once it develops.[33] Without precedent or formal agreements to serve as guides, it is easy for disputes to escalate. For instance, if a teacher and principal in a charter school disagree about the ideal class size, there is no class-size clause in the contract to settle the dispute. When a teacher feels she received an inappropriate evaluation, she will often find that the school has no grievance process and, without formal evaluation tools, no basis on which to contest the evaluation.

Unsurprisingly, the loss of trust between teachers and administrators seems to be at the heart of many charter school unionization efforts. A former charter school principal (now a charter management organization leader), who walked into a school as the staff was unionizing, explained:

> *[The prior administration] treated people poorly. They turned them over quickly. They had young teachers coming in, working long hours. [They] didn't pay them very well—all the things that are just a recipe for a disaster…If I was working there, I would've joined the union too.*

Today only 12 percent of charter schools are unionized.[34] However, as schools mature and the staff in them get older, the need for structure appears to increase.

As interest in charter school unionization grows, charter school administrators and governing boards are becoming increasingly concerned that, over time, they will lose flexibility and autonomy to manage and staff their schools. Finding a way to balance teacher protection with administrative flexibility will be a crucial challenge as the charter school sector matures and grows.

Serving high-needs students in urban schools is associated with staff instability

Nationally, about 25 percent of charter teachers leave their school every year.[35] While this study indicates that no single teacher was more likely to leave a charter school than he or she was to leave a traditional public school, several factors come together in charter schools to make them vulnerable to high rates of teacher attrition.[36]

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32.   Gross and DeArmond, *Parallel Patterns*.
33.   M. Price, "Still Negotiating: What Do Unions Mean for Charter Schools?" in *Hopes, Fears, & Reality: A Balanced Look at Charter Schools in 2009*, ed. Robin J. Lake, National Charter School Research Project (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2009).
34.   Ibid.
35.   D. Stuit and T. Smith, *Teacher Turnover in Charter Schools* (Nashville, TN: National Center on School Choice, Vanderbilt University, 2009).
36.   Gross and DeArmond, *Parallel Patterns*.

First, charter schools focus on challenging populations of students. CRPE reports that, nationally, 61 percent of charter school students are minority students and 49 percent are eligible for free or reduced price lunch (FRL). These factors have long been associated with greater rates of teacher attrition[37] and teachers in charter schools seem to follow the same pattern.[38]

Charter schools also tend to hire relatively young teachers. Nationally, more than one-third of charter school teachers are under 30 years of age, while less than one-fifth of traditional public school teachers are that young. Young professionals across all industries tend to be more mobile as they figure out career and personal paths.[39]

When teachers leave a charter school, however, they are more likely to do so because of concerns over key factors in the new teacher compact—job security and uncertainty about their job description.[40]

The concern about teacher attrition is not an argument that charter schools want to retain all their teachers year after year; however, losing large numbers of staff from a small school creates significant problems for principals trying to build focused and coherent programs. Losing key staff members can be very hard on a school. One school visited for this study serves a highly impoverished and marginalized student population; it lost half or more of its teachers every year. (The challenging student population was only one of several reasons teachers left the school.) Attrition was not this school's only problem, but it was an important reason why it failed to gain any traction. School administrators watched as nearly all of the investment in professional learning each year walked out the door, leaving the school with few teachers able to carry the knowledge forward to the next round of teachers. This meant that almost no one was available to provide institutional memory in the school, and few had the experience to take on leadership roles.

Several informal and creative efforts to retain teachers were apparent. These included flexible hours and on-site day care for teachers' young children. Some principals sought input on teachers' preferred classes and activities. One principal encouraged a valued teacher who turned in her resignation due to burnout to take "as much time off as she needed." Six weeks later she returned to the school with renewed commitment. These are all important examples of how charter schools can use autonomy and flexibility to address teacher concerns. These informal arrangements, however, only work in a trusting environment. To stabilize the working arrangements for teachers may require some basic, more formal systems and structures related to evaluation and dispute resolution.

37.   H. Lankford, S. Loeb, and J. Wyckoff, "Teacher Sorting and the Plight of Urban Schools: A Descriptive Analysis," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 24, no. 1 (2002): 37-62.
38.   Gross and DeArmond, *Parallel Patterns*.
39.   Ibid.
40.   Ibid.

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.[41]

Schools are perhaps the most widely known institutions in this country. The vast majority of people in this country have experience in schools, most in public schools. The public has very strong expectations about what schools should look like—especially with regard to academic programs and the roles of teachers and principals.[42]

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.[43] Perhaps someone with an entrepreneurial background would find the challenge of starting up an independent charter school to be compelling. Perhaps nonprofit leaders from other fields would see charter schools as a place to expand their social mission. Perhaps young and motivated college students would see charter schools as a place to apply their skills to great effect.

