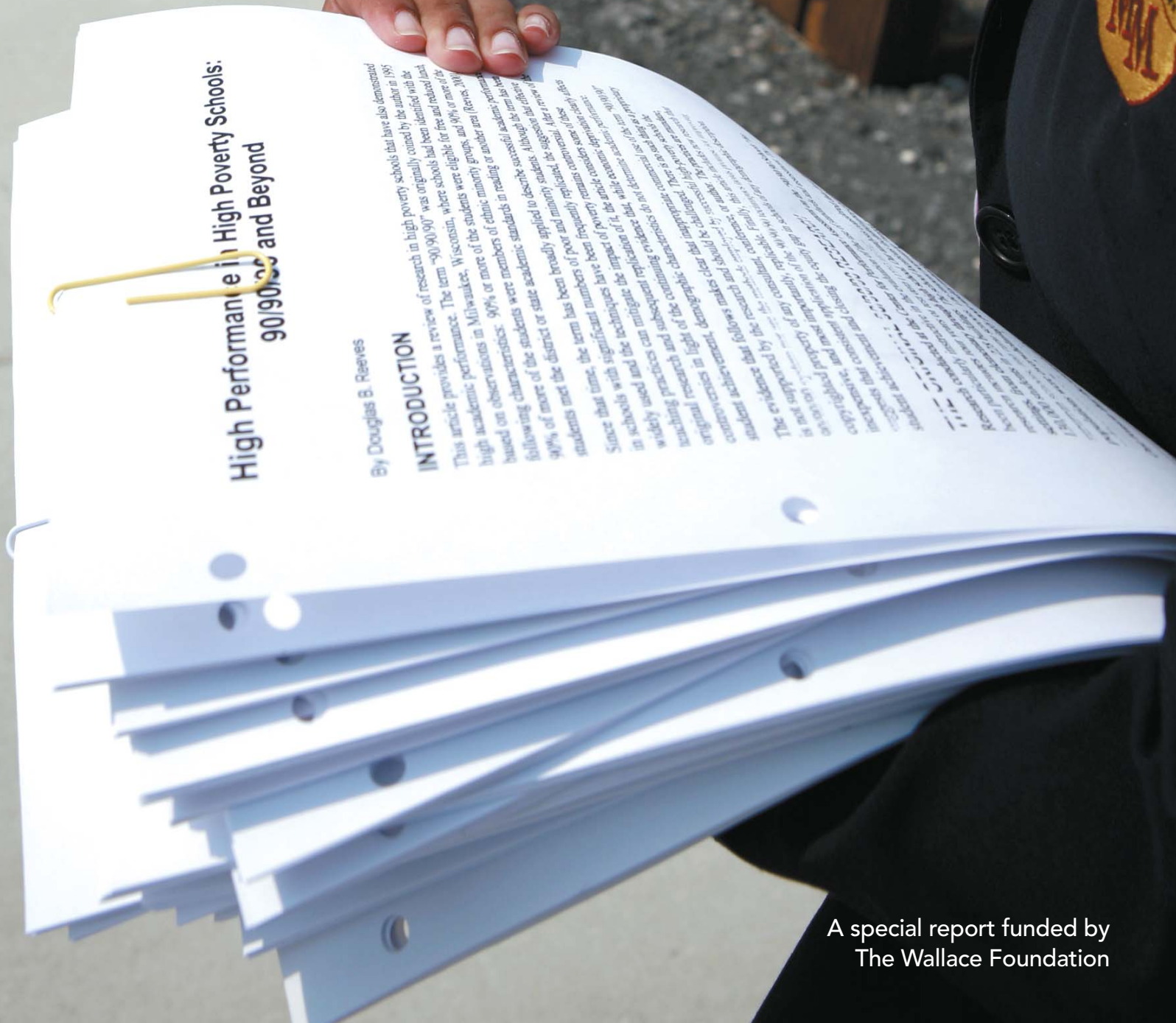


LEADING for LEARNING

Exploring the leadership
challenges facing the nation's
expanding charter school sector.



