

From Margins to Mainstream: Building a Stronger Charter School Movement

Conference Essays

What is the purpose of charter schools and the charter school movement? Is it possible for the charter school movement to grow in scale without compromising this purpose? 3

By Robin Halsband and Terry Simonette	3
By Ted Kolderie	6
By Alex Medler	7
By Eva Moskowitz	9
By James A. Peyser	10

How do we grow the movement and bring charters from the margins of public education? How much growth is “enough”? 12

By Joe Graba	12
By Frederick Hess	14
By Marc Dean Millot	16
By Kim Smith	20
By Sheree Speakman	22

What kinds of organizations and individuals does the charter movement need to attract to start and run public charter schools, and how will it get them? 24

By Wendy Kopp and Abigail Smith	24
By Jonathan Schnur	26
By Jon Schroeder	28
By Jim Shelton	30

Who are the external actors that the charter movement needs to engage and win over?

How can we accomplish this?

By Ted Kolderie	32
By C. Peter Svahn	33
By Ronald Wolk	35

How should the charter movement deal with low-performing charter schools? What policy reforms are needed to improve the quality of charter schools? 36

By Jane Hannaway	36
By Bryan Hassel	38
By Paul Herdman	40
By Margaret Lin	43

How do charter schools better articulate a public message and defend against attacks from entrenched interests?	46
By Michael A. Goldstein	46
By Joe Nathan	49
By Doug Thomas and Shel Hiscock	51
What lessons can the charter school movement learn from other social movements? ..	53
By Alex Medler	53
By Joe Nathan	55
How will the charter school movement look in 10-20 years? How should it look?	57
By Nelson Smith	57

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What is the purpose of charter schools and the charter school movement? Is it possible for the charter school movement to grow in scale without compromising this purpose?

By Robin Halsband and Terry Simonette

Since NCB Development Corporation started working with charter schools in the mid-90s, we have found that what started as an innovative form of education reform has also proven to be an effective tool for community economic development in urban areas. While the jury is still out on the academic record of charter schools, from the perspective of urban renewal and neighborhood revitalization, some wonderful things are happening.

Charter schools are affecting community economic development (CED) in three major ways. First, there is growing evidence that an increasing number of community-based organizations (CBOs) are starting charter schools to expand their current services. Second, as neighborhood schools improve, families are less likely to move once they have children. Finally, with respect to real estate development, charter schools often purchase or lease vacant, dilapidated buildings, long viewed as eyesores, and renovate them into state-of-the-art new schools and even community centers.

CBOs and Charter Schools

Nonprofit, community-based organizations are increasingly seeking partnerships with schools to increase the impact of their programs. In some cases, CBOs are actually starting their own schools. In other examples, charter schools are expanding their services to become more comprehensive community organizations.

For example, Lawrence Community Development Fund in Lawrence, Mass., ran several programs for its largely low-income Latino community. After Massachusetts passed its charter school legislation, the Fund decided to start a charter school. Today, the school is in its eighth year of operation, running a dual-language program for children in grades K-8, 78 percent of whom qualify for free or reduced priced lunches. The creation of the school allowed the Fund to add education to the many services it provides to the surrounding low-income community.

Other schools are quickly learning that they have the capabilities to serve as community learning centers. The Maya Angelou Public Charter School (MAPCS) in Washington, D.C., opened as a school to serve at-risk and court-involved youth. Today, it is not only educating kids, but it is providing key job skills and services for the community through its two nonprofit businesses: a catering company and computer-training center.

Bronx Preparatory Charter School, located in Bronx, N.Y., serves a population in which 92 percent of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch. The school is in its third year of operation and is in the process of building a major campus for its students and neighborhood. When the school set out to design the new campus, the intent was to create a community space. The building's design is centered around a courtyard to give a campus-like feel and create a welcoming space for the community. The auditorium/gym will be built to allow for easy access to other organizations for community events.

Kristin Kearns Jordan, the founder of Bronx Prep, says, “Typically, these days gyms are built on top floors for efficiency, but that does not foster a community space. For our school, the architect specifically designed the gym to allow for community access.” Kristin describes the area around her school as safe, but barren. While there is some housing and undeveloped land, there’s no community anchor. Kristin hopes that the school will become a community hub, and allow for a “town square” type of feel.

Keeping Families in Neighborhoods

Quality schools keep families in neighborhoods. When many young, urban couples have children, those who can afford it often flee to the suburbs for their children’s education. Slowly helping to buck this trend are several charter schools that, by providing quality education programs, are attracting diverse sets of families, both racially and economically.

Many of our nation’s school systems are overwhelmingly segregated, and some charter schools continue that trend by virtue of their location. A recent study by PACE of the University of California¹ professes that charter schools serve larger shares of African American and Latino students than their respective proportions found in traditional public schools, and that ethnic segregation is comparatively greater in charter schools. When looking at overall data, this appears to be true. But, when looking at individual cases, there is an increasing crop of charter schools attracting a much more diverse population than their surrounding traditional public schools.

In Washington, D.C., for example, Capital City Public Charter School is managing to attract a more diverse population than its surrounding area. District-wide, only 4.6 percent of total students are white. In schools within one mile of Capital City, a mere 1.6 percent of students are white. But of Capital City’s student population, fully 22 percent are white. When looking at economic levels, the school serves a population in which 54.8 percent qualify for free/reduced lunch. In nearby traditional public schools, 73.7 percent qualify.² Could this be a sign that they are helping to stop white flight? At the very least, Capital City is offering a more diverse school by choice. They appear to be doing this by providing a community-based, quality education program.

Renovating facilities

Charter schools have a direct impact on community development as they help turn rundown, unused structures into renovated school buildings. Charter schools started by New Community Corporation (NCC), a community-based organization in Newark, N.J., have been welcome and positive additions to their neighborhoods. One school provided a newly constructed building on the site of abandoned and deteriorated housing. Another allowed for the preservation of a cherished landmark in its North Newark neighborhood.

The SEED School in Washington, D.C., renovated a burned-out shell that had been set ablaze more than 20 times, in the middle of one of the District of Columbia’s most violent neighborhoods. Today, it is a functional residential campus that will eventually house 300 students in grades 7-12.

The Lawrence, Mass., school mentioned above has been operating since 1995, long enough to see the improvements it helped to create in a neighborhood once overrun by prostitutes and drug dealers. On the first day of school eight years ago, the principal approached each prostitute to explain that an elementary school was opening that day. They left and never returned to that corner. Over the years, businesses and residences around the school have been cleaning up. A nearby businessman fixed up his property and explained

to the founding director that it was only because the school was there that he felt it was worth improving his property. If it weren't for the school, he would have moved his business. Recently, a house across the street was renovated and another was purchased for renovations. The founder can hardly believe the kinds of additional benefits that the school has fostered.

Beyond the possibility of quality education, charter schools have the potential to generate neighborhood revitalization in inner-city areas. The examples mentioned above could be multiplied if more community-oriented organizations joined the process, including neighborhood-based community development corporations (CDCs), private developers, government entities, and foundations. If these entities embraced charter schools as a public education option, as well as a community development tool, we might see fewer rundown unused buildings, an increased number of schools and more public school options in under-performing urban areas.

Footnotes

¹ "Charter Schools and Inequality: National Disparities in Funding, Teacher Quality and Student Support," Policy Analysis for California Education University of California, Berkeley and Davis, Stanford University; April 2003.

² Common Core of Data website from the National Center for Education Statistics, <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/>.

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By Ted Kolderie

The purpose of charter schools – or of chartering – is shaped fundamentally by the difficulty the country has in getting us the schools we need by changing the schools we have. Coming off the “Nation at Risk” report in 1983, it was simply assumed that we would and could change existing schools enough. Twenty years later, the job is a long way from done. There is some doubt that it can be done. At a minimum, the effort to get the schools we need *solely* by changing the schools we have is—as one advocate of standards-based systemic reform conceded recently—“a one-bet strategy.” A one-bet strategy is a risk, hardly a prudent course of action with something as crucial as public education, and clearly not an acceptable risk for policymakers to be taking with other people’s children.

In the 1990s, the states introduced chartering as a way to hedge this bet and to give the country a way to create the needed—different and better—schools from scratch. Chartering withdrew the ‘exclusive’ traditionally held by the local K-12 district, opening the door for someone other than the local superintendent to start and run a public school, and for someone other than the local board to authorize these schools run by others. In enacting these laws, the states were reacting to their deep frustration with the district arrangement they had created. The state needs an institution that works - that educates young people well and improves its performance over time while reasonably containing its costs. What it has is the reverse; an institution that does not educate enough kids well and fails to contain its costs. In the 90s, state policy leadership saw that it did not have to be trapped in the traditional arrangements and that they have it within their power – if the districts do not perform – to find someone else who will. This drove the charter laws that appeared in Minnesota in 1991, in California in 1992, and quickly in other states after that. It was simply commonsense. State officials sometimes describe the districts in their cities as dysfunctional. A state should not permit a dysfunctional organization to carry out a state constitutional responsibility as important as public education.

The purpose of chartering was not to produce a particular kind of school. Everyone acknowledges that a chartered school is not a pedagogical innovation; not a kind of curriculum or learning method. Rather, the states are creating a new opportunity for teachers, community groups, or others to set up schools they believe will work better. Some of these might be brand new and different kinds of schools, simply different from those in the community today, or a kind of school present today but in too-short supply. Chartering is an institutional innovation, a new way to create new schools. It is the country’s principal experiment with the real delegation of meaningful authority to the school, testing a new and different mechanism of control that shifts accountability from process to performance. It is a superior mechanism both for innovation and for replication. It is a strategy for replacing failing schools, alternative to the one-bet strategy of trying to fix the schools we have.

This purpose is not a small one that can be achieved by creating a few new schools. Chartering is not a demonstration program, nor just an R&D program. The country needs to create quite a large number of very different schools. A large chartered-school sector will be needed partly to create a ‘ripple’ large enough to cause the districts to at last begin creating new (different and better) schools themselves. The essential purpose of chartering requires that it go to scale, that the new-schools effort be as central as the effort to introduce standards.

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By Alex Medler

There are differences in the purposes people hold for charter schools. These differences are related to where they work. While clearly many purposes drive the charter movement, a simple division between two camps helps clarify what is going on. At the national level, policy advocates emphasize the competitive nature of charter schools and the potential improvement that market pressures bring to failing public schools. Local operators prefer to focus on the complementary role of charter schools and how their presence expands the educational options available to a community. The charter movement is big enough to embrace both goals, as well as many others held by individual school founders. But, we need to think through these differences because they complicate efforts to expand the charter movement.

For one camp, charter schools are part of the “big picture.” Charters are important because they **compete** with traditional public schools. By introducing market forces into a public monopoly, charter schools provide pressure for all schools to improve. The loss of students, and the accompanying revenue, forces larger school systems to ask what parents want. Before the advent of charters, districts could take students and families for granted and get away with providing an inferior product. Proponents of the competitive purpose often assert that traditional public schools are failing and incapable of fixing their weakness because of their ineffective and cumbersome governing structures. They also emphasize differences between charters and public schools.

Another camp focuses on what charter schools add to the local community. These people emphasize that charters are public schools, but small schools with a unique approach. They serve a **complementary** role by expanding public education. While families make choices, they choose a school that matches the way their child learns. Proponents of the complementary role do not need to assert that charter schools are better than other public schools, or that traditional schools are failing. Instead, they argue that different children benefit from different schools. This camp diminishes the threat charters pose to district schools (and their supporters) and consequently emphasizes some of the ways that charters resemble other public schools.

This characterization has empirical support.¹ An upcoming review of media coverage in Washington, D.C., during a four-month period reveals that people who work at the school and district level prefer to describe the charter movement in complementary terms. People working at the state and national level think and talk about them in terms of competition. The only local actors that emphasize competition are those speaking against charter schools. These distinctions are strong and significant.

There are, of course, plenty of people within the charter movement who support both purposes (myself included). These objectives are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive. But the tension between these two purposes and their proponents is key to expanding the charter movement.

If the national and state actors pursuing competition burn bridges with the education establishment and its allies, local entrepreneurs will find themselves with fewer options. Individual schools may become isolated from some of the people and the resources that would welcome and support them if they were seen as complementary. I’m not suggesting that teachers unions and school boards can be persuaded to support charters by reframing how we describe them. But local corporations, foundations, and non-profit organizations that are already working to improve the lives of children often support public education. As we consider expanding the charter movement’s scale, these potential allies and their resources could be vital – and their opinions can be shaped by the perceived relationship between charters and other public schools.

If potential allies see charter schools as a source of competition that grows only by taking away public education's resources, they are likely to devote their energy to fighting for those resources rather than contributing to charter growth. That's why charter opponents use the image of charters as competitors to energize and activate their members. By emphasizing competition, and linking charters to other choice options like vouchers, national advocates of charters make their opponent's job easier and the job of charter school operators harder.

This doesn't change the need to demand policies and actions that promote charters, like establishing alternative chartering authorities, full funding for charters, and assistance for facilities. But it would help to tone down rhetoric based on the assertion that markets will fix all the "failures of public schools." We should also stop pushing for changes that make charters less "public." For example, the competitive camp should stop trying to relax requirements around special education, non-sectarian status, or lottery requirements. And finally, we could stop minimizing the resources needed by authorizers to implement adequate accountability.

Perhaps the charter movement's supporters from the competitive camp have strategies for delivering all the school leaders, teachers, financing, facilities, qualified and committed governing board members, and community partners that can grow the charter movement. In the absence of such resources, their emphasis on competition is likely to generate exciting media coverage, but it will also play into the hands of charter opponents and make the work of people in charter schools more difficult. A better strategy to grow the movement might be to support the work – and purposes – chosen by people in charter schools.

Footnotes

¹ Alex Medler, "The Charter School Movement: Complementing or Competing with Public Education," in *The Emancipatory Promise of Charter Schools: Towards a Progressive Politics of School Choice*, Eric Rofes and Lisa M. Stulberg, editors, forthcoming.

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By Eva Moskowitz

At its core, the charter school movement is about competition and choice. Choice within the public school system is a concept that, until now, has been treated as if it would mean the end of public education. This is not the case. Charter schools are the best mechanism I can think of to bring choice and competition in public education. And the charter school movement must grow in scale if it is to be an effective force for change in district public schools.

Since Congress passed the Sherman Anti-Trust Act in 1890, America has vigorously fought monopolies. Yet, while we spend millions of dollars to break up monopolies and ensure that consumers reap the benefits of competition, we deliberately deny these same benefits to our educational consumers – children and their parents.

Charter schools, through competition, foster flexibility, high standards, parental involvement, and independence. Public schools in New York City have to comply with three thick volumes of regulations. A charter school, by contrast, only has to comply with one (thinner) volume. This, in a nutshell, is the charter school movement's great advantage. By reducing the amount of bureaucracy that a principal has to deal with in running a school, the principal can make better choices.

