Hopes, Fears, & Reality

A BALANCED LOOK AT AMERICAN CHARTER SCHOOLS IN 2009

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CHAPTER 6

Missed Opportunity: Improving Charter School Governing Boards

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What makes some charter schools more effective than others? How can policymakers and advocates increase the number of quality charters? Where are the funds to come from? Policymakers are increasingly interested in identifying and replicating successful programs (for example, more KIPP schools), but there are a host of other questions embedded in the larger policy issues. Which human resource practices are most effective? What role, if any, should unions play? What is the best way to structure financing, including capital expenses? How do we know when to expand successful programs—or curtail those that do not meet expectations?

All of these are important areas of research and policy investment. But often overlooked in these discussions are potentially quick and relatively low-cost approaches to making charter school quality more consistent: investments in recruiting and training high-quality school governing board members.

For the last three years, the *Inside Charter Schools* study at the National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) has been examining the programs and people of charter schools.[1] Among many findings related to governing boards drawn from a survey and site visits, one finding stood out: surprisingly, given the central importance of governance to the charter school model, governing boards seem dramatically underutilized in many of these schools.

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TOO HANDS-OFF

It may be a carryover from a common criticism of district boards, but the perception is that charter boards are micromanagers. Some undoubtedly are; however, the more widespread problem appears to be that charter boards are uninvolved in strategic improvement.

In the NCSRP survey, charter principals report several very positive features about their boards. They cite a lack of conflict with their boards; just seven percent of respondents reported board conflict to be a problem. Charter leaders report that, in many ways, boards can be quite helpful (see figure 1).

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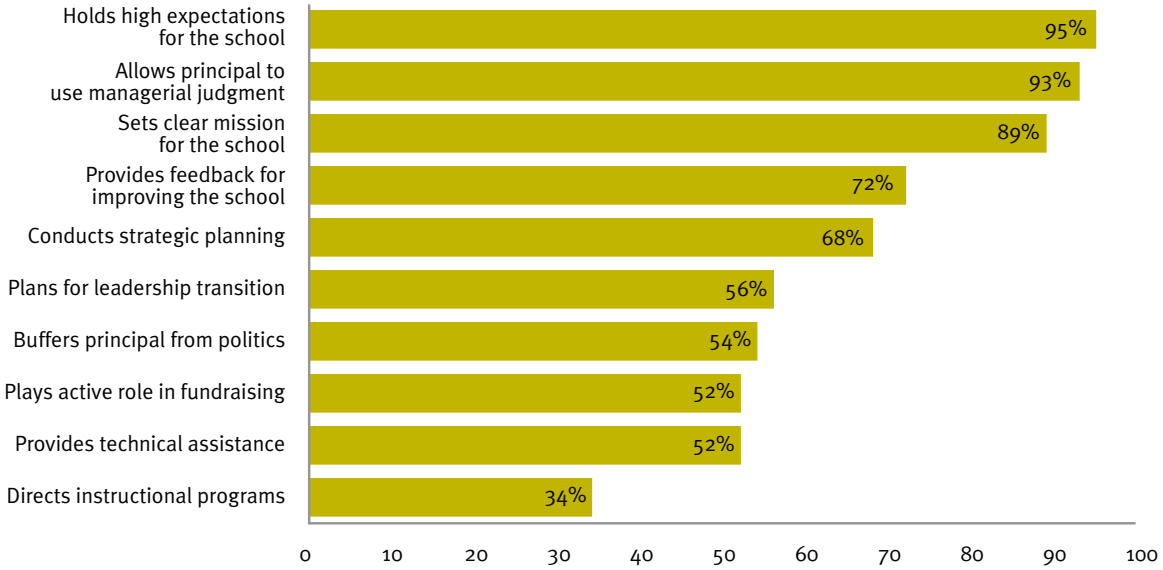
FIGURE 1. PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF HOW THEIR BOARD FUNCTIONS



In general, the board helps set a clear mission and high expectations, and offers helpful feedback. Charter boards, according to the survey responses, tend not to micromanage instruction, and they are very hands-off with regard to managerial decisions.

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On the other hand, charter principals report a troubling and largely unexpected feature of charter board operations: charter boards are not as involved as they should be in some key elements of quality control and continuous improvement. As figure 1 reveals, only about half of the principals surveyed report that their governing boards:

- Help develop new sources of revenue (52 percent).

- Buffer the principal from politics and controversies (54 percent).
- Are involved in planning for leadership transition (56 percent).