A special report funded by
The Wallace Foundation

WANTED: 'The Perfect Person'

Charter Schools Demand a Great Deal of Leaders

By Erik W. Robelen

The charter school movement faces daunting leadership and management challenges, especially as the sector continues its rapid expansion.

For starters, the publicly financed but independently run schools are projected to need between 6,000 and 21,000 new principals over the next decade. That estimate, from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, dwarfs the 4,300 charter schools in existence as of last school year.

"[W]e can predict that the next five to 10 years will bring an unprecedented scale-up in charter schools nationwide," the forthcoming report declares, "along with an acute shortage of leaders well-equipped to head those schools."

Adding to the difficulty, the Washington-based advocacy group notes that leading a successful charter school requires "an uncommon set of competencies, combining strong instructional leadership with solid business skills and management know-how."

The leadership challenges come as the charter sector is seeking ways to ensure higher, and

more consistent, quality among charter schools. The nation's first charter school opened in Minnesota in 1992. Today, charter proponents are responding to concerns about the decidedly mixed achievement results across the schools nationally.

Layers of Leadership

Against this backdrop, *Education Week's* fifth annual "Leading for Learning" report examines charter leadership and management from multiple angles: the recruitment and preparation of charter school principals; the leadership models employed across the schools; the governance role of charter school boards; efforts by newly emerging charter networks to manage and support schools; and the expansion of state organizations, such as the California Charter Schools Association, to help charters and advocate on their behalf to policymakers.

And in telling the story of how two former Memphis, Tenn., principals decided to open a charter school in New Orleans, the report shows just how much dedication and drive are required to launch and lead such schools.

Finally, the report provides new research and analysis by the National Charter School Research Project at the University of Washington on who the leaders of individual charter schools are, why they take the jobs, and where they struggle most.

One striking finding in the research is that charter school leaders appear to have less experience, in general, running schools than principals of traditional public schools have. At the same time, despite predictions that charters would attract leaders with a more diverse array of professional backgrounds, a relatively small proportion—about 13 percent—came to their current leadership positions from jobs outside education.

In its report, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools highlights another challenge: what it terms "the frequent demographic contrast between the leaders of charter schools today and the students they serve."

While about twice as many charter schools as regular public schools are led by members of minority groups—32 percent vs. 17 percent, based on federal statistics—the proportion of minority charter leaders is still far below minority students' 60 percent share of charter enrollment, it says.

With more attention turning to the pipeline for producing charter leaders, the obvious question arises: What makes an effective leader?

"I kind of joke that the perfect person is someone who has several years of experience as a superintendent of a small school district, has spent several years as executive director of a nonprofit corporation; someone who is a founder and launch person, and is also a maintainer or refiner type of person," says Eric A. Premack, the director of the Charter Schools Development Center in Sacramento, Calif.,

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Lee Celano for Education Week

Cover: The new Miller-McCoy Academy for Mathematics and Business occupies modular buildings on the site of a New Orleans school damaged by Hurricane Katrina. **Left:** Tiffany Hardrick and Keith Sanders, co-principals of the charter school, walk down a street following their June visit to the home of a student who will attend Miller-McCoy.



To view more photos along with an interview, go to www.edweek.org/go/wallacegallery

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Preparation Programs Can't Match Demand

By Erik W. Robelen

Amid concerns that traditional training programs may not adequately prepare principals for the demands of running charter schools, a growing field of specialty programs has emerged to serve them. The offerings include summer institutes, part-time study, and intensive, full-time programs.

Just last year, Central Michigan University, which is an authorizer of charter schools, launched an online master's-degree program in educational leadership with an emphasis on charter schools. This fall, High Tech High, a San Diego-based charter school network, will bring in its first cohort of five candidates for a master's program in educational leadership, part of the recently created High Tech High Graduate School of Education.