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.[44] 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. Individuals with traditional backgrounds do not necessarily conform to traditional practice; the study found some former traditional principals, frustrated with the barriers in traditional public schools, now pursuing substantial reform in charter schools. Indeed, one charter school leader acknowledged that his training had put up blinders around his vision of what could be done.

Convincing others that schools can, and maybe should, operate differently is yet another challenge, frequently involving the very parents on whom schools rely for student enrollment. An elementary school in the study ran a highly structured and disciplined environment in which students where expected to (1) arrive at school with a clean, white shirt tucked into belted pants, (2) line up silently to move about the school, and (3) sit

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41. 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).

42. H. Metz, "Real School: A Universal Drama amid Disparate Experience," *Journal of Education Policy* 4, no. 5 (1989): 75-91; J. W. Meyer and B. Rowan, "Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony," *American Journal of Sociology* 83, no. 2 (1977): 340-363.

43. J. Nathan, *Charter Schools: Creating Hope and Opportunity for American Education* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998).

44. U.S. Department of Education, "Public School, BIE School, and Private School Data Files," 2007–08.

Powerful forces constrain the creativity of charter school leaders, lessen their resolve to make big changes, or overwhelm their efforts to do so.

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attentively in straight rows in each classroom. This school received pushback from some parents who felt that elementary schools should offer a more carefree environment for students. In this case the school stuck to its plan and, when it became one of the state's most distinguished schools, parents lined up to enroll their children.

There are also a myriad of practical and technical challenges that thwart change. For example, charter school principals in this study argued that federal "Highly Qualified Teacher" provisions in the *No Child Left Behind* legislation limit them to traditionally certified teachers, even though state law may offer greater flexibility in this matter. Funding is also a concern: inconsistent or low funding makes it difficult for schools to plan ahead or commit to incentive-based compensation strategies.[45] The expanded operational demands of launching and maintaining an independent school can overwhelm planning and innovation—it is simply easier to do what is already known. Competition from local school districts, large and small, makes many charter school leaders feel penned into any number of district organizational and professional norms.

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.

Charter school organization, curriculum, and classroom practice look very similar to traditional public schools

Charter schools are generally free to adopt whatever curriculum model or instructional approach best fits their school. Previous research found that, in fact, charter schools organize into K–8 and K–12 configurations more often than do traditional public schools.[46] However, the present study found very few cases in which charter schools stepped outside traditional approaches. Most schools used textbook-based curriculum, with many elementary schools using the pacing guides common in traditional public schools. By and large, elementary schools are divided into grades and high schools are divided by academic departments (even when the department is just one or two teachers), with a single teacher per class. Classroom activities generally combined teacher-led instruction with deskwork for students. Teachers in these schools, however, did seem to emphasize their efforts to individualize instruction to students by spending one-on-one time with them.[47]

45. S. Speakman, C. E. Finn, Jr., and B. Hassel, *Charter School Funding: Inequity's Next Frontier* (Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2005).

46. T. Ziebarth, M. B. Celio, R. J. Lake, and L. Rainey, "The Charter School Landscape," in *Hopes, Fears, and Reality: A Balanced Look at American Charter Schools in 2005*, ed. Robin J. Lake and Paul T. Hill (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2005).

47. Christensen and Rainey, "Custom Tailored."

Some schools, however, may better serve their mission by stepping outside the traditional model. A school in the study that worked with returning dropouts customized the students' school day based on personal needs. This allowed students to hold jobs or come to school when (and for the length of time) they could remain focused. This school also offered new teen mothers in-home instruction for the first six months after giving birth. By making such schedule accommodations, the school retained and graduated many students who may not have stayed in traditional schools. The school even motivated some students to look into postsecondary options. Many of the schools visited offer niche programs out of a desire to serve non-traditional students better. Charter schools willing to step outside the traditional model take advantage of the flexibility their charter provides to better serve their students; charter schools unwilling to step outside traditional norms may be missing an opportunity to better align their practices with their mission.

Charter schools willing to step outside the traditional model take advantage of the flexibility their charter provides to better serve their students; charter schools unwilling to step outside traditional norms may be missing an opportunity to better align their practices with their mission.

Charter schools' administrative structure and planning are largely the same as traditional public schools

Charter school principals are free to redefine their roles, rethink the administrative structure, and revisit how they enlist staff into the operation of the school. With their strong mission orientation, flexibility, and complex operational demands, charter schools are prime candidates for distributed leadership management models, strategic efforts to engage an entire staff in the development and operation of the school. Yet in the twenty-four charter schools visited, only three had established a leadership structure that differed from the traditional administrative model—a principal with an assistant principal—and only eight displayed an effort to implement a distributed management model.[48] There remains considerable room for new ideas on how to manage and support the administration of independent charter schools.