A surprising number of charter boards also do not appear to be involved, according to the principals, in what might be considered central functions for any governing board:

- Almost one-third (32 percent) of responding principals report their governing boards do not involve themselves in strategic planning activities.
- More than one-quarter (28 percent) also say their boards do not provide feedback for improvement.

There appears to be significant room for improvement with respect to board operations in many charters. Beyond that, in a minority of charters, there are some very real governance challenges that need to be addressed:

- More than one-tenth (11 percent) of principals said their boards do not set a clear mission, arguably a core purpose of governing boards.
- One-third (34 percent) of principals reported their boards are directing instructional programs, a degree of board involvement in school functions uniformly frowned on as inappropriate.

It is easy to conclude that a substantial minority of charter governing boards is either disengaged (not providing guidance on planning, for example) or meddling too much in school affairs (trying to direct instructional programs). Many are not stepping forward to provide important guidance and support for school principals.

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This absence of governing board involvement in high-level planning may come at a real price for school improvement. Principals in the survey express frustration about trying to strategically lead a school without a lot of board support. Because of the daily demands on their time, half of the surveyed charter school principals find they cannot spend as much time on strategic planning (developing a school improvement plan, including a vision, mission, and goals) as they feel they should.[2] It is also quite possible that many principals are new to working with a board and need more training to become better skilled at providing their boards with the right information to govern.

The NCSRP field visits to 24 charter schools in Texas, California, and Hawaii revealed even less board involvement than the survey suggests. Charter leaders in these schools

worked with boards that were, for the most part, unskilled and uninvolved. Some leaders felt they had to beg people to be on the board; others staffed their boards with members wielding rubber stamps. Only a quarter of the boards in these schools could accurately be described as active, critical, or making a positive impact in improving the school. Of those active boards, several only became involved after serious school crises demanded it of them.

ROLE OF CHARTER GOVERNING BOARDS

By law, boards have an important role to play in ensuring quality. As the legal directors of the school, governing boards are meant to provide oversight, raise funds, and hire the administrator, among other things.[3] Every charter school has some kind of governing board. In many cases, charter schools must be organized as nonprofit organizations with a governing board that serves as the school's legal policymaking body. The board falls under the jurisdiction of the state and federal requirements of being a nonprofit organization and a 501(c)(3). In other cases, the school's legal governing board is the local school board, but the school may have an advisory board similar to a local site council.

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A total of 40 states and the District of Columbia have passed charter school laws, and 38 require charter schools to have a governing board (the other states use the local school district's board).[4] In the case of nonprofit charter management organizations (CMOs), a single board may oversee more than one school.

NOTABLE VARIATION IN BOARDS

As NCSRP researchers interviewed staff and board members across the 24 charter schools studied, the variation in boards was notable. Some charter school governing boards were made up of highly successful people in the community, well connected, with financial or political resources to draw on in support of the school. Other boards looked much weaker. They were made up of parents, community members, and, in some cases, more than a few school employees. As one board consultant put it: "A governing board is not meant to be a parent-teacher organization, but a group assembled to run a multi-million dollar public enterprise." Several of these boards were relatively small—just five members—while others were large and unwieldy, with fifteen members or more. Some functioned at very high levels and had a history of leading the school skillfully through

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transitions; others were perceived to be dysfunctional, oriented toward micromanagement and lacking the skills to provide solid leadership. It was evident that a good relationship, even a neutral or hands-off relationship between the board and school principal on matters of administration and curriculum, allowed a school to prosper. A negative relationship, or a tendency to meddle in the day-to-day affairs of the school, was seen as one of the causes for a school to break down.

BOARD EFFECTIVENESS

A board's opportunity to leverage quality is not a mystery; a great deal is known about effective board leadership, from the for-profit and nonprofit sectors. The work of nonprofit boards, for example, is well documented. Charter school boards were deliberately modeled after nonprofit boards, whose basic roles include the following:[5]

- Determine the mission and purpose.
- Select the organization's director (or principal).
- Support the director (or principal) and review his or her performance.
- Ensure effective organizational planning and assist with implementation.
- Attract and effectively manage resources.
- Determine and monitor the programs and services and their connection to mission.
- Enhance the organization's (or school's) public image.
- Assess board performance.

Observers of nonprofit organizations know that these tasks form the ideal board agenda. In reality, of course, many boards across the nonprofit world struggle with staying focused on policy, attracting the right mix of board members, and providing appropriate oversight. It is no surprise that charter school boards exhibit the same challenges.[6] Though the board "job description" may be clear in theory, a lack of experience, training, and guidance may cause some boards to misinterpret their charge.