And a program started last year by the New York City Center for Charter School Excellence trains charter school teachers for "secondary" leadership positions, such as dean or assistant principal, with the idea of making those jobs steppingstones to becoming school leaders. Glenn J. Liebeck, the center's director of school leadership development, likens the effort to the farm-team approach in baseball.

"These are the minor leagues, and we're grooming our next principals," he says.

According to a recent report, most charter leaders come through traditional principal-training programs, but the demands of the job usually require more-specialized preparation.

'Daunting Skill Gap'

"[W]hen a traditionally trained school leader agrees to run a charter school, he or she faces a daunting skill gap," says the report, issued in June by the National Charter School Research Project, based at the University of Washington, in Seattle.

The report notes that charter leaders typically require skills not just in leading instruction and managing people, but also in finding and maintaining school facilities, handling finances, hiring faculty members, and negotiating relations with boards, parents, and charter school authorizers.

More than a dozen programs across the country are available to prepare aspiring charter school leaders. They're run by a variety of entities, including universities, charter school networks, state charter school associations, and other nonprofit groups, such as New Leaders for New Schools, based in New York City, and the Charter Schools Development Center, in Sacramento, Calif.

The University of Washington study, which surveyed 13 training programs, suggests that they show promise when compared with traditional leadership-training programs in the relevance of their preparation and in their teaching methods.

"[M]ost charter school leadership programs reported that they are light on lecture, while heavy on field observations, project- and task-based learning, and discussion," the report says.

At the same time, though, it suggests, the programs tend to "miss or treat too lightly" certain issues that many leaders of such schools struggle with most, such as engaging parents and raising money.

“We offer professional stipends to folks to drop everything and spend a year learning how to do this.”

LINDA BROWN

Founder and Executive Director, Building Excellent Schools

And it warns that the specialty programs are too few and small in size relative to the need.

The new, online program at Central Michigan University in Mount Pleasant, Mich., has 21 students in its first cohort, most of them charter school teachers, says David E. Whale, an associate professor of education who runs the program. The program benefits from the expertise of the university's Center for Charter Schools, he says, which is an authorizer granting contracts in Michigan.

Some programs offer generous stipends to candidates.

The Boston-based nonprofit group Building Excellent Schools pays participants \$80,000 for its

intensive, 12-month program. Launched in 2001, the highly selective fellowship aims to prepare leaders to design, found, and operate high-performing urban charter schools.

"We offer professional stipends to folks to drop everything and spend a year learning how to do this," says Linda Brown, the group's founder and executive director. Private philanthropies, including the Walton Family Foundation, support the effort.

The fellowship typically entails 100 days of training at the organization's central offices in Boston, with visits to more than 30 top-performing urban charter schools in the Northeast. It also involves an extended residency in a high-performing urban charter school. The culmination of the fellowship year is the submission of a thoroughly researched charter application to open a school.

'Grow Your Own' Approach

Several charter school networks have launched their own training programs. While such networks

usually seek to relieve school leaders of many business and operational responsibilities, the programs are tailored to meet the specific approaches and demands of their schools. And they often aim for a "grow your own" approach to leadership, bringing teachers up through the ranks.

"It is very difficult to be a leader in one of our schools if you have not been a highly successful teacher in one of our schools," says Ben Daley, the chief academic officer at High Tech High, writing in an e-mail. "We have a very tight culture."

The San Francisco-based KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) Foundation has been training principals since 2000. Its newest class of Fisher Fellows, announced in July, is 18 strong. The yearlong program, which takes its name from the Doris and Donald Fisher, the philanthropists who underwrite it, includes intensive summer coursework at New York University, residencies at KIPP schools, and individualized coaching from KIPP staff members.

Aspire Public Schools, based in Oakland, Calif., offers a principal-preparation program in cooperation with San Jose State University. The charter-management organization provides faculty members for the two-year program, with candidates earning an administrative credential and a master's degree.