Should a qualified science teacher be offered more money than other teachers if there is a shortage of good science teachers? Under the kinds of rules New York City's non-chartered public schools operate, teacher salaries are based on seniority, not on demand. A charter school can utilize this basic concept of market value to the principal's advantage. In highly regulated public schools there is no flexibility – charter schools thrive on flexibility.

The charter school movement is also essential in any effort to try to keep the middle class in the public school system. Look at the most broken public school systems in the country and you will find that the loss of middle class families led directly to the schools' decay. Keeping these families in the public school system means constantly and consistently pushing the schools to grow and adapt.

To the extent that choice is at the center of the charter school movement, there is no particular reason why the growth of the charter school movement should compromise its purpose. Why shouldn't schools use competition to better themselves? Imagine a school system in which a new school could open up anywhere, attract students from poorly-performing schools, poach each other's teachers, and introduce new and better ideas. Would this be the end of public education? Hardly. It would be as American as apple pie. We expect choice in nearly every aspect of our lives, yet we leave students trapped in failing schools. Far from the end of public education, we would see schools managed smartly and students served better.

As the primary architect of New York City's \$10 million Charter School Improvement Fund, the first of its kind in the country, I have been working tirelessly to see that charter schools and the charter school movement are given every chance to bring choice and success to public education. This is an uphill fight, and I am pleased to join my colleagues who share in this dream.

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By James A. Peyser

Many early charter supporters believed the primary purpose of these new schools was to stimulate innovation and to establish a variety of laboratory models that could be replicated on a larger scale in school districts—where the heavy lifting of education takes place. The governing ethos of these charter backers is “let a thousand flowers bloom.” And the yardstick by which they measure success is the extent to which creative or experimental charter school practices are adopted by “real” public schools.

There are several shortcomings to this approach. First, public education has not lacked for innovation. Indeed, one could make the case that over the years public education has suffered from an excess of ineffectual reforms. Whether the curriculum is new or the instructional practices are creative is not the issue. The issue is performance.

Second, replication takes a willing partner. Although there are some isolated examples of collaborations between districts and charter schools, they are few and far between. Most districts either devote themselves to undermining the political legitimacy of neighboring charter schools, or they simply ignore them, taking a “not invented here” attitude toward their successes.

Finally, charter schools do not typically succeed because of a few discrete activities or programs. They succeed by creating a coherent set of learning experiences within a distinctive and supporting organizational culture, built on an unshakable commitment to educational excellence. According to one leader of a high-performing charter school, “it’s the hundreds of little things that make us different.” Any one of those “hundreds of little things” doesn’t add up to much, but taken together, they create an environment in which excellence can and does happen. In short, a successful charter school is an integrated whole, which adds up to more than the sum of its parts. It is not possible to pick and choose from the various elements of such schools and expect them to bear comparable fruit on foreign, less hospitable, soil.

The real promise of the charter movement is the creation of a critical mass of schools that are not only capable of having a direct impact on overall levels of student achievement, but that are also capable of stimulating broad structural change in traditional school districts. In other words, what is required is scale and excellence. Unfortunately, there are great challenges on both fronts.

Since the first charter was granted in 1992, growth in the number of schools and in student enrollment has been extraordinary. This impressive launch, however, appears to be losing momentum. Through the mid-1990s, four to five states each year were adopting charter school laws. Over the past several years, only a handful of new state laws have been enacted. Compounding the drop-off in new laws, are the limits most existing laws place on the total number of charter schools that can operate in any given state or district. While these restrictions did not present much of an obstacle to growth at first, many states are now reaching their statutory ceilings. These legal barriers serve to further discourage potential school founders who are already deterred by the many other logistical and political obstacles that have plagued charter schools throughout their existence.

By the late 1990s, hundreds of new charter schools were opening their doors each September, peaking at close to 500 in 1999. Looking ahead to the fall of 2003, fewer than 100 new charter schools are slated to begin operations—a modest increase over the existing base of 2,700 schools.

Over their relatively short lives, charter schools have demonstrated real potential for creating new, high-quality educational opportunities for children, which would not otherwise exist. Take Massachusetts as an example. Almost one-quarter of charter schools have passing rates on the statewide assessments (MCAS) that were at least 20 percentage points higher than their host districts. In cities like Boston, Lawrence and Springfield, charter schools are the highest performing schools in town.

Despite the many notable successes, there is little clear and convincing evidence that charter school students as a group are consistently and substantially outperforming their district school peers. While numerous local studies of comparable student assessment data have demonstrated that charter schools marginally—albeit unevenly—outperform schools in their host districts, some recent national studies (flawed though they may be) have suggested that even this slight advantage may be overstated.

To fully realize its potential as a driver of broad reform and higher achievement, the charter movement must restore its previous double-digit growth rate, while at the same time dramatically elevating the level of academic performance. Although both goals should be pursued simultaneously, as a practical matter, success on the quality front is the highest priority, since demonstrative gains in student achievement are essential to overcoming legal and political barriers to faster expansion.

There are two basic approaches that appear to be working, both of which should be aggressively supported and expanded: the replication of successful schools and cultivation of successful school leaders. The former is typically the hallmark of education management organizations (e.g., Aspire Public Schools) and networks of independently managed charter schools (e.g., KIPP Schools). The latter is the domain of incubators (e.g., the Building Excellent Schools Fellowship). Sometimes, both approaches are pursued together, as in the Fisher Fellows program, which trains founders of KIPP Schools. What these initiatives have in common is a commitment to building on proven models of success.

At first blush, the dual mandates of expansion and quality appear to run in opposite directions. Accelerated growth is frequently associated with diminished (or at best uneven) performance. Increasing both scale and student achievement is possible, however, by embracing a growth strategy based on reproducing what works, rather than perpetual experimentation.

Jim Peyser is Chairman of the Massachusetts Board of Education.

How do we grow the movement and bring charters from the margins of public education? How much growth is “enough”?

By Joe Graba

As we complete the 12th year of experience with creating and operating schools through the chartering process, we need to accept that we have been creating not simply an array of chartered schools but a new ‘Open Sector’ of public education. In the early years many thought that allowing the creation of these new schools would cause the traditional district system to become more innovative and responsive to the escalating learning needs of our country. It is now clear this expectation was not well founded. Consequently, it now appears that this new ‘Open Sector’ of public education will have to be significantly larger than many had originally assumed. This requires that we think systemically about the essential elements of this new sector of public education, considering carefully what infrastructure will be necessary to expand the new sector significantly and sustain that expansion.

Seven key elements are essential to establish a new sector in public education. Some require state action; others private action.

1. Probably the most basic is the legal framework for creating autonomous public schools new. The law should facilitate the chartering of new schools and should be similar to the best of the laws enacted in the states since 1991. The law should allow parents, teachers, and other citizens and organizations to create these new schools. The law also needs to ensure that students attending these schools have the same level of funding provided to students in district schools of the state.
2. Most of the states have attempted to use the traditional state education agency for state level oversight of the chartered sector. This strategy has real limitations. Many of these agencies have the same culture blocks toward new and different approaches that exist in the school districts. Their policies, processes, and assumptions were formed around the districts. So they find it hard to provide proactive and positive leadership for this new open sector. The desired expansion of the open sector will require a state level entity that is at least somewhat separated from the traditional state agency, and that is charged with promoting and assisting innovative learning organizations. The entity should have leadership responsibilities with the governor and the legislature as well as with the schools. This entity should be the state level focal point for innovative learning activity in both the district and in the new open sector. Schools outside the open sector would continue to interface with the traditional state agency.
3. One of the lessons of the last 12 years is that authorizing these new schools is important and complicated. A larger and stronger set of authorizing organizations is needed in almost every state. Almost all of the current authorizers have some other activity that is their main mission. We would not suggest restricting the use of willing school districts, higher education institutions, and other existing organizations, but the states need to begin to create at least some entities that have sponsoring as their sole mission. These single-purpose authorizers will be essential to any substantial expansion of the new-school sector.
4. Another basic lesson of the chartering process has been that starting these new schools is difficult and expensive. Both financial resources and expertise need to be available to assist in the startup of quality new schools. But starting the school is just the beginning.

5. Some schools may have competent unit managers; some may have ties to a management group; but in many the teachers and parents do not have the expertise needed to perform all of the functions necessary to run a school well. Access to legal, accounting, reporting, and facilities-management services becomes key to survival and success. These services may be available from a charter school resource center or simply from a variety of individuals and/or organizations that can provide these services on a fee basis. The support-structure needs to be better organized, coordinated, and perhaps shared.

6. Chartering has produced some new and interesting school models. We need to develop an evaluation system that is broader than standardized test scores soon, one that can identify which of these models are proving successful in various settings and why. We need to identify the types of chartered schools proving successful, and move away from the common but unfortunate effort to compare chartered schools in general with district schools in general. Chartering produces schools with differences. We need to look broadly for these differences. We have come to believe that the culture of the school is as important as the learning program. An evaluation needs to be sensitive to the things the students and parents find different and important for their success.

7. Finally, this new sector of public education must be able to replicate successful models. Its difficulty with replication is one of the important problems with district public education. We cannot move public education to the level this country needs if we cannot replicate those models that have proven successful. Several approaches are possible. It may be enough to do the evaluation and make the information known, causing new-school developers to design around the quality models identified. Also, greater use of management organizations to start and run new schools can stimulate replication. And the sponsors can help—especially if the single purpose sponsors suggested above would move to a more proactive approach—to select successful models and find school developers willing and able to create these selected models.

In much of the country the mechanism for producing new schools remains deficient. The use of the state education agency to oversee the charter sector has real limitations. Growing the new open sector will require states to revamp existing authorizing infrastructure for chartered schools and create entities that view their oversight responsibilities as their sole mission.

Joe Graba is a Senior Policy Fellow at Hamline University.

By Frederick Hess

In considering how to expand charter schooling and how to bring it in from the margins of public education, it is vital not to get so enraptured with educational processes or political gamesmanship that we forget charter schools are small businesses, with all the routine challenges this implies. In this memo, I want to focus very explicitly on a few challenges relating to the procurement of services and facilities, and the implications for the growth of charter schooling more broadly. The larger lessons, I suggest, are twofold:

- 1] Fulfilling the educational promise of charter schooling requires devoting attention to the non-educational services that support schools.
- 2] For-profit enterprises, both as school operators and as providers of support services, must play a growing role if charter capacity is to expand.

As small businesses, charter schools face routine challenges of procurement. Charter operators must struggle with all of the frustrations of acquiring supplies and materials that have historically hobbled small businesses. A lack of bargaining leverage means they have difficulty demanding good prices, and the newness of the charter sector means that there is not an extensive network of bundling firms that simplify matters by permitting charters to arrange the delivery of all necessary goods through one contact point.

In the past decade, two motivations drove efforts to “roll up” small operators into large national chains in fields such as flower delivery or dry cleaning. These will be most familiar to those in the world of charter schooling. One was the ability of larger organizations to gain bargaining leverage in the marketplace, and the second was the ability to generate savings by consolidating back office operations. Of course, it is profitability that motivates these efforts and makes them rewarding—no such impetus is at work in the nonprofit sector. Nonetheless, efforts to creatively manage nonprofit charters would benefit from concerted efforts to translate lessons from the small business sector into the realm of charter schooling. Enabling nonprofit entities to capture these same economies of scale will require the development of collectives or the emergence of middlemen to serve as bundlers. Seeding and encouraging entrepreneurs who provide ancillary and non-educational services is an integral part of achieving the educational promise of charter schooling.

Another approach to this problem, obviously, is the emergence of charter firms like Edison Schools that address procurement challenges by assuming such size they can create specialized internal mechanisms for arranging these services. Organizations of this scale are likely to be for-profit entities, as the headaches and challenges of large business management are otherwise enough to convince most intrinsically motivated charter entrepreneurs to operate at a more local scale. Scale-oriented nonprofits like KIPP or Aspire offer a promising partial response to this challenge. The problem is that there is likely to be a limited pool of high-performers willing to launch and run such organizations—as these efforts impose the headaches of large-scale entrepreneurship without the accompanying selective awards that characterize for-profit efforts. Those well-suited to fill such a role and eager to do so embody a rare mix of entrepreneurial energy and altruism. This small pool of candidates will further contract as the reduced opportunity for intrinsic rewards and the relative paucity of extrinsic rewards make it difficult to retain high-performers. If we are serious about recruiting individuals to operate large-scale organizations and about keeping them motivated and involved despite the obstacles and reduced opportunities for intrinsic rewards, it will be necessary to increasingly harness the incentives that characterize for-profits.

A singular concern for any charter operator is obtaining and utilizing an appropriate school facility. Public schools have traditionally tried to manage facilities-maintenance through internal departments, while handling construction and structural additions through outside providers.

Charters have generally avoided the construction problem by simply using whatever buildings are available. Unfortunately, such arrangements undercut school stability. More significantly, leasing and acquiring appropriate facilities is difficult for small charters that lack deep pockets. While for-profit enterprises can look to investors motivated by the promise of an appropriate return on equity, nonprofits have no such allure. Increasing capital for nonprofit charter expansion through public support, by guaranteeing loans, or by arranging with lenders to create favorable conditions for borrowing is essential. This is especially true as the growing size and increasing maturity of the charter community means that philanthropic support is spread more thinly.

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By Marc Dean Millot

This outline addresses three questions: How much charter school capacity does society need? How much money should be allocated to the task of achieving that capacity? How should we spend that money to obtain the desired capacity?

Part One: Coming up with a school number - How much capacity is enough?

The answer to this question depends first and foremost on one's view of the purpose of charter schools. These are the approaches I'm familiar with:

The "Moral" Perspective is based on a view that the nation has certain social obligations to children's education that are best met by a system encouraging parental choice and a market for public education providers. In this view, the supply of charter schools will be sufficient when every parent who wants to send their child to one, every adult who wants to teach in one, and every social entrepreneur who wants to start one - has done so. The moral perspective implies a capacity requirement that cannot be known in advance and is potentially without practical limit.

The "Public Policy" Perspective is based on the idea that charter school legislation was passed to improve public education overall by influencing the traditional district-centered system, whether by example (the "laboratory" view of charters) or by the operation of market forces (the "competitor" view). According to this perspective, the nation will have enough charter schools when public education has improved as a whole - including the traditional school system. The school requirement implied by this perspective depends on whether one adopts the laboratory or competitor view.

If one views charters as laboratories, enough schools will have been created when their numbers are sufficient to demonstrate a diversity of models and demographics, assuming that adequate means of disseminating the programs developed by charters are in place, and the traditional school system is capable of innovation on its own. Under the laboratory view, it is likely that enough charter schools exist today, and the means of disseminating innovations are adequate. The assumption that the traditional system is capable of innovation is questionable.

If one looks at charter schools as competitors, forcing the traditional system to change or go out of business, enough charter schools will exist when that change occurs. For the most part adequate change has not happened, so more schools are needed. Ten percent market share would seem to be the minimum required to place sufficient financial pressure on the traditional system to force real changes in practice. Some 50 million students are engaged in K-12 today. Ten percent would be 5 million. Some 700,000 students, about 1.5 percent, attend 2,700 charter schools today, with annual revenues of around \$3.5 billion. By this logic, charter school capacity must increase seven-fold.