Of the twenty-four charter schools visited, only three had established a leadership structure that differed from the traditional administrative model.

Charter schools have not adopted compensation reform as widely as expected

Charter schools seem to have all the power they need to radically change the way teachers are paid. Teacher compensation systems that reward years of experience and educational credits are under fire these days because they fail to reward teachers for high-quality teaching. Research on teacher productivity has found that teachers, on average, make few productivity gains after their fifth year of teaching, and neither higher degrees nor educational credits are associated with greater productivity.[49] The study, however, shows that fewer than half of the charter schools surveyed offered incentives to teachers in shortage fields or offered performance-based bonuses. In at least a third of these cases, the charter school just mirrored the incentives being used by the local school district.[50]

Fewer than half of the charter schools surveyed offered incentives to teachers in shortage fields or offered performance-based bonuses.

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48.   Yatsko, "Distributed Leadership in Charter Schools."
49.   J. E. Rockoff, "The Impact of Individual Teachers on Students' Achievement: Evidence from Panel Data," *American Economic Review* 94, no. 2 (2004): 247-252.
50.   Gross and DeArmond, "How Do Charter Schools Compete?"

In fact, because charter schools compete in the same labor market as traditional districts, matching the local district is a strong force behind schools' hesitance to tinker too much with teacher compensation. The traditional salary schedule is in some sense the "default" option; some charter principals are concerned that they may scare off candidates or undermine teacher retention efforts if they do not offer the same kind of compensation offered by local districts.

When charter schools do want to craft new compensation strategies, their efforts are complicated by budget uncertainty. Charter school funds are highly dependent on enrollment, which can be difficult to predict from year to year, especially for new schools. In addition, states have been known to reduce the per-pupil allocations to charter schools when their budgets are tight. This uncertainty makes it very difficult for schools to commit to bonus incentives.

Summary and Implications:
How Charter Schools Stand Out

When the mission combined with the right circumstances the result was powerful.

This study of charter schools found evidence of focused and intentional schools that explicitly sought to address the needs of long under-served students. When the mission combined with the right circumstances—strong leaders; committed and capable teachers driven by the school mission; mutual trust among staff, students, and parents; and a willingness to step outside tradition—the result was powerful. This research shows that in charter schools:

- *Mission tends to trump individual teacher preferences.* In charter schools, principals and teachers display a collective effort that prioritizes the school mission. In contrast, critics argue that American public schools often look less like organizations of teachers working toward a common purpose and more like buildings where a collective of teachers does their work.[51] Increased state standards and higher accountability expectations have decreased some of the isolation of teaching and the most effective schools have been shown to harness professional community in school improvement.[52] But despite these changes and teachers' dedication to their students, many American teachers could probably not tell you the mission of their school.

Principals and teachers display a collective effort that prioritizes the school mission.

- *Powerful charter missions serve students who have long been neglected.* When mission is unleashed, the results can be particularly striking for the most underserved students. Urban charter schools tend to make their central purpose the delivery of a rigorous curriculum to low-income students, with corresponding high expectations for student participation and comportment. Charter and traditional public schools may want the same outcomes for low-income students—college attendance and success—but to get there, public schools have traditionally created add-on programs or left it to individual teachers to solve student remediation or behavioral needs. Charter schools have shifted the problem-solving burden from individual teachers to the core purpose of the organization.

Charter schools have shifted the problem-solving burden from individual teachers to the core purpose of the organization.

- *Principals have real power to lead.* Because charter schools are oriented around mission, the role of school leadership takes on new power and responsibility. Charter schools need leaders who operate more like nonprofit managers— making strategic decisions, managing school operations, hiring and firing teachers, and providing clear and effective instructional leadership.

Charter schools need leaders who operate more like nonprofit managers.

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51. J. W. Little, "The Persistence of Privacy: Autonomy and Initiative in Teachers' Professional Relations," *Teachers College Record* 91, no. 4 (1990): 509-536; B. Achinstein, "Conflict Amid Community: The Micro Politics of Teacher Collaboration," *Teachers College Record* 104, no. 3 (2002): 421-455

52. V. E. Lee and J. B. Smith, "Collective Responsibility for Learning and Its Effects on Gains in Achievement for Early Secondary School Students," *American Journal of Education* 104, no. 2 (1996): 103-147.

- *Teachers enter into a new bargain.* Charter school teachers typically enter into a much less formalized and codified working environment than their traditional public school peers. The vast majority of charter schools do not have collective bargaining agreements and most are too new or small to have developed many policies and formal procedures. Teachers who decide to work in a charter school say they do so because they care about the mission and want to be part of a team that serves the particular population of students in the school.