Some programs offer a short crash course, such as the popular one run by the Charter Schools Development Center. "It's a weeklong boot camp for charter leaders," says the center's director, Eric Premack.

School finance, facilities, labor relations, governance matters, and charter school law are among the topics covered. In addition, the center offers a part-time training program for business managers.

Meanwhile, a recent report by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, located in Washington, urges the creation of a "new kind of leadership credential" for charters that would be provided by a variety of local, state, and regional institutions, rather than traditional colleges of education. ■

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Charter management organizations can

Differing Organizational Models Help Charters Divide Up the Load

By Erik W. Robelen

Given the wide range of duties involved in leading a charter school, it can be tough—and, some experts say, inadvisable—for one person to go it alone.

As a result, charter schools have seized on a variety of leadership models. Many take a hybrid approach that spreads responsibilities across two or more individuals, or relies on larger organizations outside the school to carry some of the burden.

“Leading a successful public charter school requires a combination of business skills and education expertise, in varying proportions depending on the school’s organizational design,” says a recent report on the issue by the Washington-based National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

Michael Goldstein, the founder of MATCH Charter Public High School in Boston, says it’s fairly common for a charter to have both an executive director and a principal, which is the approach his school uses.

“The executive director thinks about budget, fundraising, compliance, legal [issues], facilities, all those types of things,” he says, while the principal is focused on matters more directly related to “kids, teachers, parents, and academic achievement.”

Charter management organizations, which operate networks of like-minded charters, also can play a vital role.

“Sometimes, school operations and back-office services are largely handled by a charter management organization, while the on-site administrator resembles in many ways the traditional ‘principal’ of the district-run school down the street,” says the report by the national charter group. Or an affiliated institution, such as a community group that helped launch the school, may assume many of those duties, the report says.

Avoiding ‘Superman’ Model

Anser Charter School in Boise, Idaho, has two leaders—an administrator and a principal—who jointly report to the school’s board of directors.

“We share the top of the food chain, below the board,” says Suzanne Burton, the administrator, who handles the business and operations side of the K-8 school, which serves nearly 200 students.

The approach is a good fit for the two leaders’ skill sets and personalities, she says. “If it’s dirty or it’s fallen down or broken, I have to take care of it,” Burton says. “[The principal] loves that.”

Global Village Academy, a K-8 charter in Aurora, Colo., has a three-person leadership

team, with a principal on top, an assistant principal, and a director of operations. Even so, the school’s principal, Christina M. Burton, still must manage a range of responsibilities beyond education, such as marketing and political relations.