The "Political" Perspective on how much is enough is pragmatic. It is based on the idea that few states have ideal charter laws and an assessment that significant political resistance and skepticism will have to be overcome before ideal charter laws can be put into place. In this perspective, the supply of charter schools will be sufficient when individual charter school failures no longer pose a political threat to the movement. That is, before the movement will be allowed to grow by the political system, it must ensure the quality of the schools in existence. Under this approach, there will be enough schools when most of those in operation can demonstrate high quality.

The “Economic” Perspective of capacity follows from the idea that a critical mass of economic activity is required to ensure the financial sustainability of any new “industry.” Under this approach, the supply of charter schools will be sufficient when the government revenues generated by charter schools are adequate to support the industry – including the schools, the state resource centers and associations, and other required specialized service providers that make up the supporting infrastructure. This number is almost certainly knowable, but surprisingly not yet known, and is almost certainly larger than today.

My best “guesstimate” of school capacity drawing on the above discussion remains roughly a seven-fold increase in current capacity, from 700,000 to 5 million students, tempered by a pressing requirement to assure the quality of current and new schools. In short, the rule should be to grow as fast as we can, but no faster. A five-year growth strategy covering School Years 2004-2008, is the fastest “stretch” remotely plausible to achieve this objective. Ten years may be more realistic, but I doubt the politics of public education will give the movement ten years.

Part Two: Coming up with a dollar figure - How much money is enough to build the required capacity?

If we need sufficient capacity to enroll 5 million students in charter schools within five years, how much money will be required to get there? Unfortunately, it is more realistic to think in terms of how much money we can expect rather than how much we would like. Public K-12 education is unlikely to consume more of its proportion of GDP than it does today. The same can be said of public K-12’s place in the federal budget, state budgets, and philanthropy. Indeed, in the foreseeable future, a fall in real spending is far more likely than an increase.

As a consequence, charter schools are unlikely to see real increases in per pupil payments of any material significance. We will be lucky to hold our own. Moreover, philanthropy is unlikely to make up the difference in spending for the current schools, let alone maintain or increase real per capita school support under any growth scenario.

My best rough estimate of how much we will spend is slightly less than the current average per capita student spending, including government payments and philanthropy, of \$4,500 per student, times the 5 million students we need to enroll, or \$22.5 billion by 2008, up from \$3.5 billion today.

Part Three: Coming up with an investment strategy - How should we spend the money we will have?

We need the capacity for 5 million students in five years. We could build up to annual revenues of \$22.5 billion over that time period. How should we allocate these resources to achieve that capacity?

One point is obvious. Since we cannot expect to grow charter school capacity through increased per capita student spending, the dollars that do flow into the schools must be allocated far more effectively than they have been to date. A 5 percent improvement in the efficiency of overall charter school spending would equal \$110 million in annual savings by 2008. Some of these savings must go toward improving school quality, some to expand current schools, some to start new schools, and some to build the infrastructure that will get us the 5 percent improvement in efficiency. Assuming the movement could in some way “borrow against” all or part of these savings or attract foundation funding in the early years on the basis of plans premised on

growth, savings, and self-sufficiency, several hundred million might be made available to create the required school capacity.

Growth Strategies

Strategy	Five Year Concept	Costs	Schools/Students by Year 5
Increase Current School Enrollment by 40%	Enlarge facilities, etc. to achieve an average of 370 students/school	\$250,000/school \$675 million total	2,700 schools 1,400,000 students
Nonprofit EMOs	3 new EMOs/yr 10 schools/yr/ EMO 500 students/school	\$7 million/EMO \$250,000/school \$117.5 million total	50 schools 230,000 students
Improve State Infrastructure	Increase new school start capacity, add support services 500 students/school	\$10 million infrastructure \$250,000/school \$1.875 billion total	7,500 schools 3,500,000 students

Potential - and not mutually exclusive - strategies for achieving a seven-fold increase in capacity in five years include:

A. Increasing average school size. This is a plausible but very limited option. Doubling the current average school size of 250 students would get us to 1.4 million students. But many schools will not be capable of increasing enrollment significantly or be willing to expand. Even a 50 percent increase may be implausible. A conservative stretch goal would be to increase average enrollment by 40 percent to 370 students, bringing current schools up to 1 million in total enrollment. The remaining requirement is some 4 million students. If the average for this group can be brought up to 500 students per school, we need just 8,000 new schools. The investment requirement is unclear but assuming something on the order of \$250,000 for each existing school – \$675 million total over five years.

B. Investing in “scaleable” charter school models. In essence, the idea here is to create nonprofit EMOs and build chains of these new schools. The idea is plausible but likely to have only marginal impact. The basic question is why we should expect nonprofit EMO’s to work while for-profits are struggling?

- ◆ As a financial matter? Far more capital investment than philanthropy has gone into each for-profit EMO.
- ◆ As a matter of growth capacity? Management teams can only handle so much growth. Culture scales slowly. Quality control of educational models is less objective, and so much harder than investors or developers think. Community relations don’t scale.
- ◆ As a matter of efficiency? Programs tailored to a narrow market allocate fixed infrastructure costs over a necessarily smaller group of schools, and bear higher costs of growth-seeking school sites, staff, and students. The search process “weeds out” parties qualified for charter schools as much as it identifies those qualified for the model.

A plausible goal would be to form three new EMOs per year for each of the next 5 years, with each growing by 10 schools per year on average – to a total of 50 schools by their fifth year. This will yield 460 schools by 2008 and at 500 students per school, just 230,000 students. At an average investment of \$7 million per EMO, this would constitute an outlay of \$105 million over five years. Add in \$250,000 per school in start up costs for another \$12.5 million, a total of \$117.5 million.

We are left with a requirement for some 7,500 schools to serve 3.75 million students.

C. Increase the efficiency and capacity of the existing network of state resource centers and associations that support development and operations of the 2,700 schools we have today.

This approach starts with the experience and expertise these organizations have built over the past ten years. It re-orientes their approach to new school starts from “one school at a time” based on individualized technical assistance, leaving each school to solve its support requirements on its own, to processes and services designed to support large scale start-up programs. The idea is to marry the advantages of scale with those of local community ties. This should reduce costs of finding quality and scale incurred by EMOs by relying on local expertise, and reduce the costs of building quality at scale incurred EMO’s by spreading support costs over the largest possible base of schools.

A plausible goal would be to increase new school start capacity from the roughly 500 schools per year over the last 5 years to 3,000 per year by 2008 (SY 2004 – 500, SY 2005 – 750, SY 2006 – 1000, SY 2007 – 200, SY 2008 – 3000). The total annual budgets of state charter school resource centers and associations are probably under \$7 million today, and primarily funded by foundation grants. The total investment required to support a six-fold increase in output – including up front costs of staff capacity and capital expenses on infrastructure is probably in the range of \$10 million. Much of this could be financed from services provided to schools. Add another \$250,000 for up front investment in each of the 7,500 new schools – \$1.875 billion over five years.

The total cost of this effort would be around \$2.6 billion, or over 12 percent of our annual projected revenue goal of \$22.5 billion at 5 million students. A very large number; financeable on its face; but only with a much more focused, disciplined, coordinated, and cooperative business strategy than pro-charter foundations, charter advocates in government, charter leaders in state resource centers and associations, and charter school founders and boards have been capable of to date.

Marc Dean Millot is President and CEO of the National Charter School Alliance.

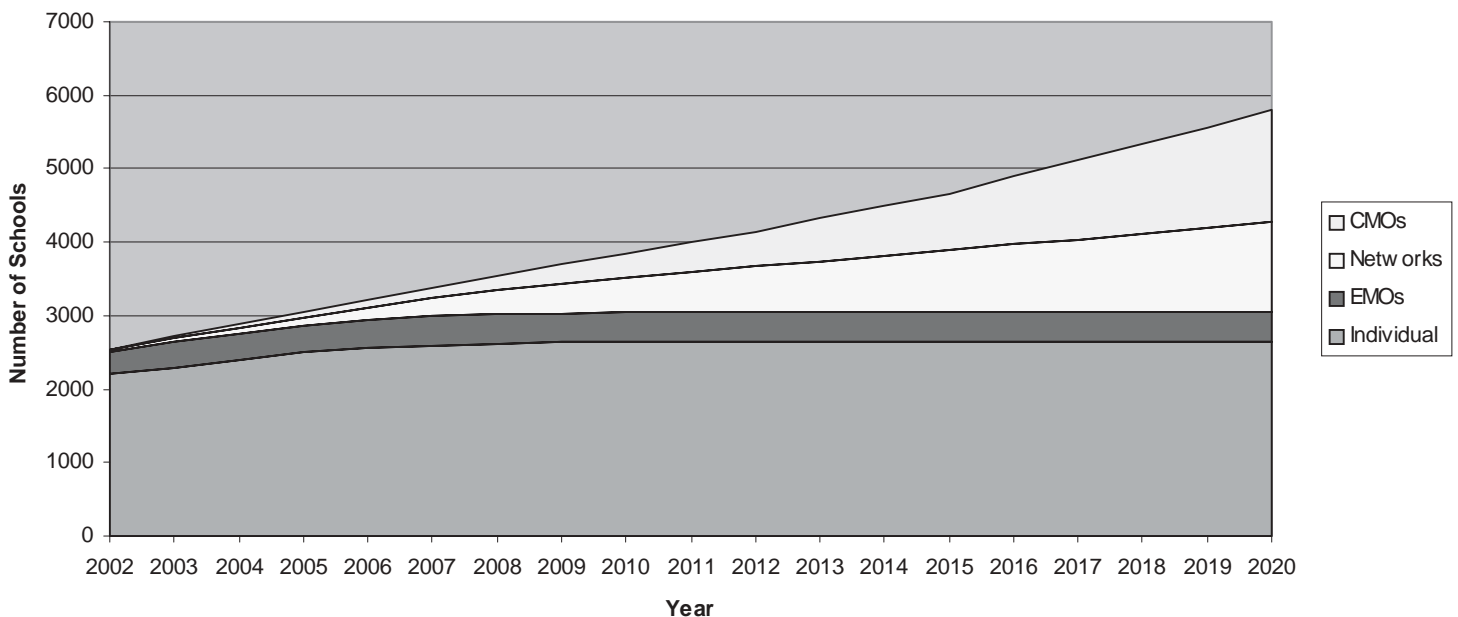
By Kim Smith

Bringing the charter school movement from the margins to the mainstream will require at least two things: quality and scale. Scale is necessary in order to serve more students, and is a prerequisite for charter schools to be seen as a credible and enduring force. And quality—consistently high quality—must be a non-negotiable feature of the charter school movement, because improved learning outcomes for children will solidify the movement’s integrity. While quality and scale are equally important, we will focus more on growth here because we feel it is receiving less attention.

It is worth acknowledging that “quality” in an education context is a complex issue. In addition to arriving at a common commitment to quality results for children in every school, there are some mechanical changes we will need, including: 1) value-added assessment and longitudinal control-group research to demonstrate student impact; 2) charter authorizers with strong standards that are willing and able to close failing schools; and 3) funding for charter schools that is equal to that of their district peers—for both operating and facilities finance.

The path to scale is also complex. Today, we see four primary engines of charter school growth moving forward: individual charter schools, nonprofit networks, for-profit education management organizations (EMOs) and nonprofit charter management organizations (CMOs). The chart below indicates our forecast of these engines’ potential growth curves; the total number of charter schools depends on how each of these models progresses over time.

Potential Charter School Growth
(For Illustration Only)



Individual charter schools. One school at a time—that’s the way nearly all charter school growth has happened over the last 10 years. These one-of-a-kind schools are created by energetic teachers, school leaders, and/or community members, who start a school to respond to a local need or their own vision. However, this traditional form of growth is stalling. We hypothesize that is because it is hard to reinvent the wheel (particularly with issues like facilities finance as barriers to success), and also because the bulk of the early adopters have

already stepped forward. While we expect slow growth to continue on this front, site-level growth has hit a plateau. Charter resource centers and incubators can help individual charter schools reduce the daunting challenges of startup and execution.

Nonprofit networks. In many ways, these networks build on the model shaped by the comprehensive school reform movement. These networks were established largely to develop school-site coherence and to institutionalize professional development—necessary, but not sufficient in scaling charter schools. Many charter school networks are nationally distributed, and most provide very limited operational support to each site (a notable exception is KIPP, which invested in a multi-million dollar national support infrastructure for its schools). These networks are strong, short-term growth engines, appealing to operational leaders who want site-level customization. However, over time, they will need to address quality control issues and the consistency of quality outcomes, particularly in light of eventual site-level leadership turnover.

Education management organizations (EMOs). The well-known early pioneer in this market was Edison Schools. Edison chose to distribute its schools nationally, creating profitability problems, and also did not establish a clear and understandable brand positioning—eventually leading to political resistance over the last two years, as well as difficulty in the capital markets. Other EMOs, like National Heritage, that concentrate geographically and have clearly defined branding, have achieved greater consistency and profitability. Over the next few years, we believe a few for-profit EMOs will survive based on strength of educational outcomes, brand positioning and profitability. However, new for-profit EMOs will enter the market slowly, and only if the existing players manage to pin down an educationally successful and economically profitable model.

Charter management organizations (CMOs). These nonprofit regional systems of charter schools are the newest entrants on the scale scene. As non-profit entities, they tend to face less political resistance, and can focus their resources on student outcomes, rather than profits. Their regional model enables a more high-touch approach, with more site support, including ongoing local professional development. Charters are held centrally for accountability, and CMOs tend to have one consistent school design model across the portfolio (though each experiments with how much of the design must be common and how much can be customized according to local needs). We believe these tightly integrated systems can better support consistent quality across schools and economies of scale, as well as creditworthiness for facilities finance; thus, we believe these CMOs pose a strong opportunity for charter school growth. However, we do acknowledge they are tough to build and run, particularly the recruiting of hybrid teams to manage them, which means they can be slow out of the gate. NewSchools has invested in a few of these systems, including Aspire Public Schools and Leadership Public Schools, and plans to ramp up support for CMOs over the next several years.

How much growth is enough? The short answer is that nobody really knows. However, NewSchools' view of this question is informed by our theory of change. In part, the charter movement's growth is a matter of supply and demand. The end goal, as we see it, is for *all* public schools to be high performing. Assuming that alignment – between schools' mission, design, operations, teachers and students – is crucial to that goal, a robust supply of charter schools is a key element in the process. The strong demand for charter schools signifies market segmentation – thus, when *every* student and *every* educator is in a school environment that allows them to be successful, that will be “enough.” The exact number of charter schools at that point will depend in part on how districts respond to charter schools: as competitors and/or as nimble collaborators to achieve system-wide quality and alignment.

Kimberly Smith is Co-Founder and CEO of the NewSchools Venture Fund.

By Sheree Speakman

2003 marked a very difficult legislative period for the charter movement and for states in general. As we plan for the next several years, it's a good time to evaluate how to 'best' grow the movement. We already know the multiplicity of ways the movement has grown over the past 13 years. Today's question is: How do we narrow our options for growth in order to do what's best for students and parents?