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BOARD ARCHETYPES

Boards serve important and critical functions. They make an organization official; they help set policy; they hire a director or principal; and they give the organization's leader the support required to be effective, while serving as a sounding board in decisionmaking. Of course, how they carry out these functions varies enormously. The variety of working styles of real governing boards is very broad, but some archetypes of board behavior are instantly recognizable. In the final analysis, it is easy to group board styles into three categories: meddlesome, rubber stamps, and stewards.

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It is always dangerous to generalize, but meddlesome boards (like the other archetypes) often display common characteristics. Individual members of these boards frequently have personal issues at stake in the school and find it difficult to separate their own preferences from their board roles. On occasion, they make no effort to distinguish between the two. Too frequently, one sees that a meddlesome board will have one or more members who either work in the school or whose children attend the school. While not always the case that board members have a personal axe to grind, it is not unusual for such board members to have an agenda they want to pursue. The agenda may involve an administrator, a colleague, or a particular teacher. It may be a preference for a particular instructional approach, or a special interest in something like foreign languages or athletics. Such board members frequently expect and demand involvement in all school issues, large and small. Sometimes they are more interested in micromanagement than in setting broader policy, paying attention to the reputation of the school, helping to raise funds, or promoting the school in the community. Indeed they may persuade themselves that adopting their preferred solution (weeding out a particular teacher, adopting a specific textbook, or winning a metropolitan basketball tournament) is the key to other policy challenges, including school reputation and success in fundraising.

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Rubber stamp boards exhibit a different shortcoming. They are often handpicked by the principal. They tend to be relatively powerless and often serve at the pleasure of the principal. These boards are often little more than figureheads for grant-writing purposes or firewalls to protect the principal from complaints from parents or staff. The big problem with rubber stamp boards, of course, is that they too frequently fail to perform the board's basic functions: where the micromanaging board inappropriately tends to interfere in management matters more properly decided in the principal's office, the rubber

stamp board often fails in its larger responsibilities to help set a course for the school (leaving that to the principal) or to call the principal to account for failures in leadership.

Stewards take their role seriously.[7] In many ways, the board as a steward is ideal. Such boards are drawn to the school because of a connection or interest in the school's mission. They are able to leave their personal preferences at the door. Frequently drawn from professional backgrounds, they tend to be comfortable establishing objective terms of performance for the principal and assessing the principal's performance against those terms. They often bring expertise in such areas as accounting, law, local politics, and business that is useful to the school as it negotiates the complex environment around it. Stewards tend to be supportive of the principal on big-picture policy goals, but quite demanding in terms of performance. Typically, a board made up of good stewards is very willing to play a significant role in strategic planning, fundraising, and promoting school growth.

Boards set up correctly from the outset tend to deliver results and stay on track as stewards. Boards that start off as meddlesome have a very hard time recovering.

It needs to be said that it is the rare board that is composed entirely of meddlers, rubber stamps, or stewards. Most boards have a mix of these archetypes. When a board can be characterized as one or the other, it is because some tipping point has been reached. Rubber stamps may suddenly outnumber stewards, or a meddler who is persistent and equipped with an especially powerful personality may come to dominate. The truth is that there are hybrids of all of these boards, and, as membership shifts, boards can evolve from one category into another. Boards set up correctly from the outset tend to deliver results and stay on track as stewards. Boards that start off as meddlesome have a very hard time recovering.

Ineffective boards exist at least in part because of missed opportunities: during the charter application phase, when defining the board and getting the right people involved; when the doors open and the founding board becomes a governing board, broadening the group and clarifying roles and responsibilities; and later in the charter life cycle and renewal process, when boards need to address the maturation needs of the school.

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TOWARD GREATER STEWARDSHIP ON CHARTER BOARDS

It may be the case that a well-functioning board is a base requirement for a quality charter school and for bringing charter schools to scale. In NCSRP's studies of charter school oversight, some of the authorizers who tend to be highly regarded (nonprofit

entities like local school boards or universities that award charters) told researchers that they believe any charter school can be "fixed" as long as it has a functional board willing to make tough decisions about staffing and accept outside technical assistance.[8] The following are some ideas about how policymakers and philanthropies might improve the quality of charter boards quickly and at minimal cost.

BROADEN THE POOL OF QUALIFIED BOARD MEMBERS

Local civic leaders might dramatically increase the pool of people interested in serving on a board through concerted outreach campaigns, networking, or building a board bank, such as ones started in New Orleans and Washington, D.C.[9] Efforts to match potential board members to local charter schools most in need of specific expertise would probably be very useful.