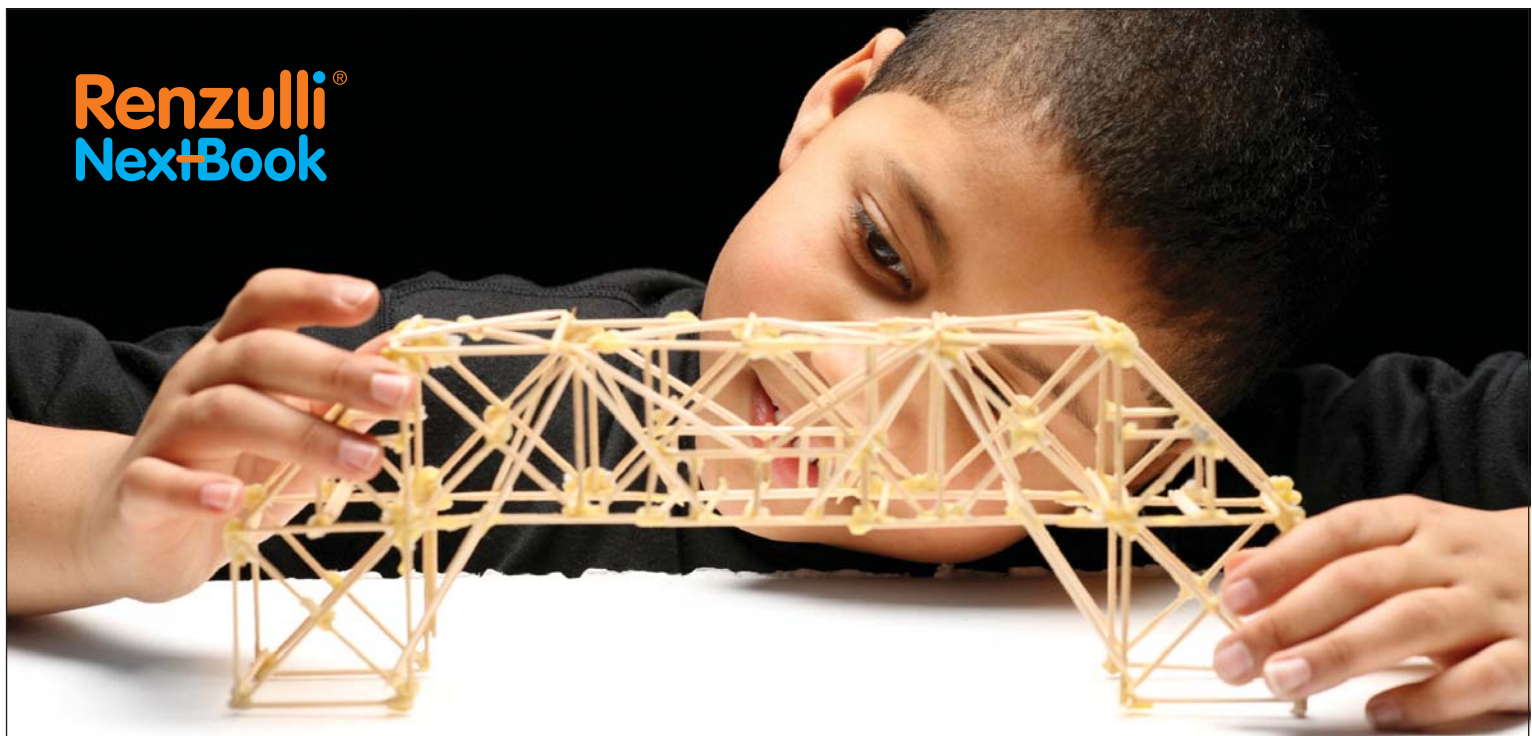
“My role as an instructional leader is absolutely central,” she says, “but it’s not my only role.”

Matt Candler, the chief executive officer of New Schools for New Orleans, a nonprofit group that works with that city’s charter schools and helps train new charter leaders, says his group encourages new charter leaders to hire a “right hand” person to handle operations and finance months before the school opens. But he argues that the person at the top of the organizational chart should have instructional expertise.

“They need to be accountable for the core business of teaching students,” Candler says. A school will not become great because of the leader’s talent in finance, he says, “but because you have a vision for what great instruction is.”

Some experts say that whatever the leadership structure, it’s important to avoid the “superman model,” in which one person handles all leadership demands. That approach can more easily cause principals to burn out, and often such a school falters when that leader departs.

Robin J. Lake, the executive director of the National Charter School Research Project at the University of Washington, says it’s important to have a clear line of accountability. “It doesn’t necessarily have to be all on one person,” she says, “but you have to be clear on who is ultimately responsible if things go badly.” ■

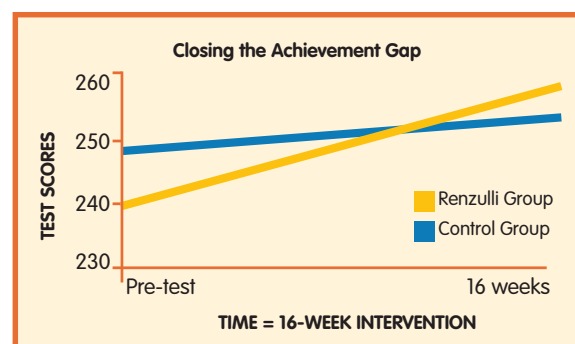


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play a vital role.