First, we note that without a strategy for growth targeted toward a specific measure or model, any direction and pace of growth would be deemed acceptable. In our service to students and parents, we've been extraordinarily accommodating. For the same reason, our movement has exhibited slow and inconsistent growth. In any emerging industry, the established competition benefits from the slow growth of new entrants. Established competitors use their market position and resources to undermine new entrants through any means available.

If we in the charter world gauge the "competitive" (read legislative), opposition to our movement over the past several years, we have witnessed opposition to chartering grow in its fervor, depth, and breadth. We are in danger of being suffocated by re-regulation while being publicly castigated for mediocre or modest performance gains. It is particularly difficult for politicians in a public sector marked by budget deficits to defend a movement that represents only 2.5 percent of the schools open today in America. We are back on our heels to some extent.

Our first step as state charter leaders and institutional funders, must be to commit to the value of meaningful, annual real growth. Why growth? There are numerous reasons. A simple benefit can be observed in the private sector. In the corporate market, one cannot raise long-term capital for low or unpredictable models of growth. Growth is a necessity for capital and capital is a necessity for growth. Thus, in the interest of students, choice, and capital, we must commit to sustainable growth. With this decision in hand, how should we grow the movement and what would be the model(s) we choose?

After 13 years of charter school operation, what is it we know how to do well – over and over again successfully? As one example, our track record in many, but not all states, points to a history that attracts and enrolls disproportionate numbers of special students – many of whom have been ignored and underserved by local district schools. A forthcoming paper on charter school summative test performance from Jay P. Greene and co-authors¹ of the Manhattan Institute discusses the significant proportion of charter schools serving disadvantaged populations. The authors suggest that this outcome results from the fact that "local school boards...tend[s] to discourage the creation of charter schools that might effectively compete with regular public schools for students who are easier to educate, since school boards have no incentive to approve of the creation of such schools and every incentive to resist them."

As charter operators, we have willingly served disadvantaged students. Should these students be our focus *for growth* into the future? If so, we must think about our corresponding ability as operators and technical assistance leaders to deliver high standards of performance for this population and all students in charter schools in today's accountability environment. Quality school models require that we reduce the volatility in existing charter school performance and improve the predictability of our success. Even with this volatility, our market is such that good schools will thrive while failing schools will close. The movement must grow continually to replace the schools we open, yet are not able to make successful.

An alternative model, one that is more provocative and politically challenging, would be to seek greater flexibility and balance in the children we target to attend our schools – improving our chances for growth and success. We would, as the foundation of our growth strategy, agree to policy frameworks, authorizing practices, and new schools that recruit and enroll populations that closely mirror surrounding district(s). This model, enrolling a broad

diversity of students who together have a better chance of academic success, is a slow-growth model and an uphill battle, at best, with school boards acting as the dominant authorizing institution across the country.

We face a slow-growth policy environment with approvals that are too few and too slow, alongside state caps that seek to shrink the growth potential of our industry. Therefore, to accelerate our speed in opening decent charter schools, we must step up our efforts to remove state imposed caps. We must also move steadily to increase the number of good authorizers in any given state. The evidence for this latter solution is presented compellingly in the June report on “Charter School Authorizing” from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute² and requires no further elaboration. So now, in light of the need to grow, we must pick a few well-understood growth models that we can deliver competently as leaders, and fund consistently as fiduciaries. Effective growth strategies should also allow charter leaders to more fully understand, acknowledge, and fund the background services necessary to support the targeted growth in schools.

People ask in any market “how much growth?” The current market structure in an industry tends to signal an answer. Today’s education market, public and private, stands at approximately 109,000 schools. Across these schools, private schools educate roughly 10-11 percent of the students and make up 24 percent of the schools, given that private schools tend to be smaller.³ An effective target for market size might be modeled on the private school market. For the charter industry, 10 percent of the market, in students and/or schools, is a good target. Not good enough forever, simply good enough for now. Why set a target if we don’t expect to exceed it?

We know now, in a myriad of ways, that people make choices in education. An equally compelling challenge is to make ourselves the priority in the choices available to parents, policymakers and students. In our success – and with better charter laws, we could sustain a growth rate in which the supply expands at a pace that ensures quality – we can offer parents a wide and deep system of charters, and a greater number of choices.

So, in summary, an effective growth strategy requires that we:

- ◆ Commit to steady growth as important to the movement;
- ◆ Deliver school results for each of our students that meet or exceed public education’s current definition of success;
- ◆ Focus on a few, not a multitude, of important growth models from individual and institutional operators;
- ◆ Replicate schools and policies that new operators can implement and deliver effectively to all students; and,
- ◆ Reduce performance volatility and improve predictability in execution.

Endnotes

¹ Jay P. Greene, Greg Forster, and Marcus A. Winters, “Apples to Apples: An Evaluation of Charter Schools Serving General Student Populations,” Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, June 2003.

² Louann Bierlein Palmer and Rebecca Gau, “Charter School Authorizing: Are States Making the Grade?” Thomas B. Fordham Institute, June 2003.

³ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Private Schools: A Brief Portrait*, NCES 2002–013, by Martha Naomi Alt and Katharin[sic] Peter. Washington, DC: 2002.

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What kinds of organizations and individuals does the charter movement need to attract to start and run public charter schools, and how will it get them?

By Wendy Kopp and Abigail Smith

Without explicitly setting out to do so, Teach For America has seen many of our teachers go on to run some of the most acclaimed charter schools in the country. Over two dozen charter schools have been founded and/or are being led by Teach For America alumni, with many more serving as teachers in these and other successful charters. These schools include Gaston College Preparatory in North Carolina's poorest county, a KIPP network school recognized as a North Carolina School of Excellence for having over 90% of students at or above grade level. At North Star Academy in Newark, 8th graders demonstrated proficiency at nearly twice the rate of their Newark School District counterparts in language arts and more than three times the rate in math. YES College Preparatory in Houston, along with six of the other highly successful KIPP Academies across the country are also run by Teach For America alumni and boast impressive records of student achievement.

The Key Ingredient: Leadership

Highly successful schools – schools where all students achieve academically at high levels – share certain characteristics: clear and ambitious goals focused on student outcomes, strong cultures that promote high achievement, a sense of accountability on the part of every staff member, and effective systems that allow the work of the school to happen efficiently. There's no way around the hard work of creating and maintaining such a school, and the differentiating ingredient in this success is leadership. Charter schools – like any other school – will be only as good as the people who lead them.

If the charter school movement is to be successful, it must, therefore, be thinking about who charter school leaders are and where they are going to come from. As we look at people like Gaston College Prep founders Tammi Sutton and Caleb Dolan or North Star Academy Co-Director Julie Jackson, what we find is that the individuals who have gone on to lead entire schools to achieve at high levels are the same ones who were extremely successful teachers in their own classrooms. These were teachers who effected dramatic gains in their students' achievement, despite working in school environments that may have lacked basic resources or with students who faced significant personal challenges.

The school leaders who will ensure the success of the charter movement are people who approach their task as these teachers did and as any effective leader would. They must define ambitious and focused goals; invest all interested parties in working hard towards the goals; work strategically and relentlessly, despite the inevitable obstacles; and deliberately improve their performance over time through a constant process of self-evaluation.

Who are these individuals?

If we want good charter schools, we need excellent leadership at these schools. Simple enough. More complex are two resulting questions: How do we identify these people and how do we attract them to the charter school movement?

Teach For America's thirteen years of experience placing teachers in low-income urban and rural schools has led us to recognize the vital role of particular personal characteristics in the ultimate success of our teachers.

(And as noted above, we believe there is significant correlation between the kind of person who will be successful in the roles of teacher and principal.) Through a series of internal studies, we have established that several personal characteristics differentiate our top performers in the classroom. Clearest and most consistent of these is *past demonstrated achievement*. People who succeed at high levels have an established record of success – in whatever arena they have operated. The second characteristic is the predilection – when faced with an obstacle – to strategize around what you can control yourself rather than to focus on assigning blame externally. This *internal locus of control* plays a significant role in our best teachers' success. The *ability to influence and motivate others* and *organizational ability* have both also emerged as clear differentiators. Finally, our most effective teachers uniformly hold *high expectations for children and families in low-income communities* and an overarching *commitment to educational equity*.

If we are to see successful charter schools, we must ensure that they are led and staffed by individuals who demonstrate the above skills and mindsets in how they operate. While others may be more qualified to speak to the whole range of characteristics of the most successful school leaders, at Teach For America we argue that these leaders should come at least in large part from a talent pool of teachers who were extraordinarily successful demonstrating gains in their own classrooms in the face of significant challenges. In our experience, these individuals have the confidence, ability, and credibility to lead others to have the kind of impact on students that they themselves had.

How do we find them?

To realize the potential of charter schools and other field-based education reforms, we must invest in building and nurturing pipelines of outstanding teachers who have the capacity for leadership at the classroom or school level. This requires aggressively recruiting such candidates through defining the opportunities and the challenges to inspire strong potential leaders. It further requires selecting those who have the leadership characteristics we know are crucial to success and then providing the training and support necessary to accelerate their learning curves and ensure their success.

Teach For America is one such pipeline for talented, dedicated individuals from a diversity of backgrounds. The New Teacher Project is another organization working to build school districts' capacity to recruit and develop more effective teachers; among other things it has developed the successful Teaching Fellows programs in areas such as New York City, Washington, D.C., and San Jose. Ultimately, to ensure the success of charter schools and of whole school systems for that matter, we must embrace within each of our educational institutions a "talent mindset," prioritizing attention and resources on the effective recruitment, careful selection, and ongoing development of staff.

***Wendy Kopp is the Founder and President of Teach for America.
Abigail Smith is Vice President for Research and Public Policy at Teach For America.***

By Jonathan Schnur, Monique Burns, Doug Lemov, and Stefanie Cyr

In order to help transform public education in America, the next phase of the charter school movement must pursue two key goals. The paramount objective must be the quality of schools. –Any other objective should be subordinate to this goal so that we foster high levels of academic achievement for every child. In an era when the nation is rightly focused on student achievement, a charter school movement that doesn't produce results will not, and should not, endure.

Second, the power of successful charter schools can best be harnessed if either clustered geographically or linked as part of a charter school system or network. The impact of this strategy will be far greater than that of lone, valiant, successful charter schools. Successful networks or clusters of charter schools can demonstrate that public schools (and the children in them) can and do succeed at scale. The ensuing contrast can reframe how society sees a mediocre or failing school system – changing the question from “what’s wrong with those kids” to “what’s wrong with us as adults for not organizing ourselves better to deliver on our children’s potential.”

A systematic strategy to ensure effective leadership can support both these goals to change the face of public education and foster high levels of academic achievement for every child.

Promoting the success of the charter school movement through a systemic approach to quality leadership.

Research and experience suggest that successful schools have effective leaders. Likewise, successful clusters or networks of charter schools will depend on an adequate supply of effective school leaders. Below, we offer some preliminary views on what qualities any charter school organization or training program should screen for, what skills need to be developed, and a few guiding principles to help charter schools and charter organizations attract and retain the right kind of leaders.

Two very important caveats: First, there is no single type of effective charter school leader. Any charter school organization should define and differentiate its leadership needs in several ways. For example, we have begun to analyze leadership needs based on school development phases: *start-up* of a new school, *speed-up* where an existing school needs new leadership and faster improvement, *turn-around* of a school in crisis, *refining/sustaining* a successful school, and *replicating* a school with a distinct and successful culture. Second, leadership of a school usually requires more than one person as well as carefully defined leadership roles and clear lines of responsibility and accountability. This can often best be accomplished by a team of at least two school-based leaders or a single school director working with a larger organization (e.g an EMO, CMO, or charter school network).

Selecting individuals with the right leadership qualities. In recruiting and selecting leaders, charter schools should screen for several key qualities and should avoid compromising or assuming that these qualities can be learned on the job.

a) A core set of beliefs and attitudes that are aligned to help every student succeed in context of that particular charter school’s mission and focus. These include an unyielding belief in the potential of every child to excel academically, a relentless drive to attain results, and a deep sense of responsibility that adults can and must deliver on our children’s potential.

b) A record of leading diverse groups of adults to accomplish results. A record of leadership should include demonstrated interpersonal skills needed to build long-term relationships and teams, excellent communication

and listening skills, results-oriented strategic thinking and analytic skills, and the implementation skills needed to follow through consistently on an action plan.

c) An understanding of effective instruction and successful experience with children – preferably children with similar needs to those in the school where they will serve. This understanding is critical, though there are clearly viable strategies where one school-based leader can serve as a leader of instruction (and manager of the staff who deliver instruction) with another leader taking on significant operational and external challenges.

d) An entrepreneurial skills set that allows for both creative problem solving and systems development. This is particularly important during the start-up phase of a charter school.

Providing leaders with the right kind of training. While it is possible a charter school will be fortunate enough to find leaders with the above qualities *and* all the requisite knowledge and skills described below, our research suggests they shouldn't count on it – even if they conduct an exhaustive search. We recommend investing in ways for charter school leaders to develop a wide array of knowledge and skills, including:

- a) Defining clear targets for student and school improvement that are aligned to relevant standards and assessments;
- b) Leading a staff in using assessments and other data to measure progress and drive instructional change;
- c) Developing a safe and supportive student culture with high expectations for academic work and student behavior;
- d) Hiring and building teams and a culture of feedback and honest communication among adults;
- e) Managing external networks and protecting the school from unhelpful outside interests;
- f) Securing and developing a strong funding base;
- g) Designing or adopting a range of key systems and tools needed to manage operations effectively including budget, scheduling, human resources, facilities; and
- h) Understanding how to execute your plan in the context of the vast array of laws and regulations affecting charter schools – including special education and collective bargaining.

Ensuring an organizational context that can attract and retain effective leaders. The best leaders will not thrive in dysfunctional organizations. Organizations need to delegate responsibility to a quality leader and not micro-manage unless serious performance issues arise. Effective leaders want to work in an environment where they have significant latitude to lead.

Our educational system has simply not produced a supply of effective school leaders with these qualities and skills at the scale needed to support a critical mass of high-performing schools. The charter school movement faces a critical challenge in identifying and developing this new class of leaders, and every organization involved in charter schooling – including authorizers, charter school management organizations and networks, resource centers, state and local policymakers, and nonprofit organizations – has a vital role to play in addressing this challenge.

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By Jon Schroeder

Getting to scale – in both numbers and quality – will require new partners, new alliances, and leadership from a broader cross-section of Americans who support and will benefit from new and different schools that produce better results. But, broadening and strengthening this charter school movement will require more than new people and organizations. It will require a willingness to expand the appeal of the charter idea and a willingness and ability to work across a more diverse ideological spectrum – twin challenges for many individuals in the charter movement who have been more narrowly focused on starting individual schools and on “preaching to the choir” in the past. The organizations and individuals the charter movement now needs to attract and engage fall into four broad categories:

Center to left-of-center policymakers: Nationally, charter schools have enjoyed bipartisan support in Congress and from both Republican and Democratic presidents and secretaries of education. And, in a number of states, moderate – sometimes even liberal – Democrats have joined with Republicans to pass, strengthen, and defend charter school laws. But, in too many states, charters have been a disproportionately conservative and Republican initiative. In those states, charter supporters have either failed or not placed a high enough priority on positioning charters in a way that can and should appeal to moderates in both parties who have enjoyed teachers union support or have strong loyalties to public education as more traditionally defined. Those centrist politicians – and their staff – are essential to not only passing strong charter laws, but also to defending against efforts to weaken those laws or limit increases in the number of new schools.