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Current charter board members should also take greater responsibility for recruitment by seeking out volunteers and donors who could be encouraged to sign up. It is highly likely that a pool of untapped talent exists in most urban areas. However, in smaller communities, and especially in rural America, the pool of potential professional leaders is likely much smaller. Here the Internet might be of help. Web sources like boardnetUSA allow organizations to post openings while interested candidates can post their credentials. Regardless of the source, potential candidates need to understand and support the school's mission.

PROVIDE TARGETED TRAINING TO CHARTER SCHOOL GOVERNING BOARDS

The California Charter Schools Association (CCSA) offers training, tools, and documents to charter school boards in California, as do many other state and local charter organizations. One of the California schools that NCSRP visited praised the help received. The director recounted how a CCSA staffer came from Sacramento to the Southern California school and trained the new governance board:

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> *It was some of the best information I'd ever heard. Her presentation was very timely and we were able to ask a lot of questions of her . . . She was really open and will come back if we need her . . . The retreat really set a tone of professionalism for the board that wasn't there before.*

The background hinted at here was a deeply dysfunctional board, with personal, non-school-related issues driving decisions. The school was quickly losing credibility with parents; when half the board turned over, it was viewed as an opportunity to improve

both the board and its functioning. Broad, voluntary board training is fundamental, but for troubled boards, a tough love approach with targeted sessions for shaky school governance is needed.

While there are many resources for "best-practice" training for boards, there is not enough attention or willingness on the part of authorizers and charter associations to hold boards accountable. Authorizers need to observe boards in action and step in and demand professionalism from boards that are starting to sink their schools. If the boards do not change their habits and practices, new members must be brought in to reshape the board.

BETTER ASSESS BOARD COMPETENCY BEFORE GRANTING CHARTERS

Clearly, relevant board training is necessary, but solutions need to go beyond professional development. As part of the application process, prospective charters should be expected to submit their list of board members and their biographies. Just as an entity applying for a charter should be able to demonstrate proof of community interest, it should also be able to show that solid leadership is part of the plan.

Many authorizers already assess charter school boards to some degree. Few, however, go as far as Chicago in looking at potential boards. In Chicago, the district works with a local organization skilled at assessing nonprofit boards to make a judgment about board makeup. A well-rounded board includes community members and educators, but it should also have people with practical skills such as fundraising, organizational leadership, finance, real estate, and law.[10] It may take time for a school to be able to produce such a board, but knowing what a healthy board looks like and seeking these people in advance of opening helps build the foundation for a strong charter school.

MAKE THE MOST OF A GOOD BOARD AND SHARE IT ACROSS SCHOOLS

Another way to make the most of charter school board talent could include having states amend their charter laws to make it possible for one board to oversee multiple schools. This is common practice in many charter management organizations where the board oversees schools with the same educational design. But the model could also work for networks of schools with very similar management approaches. For example, the Chicago International Charter School board oversees a number of schools with quite different ideas about instruction.

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NEEDED: VISION BEHIND THE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

Charter school boards have in the past been viewed as a static element: some charters were understood to have strong boards; many were believed to have weak ones. That is just the way it was. This view needs to change so that governing boards are seen as a critical foundation that supports strong charter schools and, ideally, helps bring them to scale. Leaders of the charter movement need to ask more of charter boards and provide them with more tools to help them succeed. The success of the charter movement depends on visionary board members supporting the principal.

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NOTES

1. From 2006 to 2009, NCSRP researchers interviewed 24 charter school directors from large and midsize urban districts in Texas, California, and Hawaii, and surveyed over 400 charter school leaders to find out about their jobs, how they spend their time, what they feel confident with, and where they struggle. For more information and reports, see http://www.crpe.org.
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3. Frank Martinelli, *Creating an Effective Charter School Governing Board Guidebook*, Charter Friends National Network, 2000, http://www.uscharterschools.org/governance/.
4. National Resource Center on Charter School Finance and Governance, *Creating and Sustaining High-Quality Charter School Governing Boards*, 2008, http://www.charterresource.org/files/Governing_Board_v3.pdf.
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6. Martinelli, *Governing Board Guidebook*, 2.
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8. Robin Lake and Meghan Squires, *Tough Calls: Identifying and Addressing School-Level Problems*, NCSRP working paper #2008-7 (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2008), http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/download/csr_files/wp_ncsrp7_toughcall_aug09.pdf.
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