The High-Wire Job of Charter School Leadership

By Christine Campbell, Betheny Gross, & Robin Lake

As it turns out, running a charter school poses different challenges from those of running a traditional public school.

Some of the challenges, of course, are the same. Both charter and regular public school leaders are responsible for shaping a school's vision, fostering trust between adults and students, managing resources well, and balancing the inevitable pressures inside and outside the school's environment.

But being a charter school leader brings other challenges not often faced by principals of traditional public schools, who receive support from their districts' central offices.

For the charter school leader, there is no central office to recruit students and teachers, secure and manage facilities, or raise money and manage school finances.

Now that the charter school movement is halfway through its second decade, how are charter school leaders facing these

challenges? What do we know about their experiences?

In 2007, the National Charter School Research Project at the University of Washington surveyed charter school leaders in six states: Arizona, California, Hawaii, North Carolina, Rhode Island, and Texas. We coupled our survey results with the data gathered by the National Center for Education Statistics' Schools and Staffing Survey, which surveyed both charter school and traditional public school leaders.

Who Are Charter School Leaders?

We learned that charter school leaders are deeply committed and driven by their schools' individual missions. But they told us that they struggle with all the "extras" of leading a charter school. That's especially true of leaders with less experience.

On the surface, they look like most traditional public school principals. Our survey found that only 13 percent of charter

RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

This essay and the accompanying charts and graphs were commissioned for this "Leading for Learning" report from the National Charter School Research Project by the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center. The charter schools project is being conducted by researchers at the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington, in Seattle.

school leaders moved into their current positions from jobs outside education. This finding is contrary to the expectation that the ranks of charter school leaders would draw heavily from noneducators.

In fact, most charter school leaders are professional educators. Our survey shows the vast majority (74 percent) earned their highest degrees in traditional educational training from colleges of education. Almost 60 percent are or have been state-certified school principals. Their demographic profile, too—race and gender—is not much different from that of traditional public

school principals.

A key difference separating charter school leaders from traditional public school principals is their experience with school leadership.

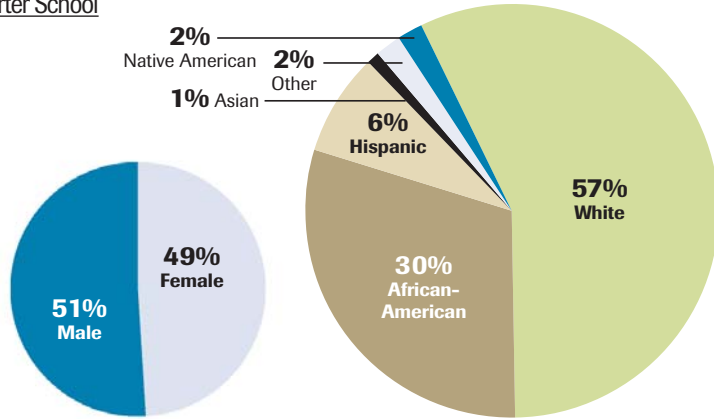
The federal data suggest that almost 30 percent of charter school leaders have led a school for two years or less, compared with only 16 percent of traditional public school principals. Moreover, as many as 12 percent of charter school leaders were under the age of 35—young professionals who, in many cases, jumped straight from teaching into the school leader's role. On

The Charter School Director . . .