The civic leadership of major urban communities: Mayors, city councilmembers, and business and other civic leaders are increasingly aware that high quality schools are essential to achieving their broader goals of attracting and retaining jobs, a tax base, and families. But, with rare exceptions, general city government leaders have not had direct authority to do much beyond using the “bully pulpit” to change and improve schools that are, operationally, under the control of other elected officials and administrators. Charter school laws, however, now offer ways of starting new schools outside the traditional framework of school districts. In some cases, like Milwaukee and Indianapolis, city officials can grant charters directly. City governments can also support new schools with start-up and facilities assistance. Mayors and other business and civic leaders can help raise money and clear away bureaucratic obstacles to making necessary zoning changes or obtain building permits. And these leaders can provide necessary visibility and credibility to help move charter schools from the fringes of broader education improvement strategies to center-stage.

Community-based organizations whose constituencies benefit from charter schools: Historically, community-based organizations like the Urban League, YMCA and YWCA, and Boys and Girls Clubs have worked through less direct methods to improve educational outcomes through a variety of after-school, Saturday, and summer programs; mentoring; tutoring; and other means. Charter laws, however, make it possible for these and other community-based organizations to start and operate new schools themselves, and many are now doing so. In some cases, national affiliates of these organizations – including the YMCA of the USA and National Council of LaRaza – have started grant and technical assistance initiatives to help start charter schools. If properly supported, these national and local initiatives can add financing, facilities, credibility, administrative expertise, and other assets – all sorely needed if charter schools are to grow in both numbers and quality.

Business and higher-education “consumers” of the K-12 education “product”: Both employers and higher education institutions spend huge sums of money on recruitment and remedial education – largely to offset a shortage of qualified workers and students. When they have intervened to improve the quality of the “product” sent them, their strategies have too often been indirect or at the margins. Businesses

have written checks to fund promises. Higher-education institutions have sent tutors or mentors without fundamentally changing the environments in which they work. Again, charter laws offer new opportunities to help start and run entirely new schools; to grant and oversee charters; to provide financial support, facilities, and direct assistance in writing new curriculum; to train teachers; and to design new ways of linking what's learned to what's needed in the real world of work.

Strategies to attract and engage these individuals and organizations also fall into four broad categories:

Explain why we're doing this in "big idea" terms: To gain and strengthen the support of these new allies, chartering must be described and seen as a "big idea" with big potential impact. Each school is critical. But, chartering new and different schools must be seen as an essential element of broader strategies to achieve the level of change and improvement in learning that will equip Americans to compete successfully in an increasingly complex and competitive world economy. The attention and resources needed – and the opposition that must be overcome – require an understanding that chartering and operating new and different schools is an idea that is least on-par with strategies to change and improve the schools we now have.

Provide "political cover" for center and left-of-center politicians: The centrist and left-of-center political leadership that's needed for charters to grow and flourish needs more evidence that it's not being asked to take unacceptable political risks. That means not only building the broader base of support outlined above, but getting center and left-of-center constituencies to match and beat teachers union and other status quo political support. Often, moderate current or former elected officials are the most effective voices in convincing their own colleagues that it's possible to publicly and strongly support charters and not end one's political career. Moderate and more liberal interest groups that support charters also have to make it clear that they will deliver votes and other evidence of their backing to charter-friendly elected officials they may have previously supported for other reasons. And they need to be prepared to deliver the opposite message to those elected officials who continue to give deference to the educational status quo.

Do proactive outreach and engagement with what should be natural allies and stakeholders: The charter idea is powerful, but still needs to be sold – particularly to new and broader audiences. That means direct and proactive outreach and engagement – on the home turf of those being recruited, using messengers that enjoy both familiarity and credibility with each audience. Reaching and connecting with at least some of these natural allies may also require a more judicious choice of words – focusing on the big picture and presenting a positive vision of improved results – rather than a shrill attack on either the substance or motives of the status quo and its most vocal defenders.

Make sure the leadership of the charter movement is more representative of the broad constituencies that are benefiting from new and different schools: It's not enough to ask new and broader constituencies to support the charter idea. They must also be invited to take visible and influential leadership positions in the charter school movement at all levels. This means drawing on the parent, community, and school-level leadership that comes much closer to reflecting the diversity of students benefiting from charters than does the typical collection of "charter school leaders" that so often speaks for the movement, both nationally and in many states.

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By Jim Shelton

Although there are many other forces at work, the charter school movement's most critical vulnerability has always been its "weakest links": the poorly conceived and operated charter schools whose missteps are so easily targeted by charter school opponents. This liability has been a major barrier to charter schools' ability to serve as models of excellence and innovation. That said, there are several organizational strategies that could significantly improve the overall quality of charter schools – a crucial first step in any effort to build the charter school movement's credibility and scale.

First, we must address a somewhat flawed notion that has underpinned the charter school movement: *that any group of people concerned enough about education to start a new charter school will be able to accumulate the intellectual and financial capital necessary to successfully operate a complex, multi-million dollar nonprofit corporation (i.e., a school) and secure a suitable facility in which it can perform its stated purpose well.* There are a number of unsound assumptions in that statement, but chief among them is the idea that the resources and expertise required to create good schools are readily available to those interested in starting schools - ostensibly from authorizers, service providers and school developers.

Although the foundations are there, there are several organizational strategies for each of these groups that could drive the charter school movement forward, toward consistent quality and the desired scale.

Authorizers/ Sponsors: The Art of Choosing Well

Because this is truly a nascent industry, many charter authorizers are not experienced or well trained enough to recognize organizations with the required capacity to be a *good* developer of new schools. (e.g., instructional, operational and financial expertise) More importantly, many authorizers lack the resources, authority and/or expertise to support the development of these fledgling school developers' key competencies. The limited number of authorizers exacerbates this phenomenon by limiting choices for charter applicants and incentives for authorizers to improve.

Therefore, the industry needs *more* authorizers with the required expertise and authority to screen and support new school developers *well*. This may require a small set of secondary organizations that can build capacity within new and existing authorizers. Authorizers may also need "partners" that can provide specific technical support to charters in their respective portfolios.

Enablers: Getting Past Buildings and Budgets

Many promising charter schools either fail to or are overburdened by the tasks of finding, securing and paying for buildings in which to serve their students. A significant number of charter school operators also struggle with the basic administrative functions required to open and operate new schools. By capitalizing on economies of information and scale, two new types of enabling organizations could significantly increase the growth and effectiveness of charter schools.

Mission Driven (i.e. non-profit) Charter Real Estate Holding Companies – There is a clear need for organizations that aggregate financial and intellectual capital in order to acquire and develop portfolios of charter school facilities for lease (and/or eventual sale) to charter school operators. These organizations could lower the cost of acquisition, development and financing of charter school facilities. Even more

importantly, they would get charter school operators out of the real estate business –allowing them to focus on improving educational outcomes among their students.

Shared Service/ Back-Office Providers – For some time, many have agreed on the need for organizations that perform the primary administrative functions for charter schools (e.g. financial management and accounting, HR admin., reporting). However, the solutions in this space are still limited in number and quality. Further, it is clear that the needs of charters extend beyond the traditional “back-office functions” to others that benefit from economies of scale and specific expertise, such as special education administration. New organizations are needed to step forward and address these issues, which currently divert charter school operators’ time and resources away from their instructional focus.

Developers: Industry Evolution

The first wave of charters followed the pattern of most industries – largely “mom and pop” charters developed by groups or individuals with courage and ideas. As that wave of school development plateaus, the majority of new charters will be created by charter school networks – “loose” and “tight.”. The tightest networks (usually centrally managed groups like charter management organizations) seem to be actively developing as an industry including building standards and technologies of their own. However, many of the “loose networks” seem to lack such definition and seem to require greater focus on establishing distinctive offerings and strategies for insuring consistent high quality and sustainability.

Whether loose or tight, networks of schools can prove valuable as they enable us to leverage the learning and the systems of individuals and organizations that have actually started multiple *high performing* schools. However, this assumes that the central organization of such a network has captured the critical lessons learned and has a methodology and mechanisms for sharing that information. Further, they must have the resources to execute their mission and a plan for sustainability. If not, then they are unlikely to consistently create strong schools that can achieve or maintain high levels of performance.

By addressing the selection and support issues that create the most significant barriers to quality charters and encouraging school developers with capacity and experience to develop strong networks, we can dramatically improve the quality of charters and make significant progress in moving them from the margin to the mainstream.

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Who are the external actors that the charter movement needs to engage and win over? How can we accomplish this?

By Ted Kolderie

Certain external actors are always involved in the education discussion at all levels. Their efforts and opinions make a difference – both to state policy leadership and to those who run the schools. The cast is much the same at all levels. There are private groups concerned with better schools, which change over time and are significantly diverse. The business community has acted in this role and given its support to others. Private and community foundations are important. And – however well or badly informed – the news media, increasingly television, still creates “the pictures in our head,” shaping general public opinion. In some places, the higher education community is important as advocates, analysts, or evaluators. More and more, individuals and organizations concerned about the future of their communities are becoming important actors with respect to the schools, as they see how their futures depend on where families choose to live based on available public education.

It is not easy to win over these actors to the cause of new schools. Most influential members of the community did well in school, and therefore feel the schools must be OK and that the students are the problem. They are loyal to the old institution they know, perhaps because they know it better than they know the children who are not doing well. The districts tap this loyalty to the institution very skillfully. To win over this group, we will need to force the question Howard Fuller sets: Do we value the institution more than we value the students? This will be as hard to ensure as it was in every field where the needs of the poor required change in existing institutions. It will take pressure from those concerned with social justice. It will help, too, to articulate a powerful public-interest justification for creating new schools in large numbers: Ideas *do* matter.

The business community especially – oriented as they are to solutions through management – need to understand that the problem in education is not a problem of inadequate management and cannot be solved by better leadership. It is a problem in the structuring of the industry and is a *system* problem. Business experience is not very helpful. Good executives take for granted their own competitive structure, in which to succeed they have to improve, innovate, adapt, treat customers well, control costs, train new leadership, and improve employees’ skills. Too many fail to understand that the superintendent lives in a world without this competitive system. State constitutions require provisions of public schooling and compulsory education laws give parents a strong incentive to use public rather than private schools. In public schools, tax revenues do not have to be earned and there is no real risk of the organization going out of business even if its mission is not accomplished.

A part of the problem, it has to be said, is within the charter community. It will not win over key outside actors until it can explain clearly what all this commotion is about. Policymakers and others are confused when we use the term ‘charter schools’ to refer both to the schools and to the state policy of letting somebody other than the local board offer public education in the community. These are different things that need to be described with different terms. Clarity matters. When we talk only of charter schools, people understandably conclude that when schools fail, the policy fails. It is absurd to let this happen. And it is easy enough to be clear: We should say “chartering” when we mean the state policy and “charter schools” when we refer to the schools.

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By C. Peter Svahn

One of the basic tenets of the charter school movement is that, in return for more flexibility and less regulation, charters are held accountable for their performance. If a charter school doesn't achieve the accountability goals established in its charter contract, is poorly run, or is unable to attract students, it will close or be closed by its authorizer.

At the same time, it is also well-documented that charter schools have considerable difficulty raising money for facilities since, in most states, no capital dollars are available through taxing and bonding authority or direct state aid. And, banks and other financing sources are particularly reticent about lending to charter schools, since they do not understand how this new hybrid type of publicly-funded, privately-run entity works.

Lenders are also influenced by the "horror" stories that get publicized in the press. They are very concerned about what they often view as a "risky" revenue source that can disappear if a charter school loses its population or is closed for performance or other reasons. Lenders also tend to view the collateral provided by school buildings as "special purpose," so its value in securing a loan is diminished. Lenders want and are looking for certainty. Without those assurances, financing is harder to come by – and, if made available, demands higher rates of interest.

So, a fundamental tension exists between these two concepts of accountability and financial certainty. The need to keep charter schools accountable for their performance (i.e. they can be shut down) conflicts with the needs of the financial community for a charter school to stay in business and produce sufficient revenue to service debt obligations.

To address these tensions, several types of loan guaranty programs are now being implemented. They are a good start. But, by themselves, they are not enough to provide a solution on the scale needed.

One possible solution is to look to the role of the charter school authorizer. Creating authorizer policies that prioritize the recycling of vacated charter school facilities is the missing piece. Such policies would significantly strengthen a school's ability to obtain financing. They would also serve to protect the public dollars that have already been invested. Even better, such policies would not require additional public funding.

In the traditional public school finance world, school districts have taxing powers. These taxing powers are the ultimate source of security to a lender. They give investors confidence that sufficient funds will be available to make debt service payments. In theory, a traditional public school can be shut down. But they rarely are. And even if an underperforming school were shuttered, the larger debt-issuing school district remains and continues to guarantee payment of any remaining debt.

Several organizations, the federal government, and some states are now working to overcome this challenge for charter schools by developing loan guaranty programs.

For example, the Innovative Schools Development Corporation in Delaware is creating a parallel support and service organization to provide the equivalent services of a district office to the charter schools it supports. This type of support helps. But ultimately, if a school is shuttered, lenders and loan guarantors need to maximize the value of the facility being used as collateral. Most school buildings, due to building design and

through zoning restrictions, are special use properties. So the maximum value for these buildings are in their use as schools, and maximum revenues are generated when the buildings are functioning as viable charter schools. However neither lenders nor loan guarantors can control its use if the school is closed.

As a result, more attention needs to be focused on the role of the charter school authorizer. The National Association of Charter School Authorizers through its Building Excellence in Charter School Authorizing project is focusing on charter design issues and the role of authorizing policies. The Thomas B. Fordham Institute has also recently published a study of charter school authorizing and authorizer practices. These initiatives document the fact that, while authorizers are working to develop a better understanding of their oversight and charter renewal decisionmaking roles, none are focusing on the role they could play to ensure that charter school facilities are efficiently recycled.

One response to complement the development of loan guaranty and technical assistance programs is to have charter school authorizers make a strategic policy commitment to grant new charters that would occupy the buildings of any charters that are closed. This commitment, coupled with loan guaranty programs and technical assistance centers and incubators would provide a solid basis for bringing the finance community to the table as a willing partner in providing access to the capital that is so sorely needed to sustain continued charter school growth.

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By Ron Wolk

For the well-established concept of chartering public schools ever to become a full-fledged movement of major significance, there must be a widespread public belief in the need for more variety and more choice in the public education system. The current body of students in America is enormously diverse in almost every way, yet they are consigned to a monolithic system that does not even recognize, let alone accommodate, their different needs and talents.