- *Charter schools can turn on a dime.* The combination of a focused mission, strong leaders, a committed team, and an informal structure allows charter schools to assess how they are doing in light of their mission and quickly change direction when they feel they are off course.

Getting the most from autonomous schools

Charter schools, at their best, have focused missions, strong and committed leaders and teachers, and are flexible and responsive organizations. But many charter schools fall short of this ideal. When charter schools fail to perform, states and authorizers respond with increased regulation and move to close poor performers. Those responses are understandable and in some circumstances probably suitable, but they also carry risks: too much regulation can undo the flexibility and distinctiveness that are the foundation of the charter school movement. Closures that are too aggressive can shut down schools that otherwise might thrive with different supports.

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

To support charter school leadership:

- *Authorizers need to look closely for a clear and achievable mission.* During the initial proposal process, authorizers should expect charter school founders to articulate a school mission and a coherent plan to support it with goals, timelines, personnel, curriculum, instructional approach, marketing, and student recruitment. In subsequent renewals of the charter, authorizers should assess the implementation of this mission with onsite interviews and surveys.

- *School leader training programs need to provide specialized training for both school leaders and governing boards.* Training programs need to be scaled up to meet increasing demand. Authorizers need to evaluate the balance of skills on charter school governing boards during the proposal and renewal process. To provide real support and feedback to school leaders, boards need members with a mix of skills (operations, instruction, legal, and financial) as well as broad community representation.

Too much regulation can undo the flexibility and distinctiveness that are the foundation of the charter school movement. Closures that are too aggressive can shut down schools that otherwise might thrive with different supports.

Authorizers need to evaluate the balance of skills on charter school governing boards during the proposal and renewal process.

- *States need to level funding by improving the reliability and stability of charter school funding.* Although perhaps difficult to provide for all schools (traditional and charter) in the current economic environment, states should move toward a goal of providing a basic per-pupil allocation for a given time horizon (for example, the next three years). State leaders should also compute per-pupil allocations early enough to allow charter schools to plan their hiring and programs for the next year. Finally, states should distribute school allocations within a reasonable time frame that is jointly determined by the state legislature and state charter school board.

- *Charter school supporters need to encourage the creation of charter school support organizations to provide administrative services.* Charter management organizations use economies of scale to establish a central administrative team to take some of the demands of personnel, accounting, facilities management, and other functions off the hands of school leaders. Charter school support organizations could fill an important role by helping to build operational support networks to serve all charter and autonomous schools.

To support charter school teachers:

- *State laws should allow charter schools to operate outside existing teacher contracts.* Many charter school leaders appreciate the freedom they have from existing teacher contracts, especially with regard to hiring, evaluation, teacher time, and teacher retention and dismissal. That said, some charter schools do opt for a formal teacher contract. Early analysis of teacher contracts negotiated at the school or CMO level show those contracts appear better able than traditional district contracts to protect the school's unique mission and its administrative and operational flexibility, streamline grievance procedures, and incorporate teacher performance in hiring and dismissal decisions.[53] When charter schools do want to unionize, it is best to give these schools the freedom to negotiate their own contract or to decide on their own to opt into an existing contract.

- *States should experiment with lifting traditional certification requirements for charter schools.* State leaders could help charter schools to hire teachers that match their mission by either waiving certification requirements or providing time for teachers to obtain certification after taking a position in a charter school.

- *Authorizers should require charter school agreements to include basic protections for teachers in charter schools.* These assurances would balance the freedoms charter schools enjoy with the job security that teachers desire. Two important steps that could be taken include thoughtful school-level evaluation systems and standard processes for responding to employee grievances.

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53. Price, "Still Negotiating."

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 will lesson the need for prescriptive board member requirements. Strong organizational support systems and sources of technical assistance to which charter schools can turn for advice on school improvement will ensure that school closures impact only those schools with intractable problems and not just schools that have hit a rough spell.

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.

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About the Author

Betheny Gross is a Senior Researcher at the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington Bothell. Her research is focused on policy analysis in the areas of organizational improvement and learning, human resources, and accountability. Currently, Dr. Gross is coordinating research for Inside Charter Schools, a major research initiative of the National Charter School Research Project funded by a consortium of private foundations and a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. This initiative looks into charter school human resource and leadership practices. In addition, Dr. Gross is involved in studies of portfolio district reform, examining accountability and portfolio management in school districts. Dr. Gross holds degrees from the University of Pittsburgh (BA, Economics and Urban Studies), the University of Iowa (MA, Economics), and the University of Wisconsin-Madison (PhD, Educational Policy Studies).

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.