In a chicken-or-egg situation, we may need a public groundswell to move politicians to take what they may perceive as risky action, but at the same time we need the leadership of politicians to galvanize public opinion.

For practical reasons, I think we must concentrate on the people who have the assignment to lead and the power to act, and the three groups that should have top priority are politicians/policymakers, business leaders, and philanthropic leaders. To enlist them to the cause, I think we need to mount a concerted campaign that includes face-to-face meetings, media messages, political organizing, and all of the techniques used to shape opinion and influence action.

State legislators and governors, city councils and mayors, and state and local boards of education are pivotal. Most of them are probably hesitant to venture into uncharted territory or take on the teachers unions, but they have at least adopted some form of chartering in about 40 states. They may be increasingly receptive to the chartering strategy because efforts to fix conventional schools have so far paid little in dividends, and politicians are a bit on the hot seat. After all, they authorize the huge expenditures for public education and are, or should be, accountable for results.

Business leaders are as important as politicians because they have clout, exert disproportionate influence on policymaking, and have the potential to devote resources to shaping public opinion. They, too, are increasingly inclined to support alternatives to the bureaucratic governance of schools.

Foundation leaders and other philanthropists are a relatively small interest group, but one that is extremely important. A handful of foundations gave the standards movement the momentum to make it the *de facto* reform strategy in the United States, and many foundations have become frustrated and disappointed with their previous support for changing conventional schools. They tend to be more conservative than they admit, but also tend to “jump on bandwagons.” If a handful of the biggest and best-known foundations made major commitments to chartering, the movement would get a significant boost.

The support of teacher unions and the education establishment would solve the problem, but unfortunately they are the heart of problem. They probably can't be brought on board and they are too influential to ignore, so chartering advocates must be prepared to confront and debate them publicly.

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How should the charter movement deal with low-performing charter schools? What policy reforms are needed to improve the quality of charter schools?

By Jane Hannaway

The above two questions are related, but distinct. Both are concerned with performance of charter schools, in particular the large number of schools that are low-performing, and asks what should be done. The actor in the first question, however, is “the charter movement” and the actor in the second is public policy. Each clearly has a role to play, but those roles should differ.

The role of “the movement”

The charter school movement— advocates and operators of charter schools – have a vested interest in improving the quality of charter schools. To the extent that charter schools are hurt or helped by their overall reputation, it is in their interest to promote quality across the board. Overall reputation could affect, for example, the extent to which policies are instituted that restrict charter operations or put limits on the number of charter schools and/or amount of funding.

There are at least two ways that the movement could improve quality. One is through some sort of certification process. Only schools that meet some specified criteria would be officially recognized by an association, perhaps voluntary, of peer schools. The association would set standards, conduct peer reviews, and confer membership in the association to schools that passed the bar. While such certification might be counter to the spirit of charters, it holds the possibility of weeding out weaker schools or at least providing recognition for stronger schools and perhaps an incentive to become stronger. The association would be similar to the associations to which private schools belong. Another analogous association might be organic farmers who typically started small-scale independent farming, and then formed an association, partly to set standards to protect the “organic” label.

A second way the “charter movement” might help deal with low performing schools would be through technical assistance vehicles, again perhaps through a peer association supported by a dues finance structure.

The role of policy

Policy-based efforts to improve charter schools would be more formal than the efforts of, say, a peer association that represented the charter movement. But it should be recognized at the outset that the primary role of public policy in the charter school development is *not* school improvement, as is discussed further below. That said, there are two points of control where policy could intervene more vigorously to improve quality and still leave charter schools considerable discretion in their operations.

The first point of control is the charter award. It is *entry control*. Authorizers could exert more quality control on the front end to ensure that schools have all their procedures and education plans in order prior to opening their doors. Entry control can be very effective; only the best and strongest are selected.

The second point of control is *output control*. In this type of control, students would be held to academic standards similar to other students in the state and, unless there is some exceptional condition, some base level of improvement might be required. I stress base level – other objectives and standards would be set by

the school. Of course, this is what happens in most states. The expected levels of performance or performance improvement and their stringency would vary by grade level. In the early grades these performance targets should be quite strict, but in upper grades, once some basic level of proficiency in basic subjects had been achieved by students, external standards would diminish.

The real problem is determining when to shut a school down and then actually doing it. This is clearly an important public policy role. If schools are not effective, they do not merit public support (especially because parents may infer that public support indicate some minimum quality). Parent demand or flight cannot be used as the sole criterion, partly because natural loyalties can cause poor judgments and at least some parents may have poor information about school quality. It is questionable whether public authorities have been as aggressive as they could be in closing poor quality schools.

It is important to stress that the role of public policy in charter schools is to establish conditions that allow well-thought-through charters to develop, and provide them with adequate discretion in their operations to meet their objectives in ways that they think work best. It is also the role of public policy to shut down schools that do not work. It is up to the schools themselves and perhaps the charter school movement more generally, to ensure that school quality and improvement standards are in place (beyond the base level required by public policy standards).

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By Bryan Hassel

What policies would foster quality in charter schooling? To answer that question, it helps to think first about what factors drive quality in the sector as a whole. Five come to mind:

- ◆ **Supply.** What's the caliber of individuals and organizations submitting charter applications? How well equipped are they to start and operate successful schools? How sound are their plans for educating young people and minding the "business" side of school?
- ◆ **Screening.** How high of a bar do charter authorizers set for approval of charter applications? Do they let pretty much anyone open a school and see what happens? Or do they conduct a rigorous screening process so that the schools chartered are highly likely to succeed?
- ◆ **Operation.** Once open, how well do the schools function? How well do their learning programs prepare students to meet high standards? How do the schools do as stewards of public resources?
- ◆ **Scale-up.** To what extent do successful schools replicate themselves, or find themselves imitated by other schools?
- ◆ **Accountability.** What happens to schools that don't perform well? Do they go out of business or lose their charters?

How can "policy" affect these factors in positive ways? The most obvious areas for policymaking are screening and accountability, because these are two areas where direct action by policymakers can make all the difference. Authorizers – and the legislators who empower them—can insist on setting a higher bar for approval of charters. And they can act decisively to close schools that do not measure up.

To be sure, these two kinds of policies would increase the level of quality in the sector. But they would do so by *limiting* or weeding out poorly prepared applicants and unsuccessful operators. If these were the only two policy approaches to quality, what we would probably achieve is a charter sector that was very successful, but very small.

If we want to think about quality-at-scale, we need to focus more attention on the other three factors. In these areas, the policy solutions are less obvious. Private action, not public action, seems like the driving force on these issues.

Still, policy can make a difference in all three because policy determines the operating environment in which private actors make decisions and carry out their work. Supply, for example, is not a fixed quantity. It is determined by decisions made by individuals and organizations about whether to enter this "market." The more favorable the operating environment, the more likely the marginal quality supplier is to enter.

Here are some policies that would contribute to quality by improving the supply, operation, and scale-up of chartered schools:

- ◆ **Flexibility.** When quality concerns surface, a knee-jerk reaction is to restrict schools' autonomy, to keep them on a tighter leash. Such policies might prevent some abuses, but their broader effect is anti-quality. They dissuade potential entrepreneurs from entering the space, make it more difficult for high-quality operators to maximize their performance, and discourage successful single-site schools from expanding.
- ◆ **Fair finances.** It is still too common for chartered schools to operate with less than full per-pupil operating funds and to go without capital dollars altogether. Money doesn't guarantee quality, of course, but it does affect people's decisions at the margins about whether to "invest" in starting a new school, growing a great school, or replicating a successful one.

- ◆ **Tolerance for scale.** If anything, current charter policy environments have a bias against scale. They are geared around single-site schools, each with their own governing boards. As I've written elsewhere, these single-site schools are critical to the educational and political health of the movement. But policies should also allow room for multi-school organizations to hold charters and bring the benefits of scale into the sector.
- ◆ **Seedingscale.** Beyond tolerating scale organizations, policymakers should consider investing in organizations with the capacity to operate large numbers of schools, provide services to large numbers of schools, or help successful single-site schools replicate. Of all the funds spent on education, virtually none currently goes into building this kind of capacity.

A final note about “quality.” While we should take actions like the ones described above to boost quality in the charter sector, our goal should not be to “ensure” quality, in the sense of eliminating all traces of poor quality in the charter space. Chartering opens up opportunities for new organizations to offer public education. If that opportunity is truly open, not all entrants will succeed. At any given time, there will be a fraction of chartered schools that are not up to snuff. This is inevitable, and it's important to assert that this is part of the package—not a signal of “failure” for chartering as a strategy, anymore than struggling small businesses are a sign that open entry in other industries is a bad idea. The success of chartering should be judged by its overall, long-term effect on school quality, not on moment-in-time snapshots that capture today's particular mix of high and low performers.

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By Paul Herdman

Improving the quality of charter schools needs to be addressed from the bottom-up and the top-down, the yin and yang of school quality.

The Yin: Quality from the Bottom-Up

How can we take a grassroots approach to improving the quality of charter schools? Certainly individual schools can engage in the process of self-critique by administering more tests, inviting more qualitative, critical friends-type reviews. However, while these efforts should be encouraged, they present limited economies of scale in terms of cost and knowledge sharing.

A more efficient vehicle might be for national and local networks of schools to play a role in maintaining school quality. These networks take several forms, from the smaller nonprofit management organizations that have sprung from a single school, community-based organization, or foundations (e.g., Aspire, National Council of La Raza, or KIPP); to the some 300-plus Comprehensive School Reform models (e.g., Expeditionary Learning or Different Ways of Knowing); to the education management organizations, or EMOs (e.g., Chancellor Beacon, National Heritage, or Edison). These intermediaries can develop holistic approaches to monitoring performance and, more importantly, they can engage practitioners in the process of how to *use* this information to improve their schools as well as leverage knowledge across the network.

Given the intense national focus on accountability, all of these entities have an incentive to engage in:

- ◆ Information management systems to monitor progress *over* time and in *real* time;
- ◆ Qualitative reviews such as critical friend or British inspectorate-type site visits to deepen the stories behind the test scores; and,
- ◆ Intensive technical assistance to interpret and use quantitative and qualitative information to improve performance.

Charter school associations, resource centers, or other local and national intermediaries can also play a role in improving the quality of charter schools. For example, the work of the Colorado League of Charter Schools, supported by the Walton Foundation, has led to the creation of a thoughtful school review process. Likewise, the Center for Excellence in Leadership for Learning (CELL) at the University of Indianapolis has been awarded a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to start upwards of 10 new schools and can use its base in academe to engage the schools in a process of continuous improvement from the start. Further, as the National Charter School Alliance gets its footing, it can use its pulpit to share ideas across sites and promote a national conversation.

Policy recommendations: Nationally, intermediaries and network hubs need resources dedicated to creating systems built around data-driven decisionmaking. These entities rely heavily on the investment of foundations and the federal government. Currently, the bulk of the charter-related private foundation and federal dollars are going towards the creation of new schools or the dissemination of good ideas. While these funds are certainly needed at the school-level, from a policy perspective, a redirection of some of those dollars to intermediaries could provide greater overall impact on charter school quality.

On the flip side, these intermediaries need to be invested in creating quality schools, and say “no” on occasion to opportunities start new schools. While the financial incentives to increase their numbers by contracting through paper boards with insufficient capacity are strong, it’s a short-sighted strategy.

The Yang: Quality from the Top-Down

While a good supply of schools is essential, it alone will not improve the overall quality of charter schools. If the gate to charter entry is too low or the ongoing oversight of these new schools is too loose (or too tight), school quality will be compromised. Therefore, in addition to investing directly into these schools, we need to address the policy conditions into which new schools are born. This side of the equation has seen far less support to date.

As the recent Fordham study on charter school authorizing indicates, the authorizing notion is understudied, and the overall quality of charter school oversight is both highly variable and under-funded.

While authorizers might only oversee perhaps 1 percent of the nation’s schools, understanding their work can have tremendous impact on the work of the districts overseeing the other 99 percent of schools. With most major metropolitan areas from Los Angeles to Boston experimenting with some form of decentralization, charter school authorizers can serve as an important R&D opportunity for developing high performing systems of public school oversight.

Researchers such as Richard Elmore and others have identified challenges in public school accountability that carry over to the authorizing world. They point out three inter-related issues:¹

- ◆ **Limited resources/capacity.** Most authorizing offices are understaffed and remain so despite the growth in charter numbers. Because of the political volatility of charters, the notion of creating a parallel bureaucracy is often an unattractive public investment;
- ◆ **Technical limitations.** Sorting out just how to measure performance (versus compliance) is an evolving art. This is an issue that confronts districts as well and is an area where authorizers could really lead the way; and
- ◆ **Politics.** Without sound and transparent measures of performance, there is an increasing opportunity for the system to let factors other than performance drive the system, (i.e., there is an inverse relationship between good data and political pork).

Policy recommendations. To bring the level of quality in authorizing up, several steps should be considered:

- 1) Authorizers nationally (or regionally) need to commit to a common set of principles around best practices (the National Association of Charter School Authorizers has taken us a step down this path). This will provide a helpful frame for self-critique as well as open the door for developing a process for *overseeing the overseers* in a given state. Accompanying research should help clarify the relationship between authorizing practices and charter school performance.
- 2) There need to be clear expectations and sanctions at both the *school* and *authorizer* level. Currently, roughly nine out of 10 charter schools that are closed meet this fate because of malfeasance or lack of compliance. It is the rare exception that is shut down for primarily academic reasons alone. For authorizers to have the political will to sanction a poor-performing school, the criteria for success needs to be clearly stipulated

from the time the charter is granted. Likewise, what's good for the goose is good for the gander – authorizers that continue to do a lousy job should lose the opportunity to grant charters.

3) States, districts, and other authorizers need to acknowledge that to monitor a system of high quality schools takes some level of commensurate financial support. To date, charter offices are often understaffed and then left at that staff capacity as the number of schools they oversee grows. This is not a sustainable structure.

Thus, through this yin and yang approach, we could use national and local networks to develop comprehensive approaches to improving the quality of charter schools from the bottom-up and the top-down. Further, we can develop a common set of principles around best practices that will provide a helpful framework for self-critique and a process for *overseeing the overseers* in a given state.

Footnotes

¹ Elmore, Richard F., Charles H. Abelman, and Susan H. Fuhrman, “The New Accountability in State Education Reform: From Process to Performance,” in Helen F. Ladd, ed., *Holding Schools Accountable, Performance-Based Reform in Education*, Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., 1996. Also see the recent national evaluation of the Public Charter Schools Program (SRI International, 2002).

Paul Herdman is Managing Director of Accountability and Evaluation Services at New American Schools.

By Margaret Lin

A party to the creation of every charter school – even before the school doors open – is its authorizer, a powerful entity that has been largely overlooked in education policymaking. The authorizer is charged with the important public role of approving, overseeing, evaluating, and deciding whether to renew or revoke charters in a particular state or locality.

Every charter school that exists has received explicit approval to operate by a body vested with such power through the state charter law. This growing supply of new schools includes, unfortunately, some failures and poorly performing schools that should never have been permitted to open, as their own authorizers acknowledge.

Depending on state legislation, charter authorizers (also called “sponsors” in a few states) may be local or county education agencies, state boards or departments of education, universities or colleges, municipal bodies, special-purpose chartering boards, or private nonprofit organizations meeting certain criteria. As gatekeepers, overseers and renewal judges, these diverse entities wield tremendous influence over the quality of charter schools that enter and remain in the public school supply.

Though pivotal, the stewardship role of authorizers received almost no policy attention in the first decade of charter schools – with predictable results. The checkered performance of charter schools as a whole to date – many excellent, but also many weak or mediocre schools – is linked to the spotty capacities and effectiveness of their authorizers.

Accordingly, the single most influential policy reform to enhance the quality of charter schools across the country would be to improve the execution of *authorizing* at the foundation of the charter school infrastructure. Improvement will require the following:

- (1) Broad appreciation for the complexity of effective authorizing;
- (2) Greater selectivity in determining the entities to be entrusted with this important public role; and
- (3) Support enabling the institutions that undertake the job to perform it well.

The first element is a matter of knowledge and awareness, while the second and third entail policy shifts. A brief discussion of each of these elements of improvement follows.

Understand the complexity of sound authorizing.

Authorizers must discharge a challenging array of responsibilities including:

- ◆ Guiding school developers through a charter **application process** that helps them understand and prepare for all the demands of running a performance-based public school;
- ◆ **Evaluating charter proposals** astutely, awarding charters only to applicants that demonstrate the ability to run effective schools;
- ◆ Creating and implementing sound, meaningful **accountability plans and oversight systems** for diverse schools based on measurable results – not simply compliance – while respecting schools’ granted freedoms and distinct missions; and
- ◆ Developing defensible practices for making charter **renewal and revocation decisions**, based on judicious evaluation of each school’s record.¹

This is a complex set of responsibilities calling for new, efficient systems of oversight that ensure accountability while preserving school autonomy. Creating these systems demands vision, a sense of purpose, innovation, planning, time, and resources. If charter authorizing were an advertised position, many entities that legislatures have charged with the job would plainly not fit the bill or even apply for the work.

The most notable weakness on this score is that many state laws grant chartering authority largely or exclusively to local school boards or districts, which tend to have little preparation, inclination, or inherent capacity to assume the role of managing a portfolio of independent, performance-based schools. Yet improvement on this front is a key avenue for far-reaching change.

Tighten and strengthen the supply of entities that are empowered to charter.

To form a sound infrastructure for quality charter school development, institutions vested with chartering powers and responsibilities should demonstrate at least three traits:

- 1) A strong desire to advance the principles and potential of charter schooling as an educational improvement strategy;
- 2) An equal commitment and sense of mission to carry out the serious job of chartering effectively; and
- 3) The human and financial capacity to execute those complex responsibilities well.

Agencies that want to do the job but need more capacity for it should obtain capacity-building support. On the other hand, agencies lacking commitment to either the tenets of charter schooling or the hard work of skillful, conscientious authorizing simply should not be permitted to charter.

Redefining the universe of authorizers will require legislative action in many states – including establishing new authorizing bodies altogether in more than a few places. Such change is already taking place in active chartering states such as California and Ohio, and is under consideration in many states. This renovation of the infrastructure for charter school authorizing is necessary for more effective implementation of charter laws and a stronger supply of high-quality charter schools. The stakes are too high for chartering responsibilities to be undertaken lightly.

Provide adequate support for the authorizing function.

Quality authorizing requires strong agency planning, institutional capacity, focused expertise, and sufficient resources. Most authorizers to date, however, have plunged into this work without the resources or time to build capacity for their new challenges, or even to study the practices of other authorizers. Instead, they have taken on the job without adequate personnel and funds to carry out demanding new functions. Particularly in the case of local and state education agencies, chartering duties have often been tossed onto the plates of staffers with little time, background or expertise for the complex work of developing and overseeing performance contracts with schools.

Unfortunately, when authorizers are ill-equipped for their responsibilities, the schools they charter are more likely to be low-quality or run into trouble. More than likely, lack of resources to “do it right” has deterred some otherwise willing potential authorizers from taking on this role.

Authorizers should receive sufficient funding to carry out their weighty charge well. An important public function and state-derived responsibility, oversight of charter schools should be funded as such. Similarly, no authorizer should have to operate without the benefit of connection to the best state and national resources that exist to strengthen their effectiveness. On the leading edge of public education, authorizers need highly targeted professional development and knowledge of rapidly evolving practices and lessons; they cannot be expected to blaze and navigate this new path well in isolation.

Conclusion

If charter schools are to succeed as a large-scale reform initiative, policy attention must now focus, if belatedly, on improving the gatekeeping and stewardship functions served by authorizers. Charter schools themselves are only one side of the equation that policy leaders have expected to serve as a model for effective governance and accountability in public education. Equally important, authorizers must have the vision, commitment, capacity, and resources to perform *their* role effectively. Now, early in the second decade of the charter school movement, it is imperative to examine, redesign and invest properly in this infrastructure.

Footnotes

¹ Greg Richmond and Margaret Lin, "Putting the 'Public' into Charter Schools: The Important Role of Charter School Authorizers," *ECS Governance Notes*, Education Commission of the States (December 2001).

Margaret Lin is a consultant focusing on charter school authorizing, accountability and governance issues.

How do charter schools better articulate a public message and defend against attacks from entrenched interests?

By Michael A. Goldstein

The Problems

Message Problems

How many cocktail parties have you attended where someone said “Um, so what exactly *is* a charter school? Isn’t it like, you know, a private school?” That’s a problem.

Second, we need a *simple, single* bumper sticker message; alas, we have four: charters equal choice, academic excellence, innovation, and/or accountability.

Medium Problem

Charter debates play out mainly in newspaper metro sections. Yet most people get their news from TV. We’re not on TV because of weak imagery (no baby seals being clubbed), 10-year-old concept, and most importantly, lack of effort.

Messenger Problem

We have no Susan B. Anthony or Charlton Heston. This was less of a problem with Bill Clinton loudly promoting our cause.

What Do We Do?

Simplify message

On the national stage, charters must mean “Small non-profit inner-city schools which give choice to parents who can’t afford to move to the suburbs. Otherwise their kids must attend shameful, dangerous, large inner-city schools where less than 5 percent of kids ever graduate from a 4-year college.”

Yes, charters are actually three very different products: small urban; often progressive suburban; and for-profit, large urban. We need to emphasize the first because it’s most compelling to the average Joe.

Name change

“Charter schools” should become “Charter public schools” everywhere – on school buildings, in press releases, in policy papers, in op-eds, and in grant RFPs.

Medium: National TV

Social movements can only grow broad support through national TV: CNN, FOX News, MSNBC. Charters are perfect for their caustic debate environment.

We also need to provide networks with video (B-roll) which justifies why we exist in the first place: because of the utterly chaotic day-to-day existence of *regular* inner-city public schools, where no kids are paying attention to the teacher, where classrooms are bedlam.

Messenger: Ella

We need a nationwide casting call for a telegenic, dynamic African-American mom who sends her kids to a charter school and loves it. She'll be hired as CEO of a new nonprofit, Parents For Public School Choice. Its sole purpose will be communication, not policy. Preferably she's spent 10 years teaching in inner-city public schools and ultimately left, frustrated; she's a member of her local NAACP; she has a sense of humor to defuse attacks, a la "It's not like I'm secretly plotting on behalf of Karl Rove to eliminate the idea of public schools..."

We'll call her Ella.

On a \$1 million per year budget, Parents For Public School Choice would hire a top-notch P.R. booker, the kind who can consistently book Ella on cable news and talk radio, and occasionally on network news programs like *60 Minutes* and big-city local news (i.e., on NBC's local New York City affiliate). Each charter pays \$350 per year to fund this, with perhaps \$10 million per year worth of promotion and visibility in return.

News Hooks

To land on TV, Ella needs a news hook. (Right now the charter news cycle comes from published studies – not good for our side since the messages are inevitably mixed and easily spun by opponents).

1. Election commentary. Kerry, Edwards, et al: Who supports status quo inner-city regular public schools? "Minority parents and moderates who want public school choice vs. the 'liberal' establishment who block it."
2. Charter admission lotteries. They're inherently theatrical. "All across America, desperate inner-city parents play the lottery...but this one isn't for a \$3 million, it's for something perhaps more important – their children's education. In tonight's *Eye On America*, CBS looks at charter school lotteries...." Cut to shot of a parent praying.
3. The Law. *No Child Left Behind* is a great hook with the bureaucracy conspiring to strangle the provision to exit failing schools. "In the 60s, it was the right to sit in the front of the bus. Four decades later, it's the right to sit on the bus to a public charter school. In tonight's *Dateline*, we look at the new civil rights battle – public school choice."

Ella's Metaphor

Ella needs an easy way to explain charters. That's the job of the \$1 million P.R. firm. For one dollar, here's the best I can muster:

"Coca Cola is the suburban public school – tastes good but I can't afford to live there. Pepsi is the private school – tastes good but I can't afford tuition. The bureaucrats won't give me a choice; they offer me stale bargain brand cola that tastes terrible."

"Along comes charter public schools – they're the Dr. Pepper, a good cola, but with a twist, innovative. So the bureaucrats say, "Fine, you can buy Dr. Pepper, but we'll only sell one case of it to the whole city. Everyone else still gets stale bargain brand cola."

Ella's Message

"All parents want public school choices, but especially low-income minority parents in the inner-cities. We want real choice (charters) – not the fake one where you get to pick among 5 terrible schools. Federal law

requires that we get choices. These districts are **breaking the law**. The authorities say charters will mess up their Big Reform Plan. Their Plan stinks and hasn't worked for 20 years.

As parents get more choices, teachers in regular schools will return our calls, give us physics and Shakespeare and art class, stay after school for homework help – just like my son's charter school does.”

End Game

The point is **not** for Ella to “represent” all charter schools, just to articulate to the broadcast media the most politically appealing argument for charter schools. Ultimately, Ella's message can embolden state and local pols – especially moderate Democrats, who support this stuff but fear the teachers union – to write legislation that supports and sustains the charter movement.

Michael Goldstein is Co-founder and CEO of the MATCH Public Charter School in Boston, Massachusetts.

By Joe Nathan

Imagine presenting a report to a state legislative or Congressional committee, a local Rotary club, or the board of the Urban Coalition showing that the charter movement has:

- ◆ Helped produce a variety of specific improvements in district schools;
- ◆ Developed 15 outstanding, innovative ideas in curriculum, instruction, governance and facilities that are being replicated successfully in other places;
- ◆ Helped thousands of students who had dropped out of previous schools to not only graduate from high school, but earn degrees in post-secondary institutions; and
- ◆ Produced major, measurable improvements in student achievement, assessed in various ways in the vast majority of charter schools in your state.

Wouldn't that information be helpful? Wouldn't it be important? Wouldn't it encourage broader interest and support for this movement?

Right now, it does not appear that many states have gathered this information, much less shared it. But the information may be out there.

Do you think charter critics and opponents will look for this information? Do you think the people who continuously try to compare under-funded charter schools with district schools will gather this information? No, I don't think so either.

So if it is going to be gathered, people in this movement will need to do so. Yes, it needs to be done fairly, thoughtfully. But it does need to be done.

The public, and policymakers, need much more information about developments like these:

- ◆ How New Visions Charter in Minneapolis has helped dozens of district schools improve student achievement by adopting and adapting techniques New Visions created
- ◆ Why the Boston School Board changed its mind about small new options within the district after the Legislature adopted a charter law, and many of the first proposals came from Boston
- ◆ What happens to graduates of KIPP, Academy of the Pacific Rim in Boston, City Academy in St. Paul, and other inner-city charters that are helping youngsters succeed and go on to college
- ◆ Why organizations like the YMCA and the National Council of La Raza have decided to create charter schools
- ◆ How the charter movement is attracting and encouraging skilled, veteran educators who were frustrated with the district system

This kind of information is vital. So is an army of young people and educators, who are sharing this information. Imagine:

- ◆ Charter school students contacting a vast array of local civic, advocacy and social clubs, and asking for the opportunity to present information about the successes of their charter school
- ◆ Graduate students in universities contacting charter schools and helping them conduct surveys of charter graduates, or conducting other research that the charter schools themselves identify as important
- ◆ Advocacy groups inviting successful charter schools to attend their state and national conferences, and helping publicize their efforts

- ◆ Universities, charter organizations, and charter schools writing proposals together
- ◆ Foundations, universities, state departments, and other groups convening meetings on topics like increasing family involvement or improving reading instruction, where successful educators from charter and other schools share their experiences
- ◆ Retired businesspeople deciding to help strengthen charter boards and charter school leadership, and publicizing their successes

All of these things are happening in a few places, but not nearly enough. We need not only publications about how to do these things, but actual training and follow-up.

We cannot stop the flow of often inaccurate, critical or questionable information about the charter movement. But we can use techniques such as those described above. Doing so will increase the likelihood that the charter movement will get stronger, internally, and have even broader, stronger outside support.

Joe Nathan is Director of the Center for School Change at the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute.

By Doug Thomas and Shel Hiscock

One of the more difficult issues in the short history of chartered schools has been the energy expended to fight off the entrenched institutional forces. We've come to expect it, but it is no less upsetting to have to spend hours and hours countering harmful legislation, refuting opinioned information or dealing with unfounded research. Clayton Christensen of Harvard University would describe charter schools as a "disruptive innovation" in the public school sector. His 2001 book, *The Innovator's Dilemma*, is instructive in giving charter school folks a sense of place in the context of making changes and taking on the establishment. According to Christensen, we can expect to face years of contentious disrespect and questioning success. Our product will be seen as inferior and our clientele out of the mainstream.

Not many people get great satisfaction being the bane of their established chosen field or the greater public, for that matter. Until the idea of a parallel sector reaches a significant portion of the population, we will have to live with the established forces having an audience for their attacks. Every school and support organization will have to be prepared to fend off the nay-sayers. Those of us who create new schools as a part of our organizational mission need to be even more vigorous in our efforts.

At EdVisions, we tend to tackle this in at least three ways. First of all, we continue to provide good information. Even though we can't begin to get enough information to enough people, word spreads across the country in astonishing ways. We need to write and speak factually and honestly about the successes and challenges of creating new public schools. The opposition will always talk, so we need to put the truth in front of them. The better the information, the less distortion we can expect. And we should try to carry a passionate message as well. A certain portion of the population, whether they agree with us or not, has a liking for an impassioned effort.

Second, we should offer true alternatives. We find little interest in re-creating the status quo. We don't want to limit the conversation to why we might be better at doing the same thing the opposition has had a hundred years practicing. We also don't want to defend the system we are trying to improve upon. An example of this is in school size. Most new chartered schools are small. If we're trying to be small versions of larger traditional schools, we lose that fight every time. They are more efficient (at least in the minds of the general public). They do offer far more extra-curricular activities. And they usually have more impressive buildings. Where we make our case is that smaller schools are more personalized, have fewer bureaucratic obstacles, in most cases have higher graduation rates, more parent involvement, and often more innovative and community based learning programs. Sometimes, we just have to engage the opposition on our terms.

Third, we have to be forthcoming with our results and make it clear as to how those results attend to our intentions and the policy of chartering in general. There are purposes in charter laws, and we have to meet those purposes in order to be legitimate. If we can do so, we will quiet those who have supposed all sorts of inaccurate reasons for this new schools strategy. If we can't, then we join the ranks of former attempts that came and went with lots of good ideas and little evidence of change and betterment. So far, there is mixed bag of evidence, good enough to spur more schools and the continued support of policymakers, but not good enough for the mainstream system to ask for advice or to begin imitating.

When we hear the tired old refrain "It's all about the kids" from traditional school folks and from the mainline teachers associations, we cringe a bit. We reflect critically on years of lip service that have been paid to shortsighted attempts at professionalizing teaching. History shows the effort has been mostly about driving up teacher compensation, tightening master contract language, and regulating working conditions for

teachers. Paying higher salaries to incompetent and ineffective educators who work in an archaic system designed to provide comfort and stability for adults is not “about the kids.”

Not one of the schools we have helped create is a perfect representation of the governance or instructional model we’ve set out to replicate. They are, however, continually challenged to make hard decisions about what really is best for learners who walk through their doors each day expecting to have a different kind of educational experience. They come through those doors because where they were previously enrolled, it wasn’t working. As such, they might be the most perfect models of schools engaged in progressive R & D focused on critical issues that truly are “all about the kids.”

The beauty of the chartered school scenario is that learners and families are indicating in ever-growing numbers they no longer will tolerate practices or programs that make the institution the primary beneficiary of policy decisions and resource allocation. Entrenched bureaucracies with obvious self-interested demands will seldom be able to fully embrace recognized best practices. They will not embrace these practices even though they are acclaimed for improving student engagement, achievement, and development – what’s best for kids.

Allow us to use another example. Everyone knows the state teachers unions are not big fans of chartered schools. At the same time, many educators around the nation are not happy with the current union organization. One of the purposes of the Minnesota charter law (and we presume in other states) is to “create new professional opportunities for teachers.”. In our case, at EdVisions we’ve tried to convince teachers that to organize as a Teacher Professional Practice and own the instructional program is a step in the right direction. A small professional association that contracts to provide the program of instruction, certainly qualifies as a new professional opportunity. We even went a step further, organizing as the first public school teacher cooperative in the nation. Whenever I meet union leadership folks, I remind them of the opportunity they are missing to bring the association to a level of professionalism unthinkable in their many schools. We are convinced the unions will never reach the professional practice status of doctors and lawyers if they continue to organize as industrial labor organizations.

Entrenched systems and organizations have been, and will be, concerned primarily about what’s good for maintaining the status quo. Autonomous, market-responsive public schools of choice (chartered schools) must do what’s good for kids. That’s the public message that should be articulated. Part of countering the status quo is to push new ideas into the local, regional, and national reform conversations. We are not satisfied to settle for the old adage, “Everybody wants schools to be better but almost nobody wants them to be different.”. We must keep reminding people that chartering laws were created to allow for things to be better *and* different.

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Shel Hiscock directs EdVisions Schools national scale-up effort.***

What lessons can the charter school movement learn from other social movements?

By Alex Medler

While the charter school movement could draw many lessons from previous social movements, I will focus on two. The first lesson is about making progress to build support and recruit members. The second lesson involves strategies to manage resistance and the public's perception of conflict.

Progress comes from hard work by determined activists. It is often bumped forward by pragmatic compromises. Making progress toward goals can attract new members, but too much compromise can alienate members. A movement with no success attracts few pragmatists and can become filled with ideological militants. Through a combination of hard work, great people, and compromise, the charter movement has, thus far, enjoyed success that proves its worthiness to ordinary people and builds support and membership.

If a movement receives significant resistance, and the public does not hold the movement responsible for the resulting conflict, it can build support among the larger citizenship and antipathy for its opponents. The charter movement has successfully projected an image of being victimized by a self-interested education establishment that tries to prevent it from creating good public schools. This is a balancing act. Social movements that inflame resistance by powerful opponents can be crushed by the status quo. Even if they're not crushed, when the public believes that movements "deserve" this resistance, the movement's support declines and opponents get feedback that resistance is appropriate.

For example, contrast the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Panthers. Civil Rights activists maintained a non-violent strategy of civil disobedience and earned national support. Their strategies were not designed to limit conflict. They chose locations to elicit ugly reactions from staunch segregationists. Even in the face of murderous attacks and brutal treatment by authorities they maintained a disciplined, non-violent, response to that resistance that increased their support. The Black Panthers, less interested in how the general public perceived them, armed themselves in response to police repression. The result was more repression by opponents, less support for the movement, and increasing support for the police's heavy-handed response. Many other examples are available from the anti-globalization, peace and environmental movements.

Generically, social movements often start out with a challenge to mobilize collective action. After some success their challenge shifts to getting everyone joining the movement to work together. They try to generate a cohesive message and pursue limited, but shared, goals. Organization, a sense of community, and shared norms are necessary to keep everyone on the same page. A social movement uses this single-mindedness not only to win victories, but also to manage their opponent's reactions and the public's perception of conflict. When a movement becomes divided, one faction's actions can have drastic implications for everyone else.

One implication of these dynamics is that the charter school movement must balance its efforts to win freedom for charter schools with the resulting resistance. One of the charter movement's strategies has been to diffuse opponent's criticisms by emphasizing the public nature of charter schools. Opponents repeatedly charge that charters are elitist, unwilling to serve students with disabilities, and recklessly using public funds. In response the movement can emphasize charter schools' non-discriminatory admissions and lotteries, their compliance with and commitment to special education laws and practices, and their accountability for student

performance. If the charter movement can assure that all its members support these goals, the opponents appear unreasonable and the charter movement noble.

If some charter advocates push for greater freedom for each school their efforts could backfire. Thus, there are political – as well as policy and ethical reasons – not to assert the following: that parental choice produces adequate accountability, that schools should face fewer regulations about admissions, and that charters need freedom from special education and desegregation requirements.

These lessons present dilemmas. By managing conflict the charter movement gains supporters and undermines its opponents. But it does so by diminishing the differences between innovative charter schools and other public schools. This could also diminish the sense of urgency that helps the movement recruit some of its most militant activists. The charter movement also faces a challenge in that many of its strongest national leaders are committed to other fights with the education establishment. It could be that growing the charter movement requires us to increase conflict. This would energize some activists, help us connect with constituencies involved in other fights, and recruit more members. But these strategies may also diminish the political space that school founders need to succeed, energize and legitimize opponents, and change the public's perception of the charter movement. These outcomes, in turn, could affect the ability of the movement to secure resources and support that would be required to operate at a much larger scale. While these lessons raise plenty of questions, they do not provide the answers.

Alex Medler is an independent education consultant who specializes in education policy, school choice and charter schools.

By Joe Nathan

One of the most powerful, popular songs of the civil rights movement urged people to “keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.” As charter activists learn from other efforts to change and reform America, this advice seems relevant in several ways. The charter movement should:

- ◆ Be clear and aggressive in sharing goals and major accomplishments with policymakers, the news media and the general public;
- ◆ Develop ever broader alliances; and
- ◆ Use a variety of strategies to achieve its goals.

Let’s take a closer look at these one by one.

1. Clear goals - widely promoted

Successful movements aggressively, constantly explain to the public why and what they are trying to achieve. These movements also help people understand major accomplishments. Efforts to make fundamental changes in society inevitably attract opponents. But successful movements do not allow opponents to be the only public voice commenting on their efforts. At its best, the civil rights movement also had clear goals in areas of voting rights, equal access to restaurants, swimming pools, stores, etc.

The women’s suffrage movement had a clear goal, to obtain the right to vote for women. This movement succeeded for a variety of reasons—one of which was that people understood what it was trying to accomplish. Over the years, women’s rights advocates spoke to thousands of groups. They went anywhere and everywhere, explaining their cause.

Charter school advocates might well adopt this attitude, seeking out service, business and community groups – explaining what we are up to. These groups are terrific places to promote the charter movement. Contacting and speaking with such groups could be a great experience for kids in charter schools.

More broadly, the charter movement needs to help policymakers and the public understand what supporting the charter movement has produced. When the charter movement began, its goals were to:

- ◆ Increase the number of high quality schools available, especially to students from low- and moderate-income families;
- ◆ Help stimulate improvements in the broader education system;
- ◆ Provide opportunities for educators, parents, community members and others to develop new, potentially more effective educational approaches; and
- ◆ Create a new, potentially more effective form of accountability for results in education.

It is time to help answer critical questions about this movement. We need to gather information showing, for example:

- ◆ Where has greater flexibility offered by strong charter laws helped produce successful schools?
- ◆ What new, effective ideas have been generated by the charter movement?
- ◆ How has the charter movement helped improve district schools?

The charter movement must be more aggressive in producing information and reports on these issues. Too often the movement has found itself responding to reports written by strong critics and opponents. Those reports will continue, and we can learn from them. But we also should generate information to help policymakers and the broader public see what has been accomplished.

Civil rights and women's suffrage groups faced enormous, powerful opposition. But these movements continued to grow and ultimately, to succeed, in part because they spent a great deal of time explaining and promoting their views. Perhaps the most important lesson for the charter movement is the necessity of being clear about our goals and our successes.

2. Developing alliances

Margaret Mead once wrote, "Never doubt that a small group of people can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." The charter movement started with literally a handful of Minnesotans. But in recent (successful) legislative efforts, Minnesota's charter coalition included the Urban Coalition's director, the Minnesota Business Partnership, Minnesota Chamber of Commerce, a liberal Democrat who formerly was the mayor of St. Paul, voucher advocates, etc. This was a reminder that successful social change movements bring together a variety of people who often disagree.

Efforts to obtain voting rights for women and African Americans succeeded, ultimately because broad coalitions of people decided that the goals of these movements made sense. Women from a variety of backgrounds came together in the suffrage movement. When most successful, the civil rights movement enjoyed a vast array of supporters from various communities, including union and church members from many different viewpoints.

3. Various strategies

Consider the vast array of means that the civil rights movement used to achieve its goal. Some advocates filed lawsuits. Others held marches. Some used "sit-ins" and freedom rides through various parts of the south. Others attempted to convince prospective voters (and to pressure officials to allow these people to register to vote). Ultimately, the various efforts had more impact together than did any single strategy.

This might mean several things for the charter movement. First, obviously, the movement should produce as many possible excellent schools as possible. Second, we should identify extremely successful charters, and giving them an opportunity to help other schools, both district and charter. Universities, foundations, businesses, state departments, and other groups ought to convene meetings on topics like family involvement, improving reading skills, etc., and invite successful practitioners from various kinds of schools – charter, district, private, parochial – to share their experiences. Finally, as noted above, the charter movement needs to become much more active in sharing our accomplishments with the general public. History shows that the charter movement will be most successful when it uses several strategies to reach its goals.

Joe Nathan is Director of the Center for School Change at the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute.

How will the charter school movement look in 10-20 years? How should it look?

By Nelson Smith

I asked three experts – but to my puzzlement, they related three very different histories. One described a movement that inspired wholesale transformation. The next saw charters much as they were two decades ago. The third reported their quiet death.

It appears that each of these paths was possible in 2003....

Maria Lopez, U. S. Secretary of Education:

Well, there are hardly any “charter schools” *per se*. But just about every public school runs on a performance contract, awarded and monitored by the mayor, a local university, or one of several “regional education authorities.” The schools are operated by all sorts of groups – some by Mom and Pop, some by the Edison-Chancellor-Mosaica conglomerate, some by teacher co-ops, and most by nonprofit networks. The dollars follow the kids, and principals report to school-based trustees who have final say over budgets and personnel decisions.

In the 90s, we created a whole bunch of charter schools, including my own. We didn’t worry about scale – we joined purchasing co-ops and won competitive grants because we had to. At some point we realized we were creating new systems.

Then, around 2007, came the Charter Bubble, when they started converting all the failing schools to charters. Suddenly there were 20 or 30 cities with a majority of kids in charter schools, showing real increases in achievement. That’s when the big school systems cried “uncle,” and started luring charters back by offering them buildings and stable pension plans in exchange for operational autonomy. Of course, the district schools demanded the same deal! With all the schools basically managing their own affairs, the big central offices pretty much disappeared.

So now, we deliver public education very differently. All 53 states have charter laws, but we don’t really use the word “charter” anymore. They’re all just “public schools” now.

Patricia Wentworth, Metro City School Board President:

We just love our charter schools! But we only have – what is it, four of them now? We’re open to good applications – but since I’ve been on the Board we’ve also had to put two schools out of their misery. That generated all sorts of controversy and made some of us wonder whether the whole idea was worth the effort. But the four charters that are still open are actually pretty good – not “test score” good, but well-run, and with a lot of happy parents.

Basically, we see charters as an alternative choice for families that just can’t be satisfied by the public schools. We’re fine with competition, don’t get me wrong – but we need to educate *all* the children, so the public schools get first priority. Right now, literacy is our districtwide priority, and we’ve just hired 15 more trainers for our Reading At Last initiative.

But having the charter schools is a blessing, in a way; they really seem to enjoy working with those...hard-to-educate children. And really, they're just as happy to stay small.

Michael Ripwine, NY Times reporter

Topeka, Kansas, June 6, 2023: It's the final graduation day at Freedom Charter Academy. With just five seniors getting diplomas, the ceremonies are being held in the school's cafeteria.

There were 2,700 charter schools at the turn of the century, but the annual rate of increase was already declining: 22% in 2000, 17% in 2001, and just 11% in 2002. The movement foundered in a Perfect Storm of facilities difficulties, re-regulation, and improvement in regular public schools. The Greatest Generation of brave, foolhardy charter school founders never groomed successors, and socially-conscious entrepreneurs turned their attention to refugees, the homeless, and other less-intractable problems.

The landmark "No Child Left Behind" Act didn't help. Revocations and non-renewals soared as charter schools (especially those serving poor kids) failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress. As the numbers dwindled, marginalization increased.

According to education analyst Amy Stuart Fargo, "In the final analysis charter schools were just another gimmick. They attracted kids who didn't do well, but never managed to improve performance convincingly enough to impress the general public. Those that did succeed had huge infusions of private cash – making it impossible to replicate their models at large scale."

The charter movement was problematic in other respects. It was never politically cohesive, an uneasy amalgam of left and right. By 2010, most libertarians had moved back to the voucher camp, while liberal supporters focused on teacher pay and working conditions in the regular school system.

Finally, there was an odd disconnect between the movement's leadership and its clients. According to Freedom Academy principal Kwame Spencer, "Charter families were a lot more diverse, a lot poorer and darker, than most of the people who represented them. Things might have turned out differently if they had fixed that."

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