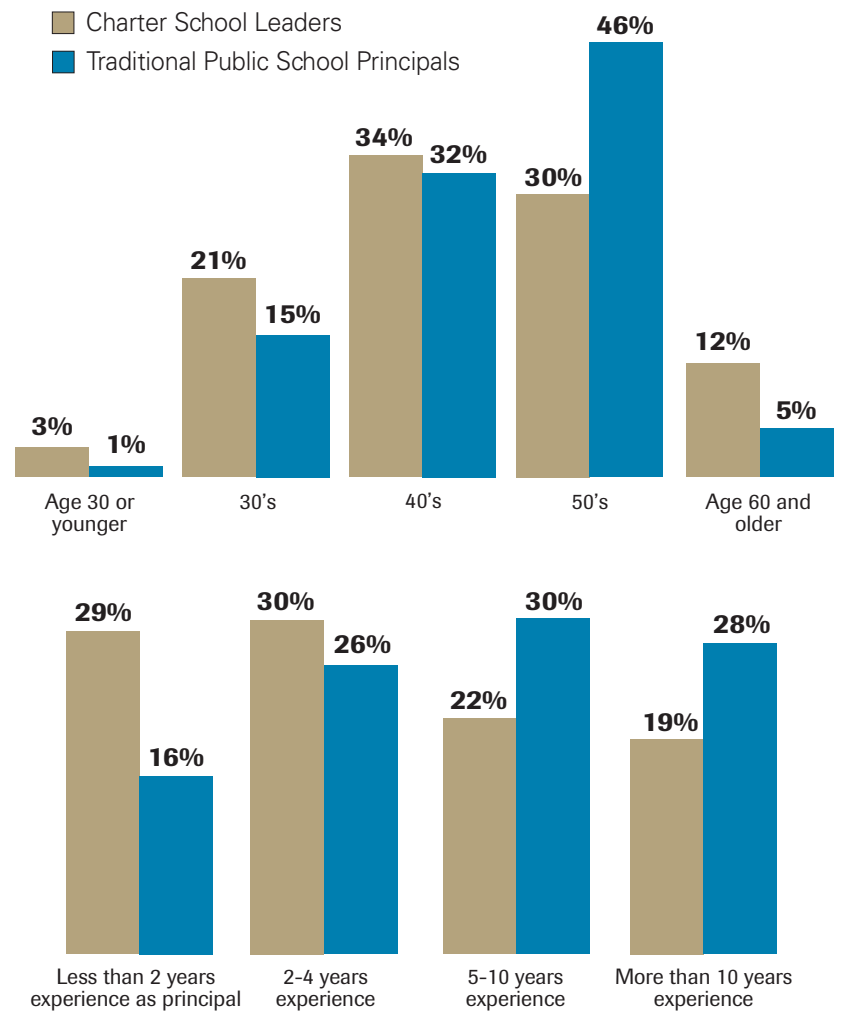
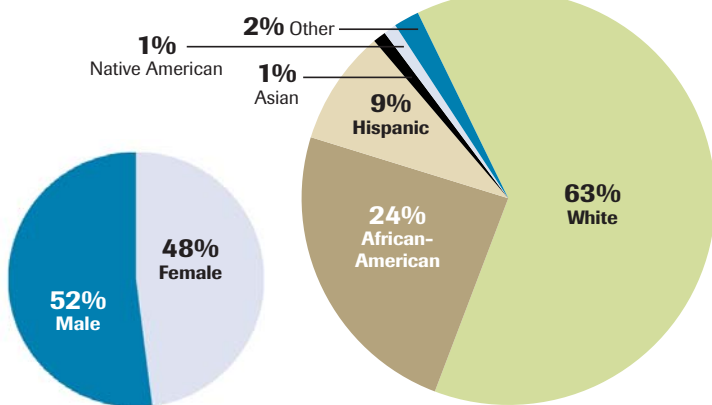
Race and Gender

According to the 2003-04 Schools and Staffing Survey, charter school leaders and their traditional public school peers, for the most part, look similar when it comes to race and gender.

Charter School



Traditional Public School



Age and Experience

While the majority of charter school leaders have advanced degrees in education and prior careers in education, they tend to be newer to leadership than traditional public school principals. About 30 percent of charter leaders have directed a school for less than two years. A comparable share of traditional principals have more than 10 years of school leadership experience. Charter school leaders are also more likely to be in their 30's and less likely to be age 50 or over. There are also slightly more charter leaders younger than 35 and more older than 60.

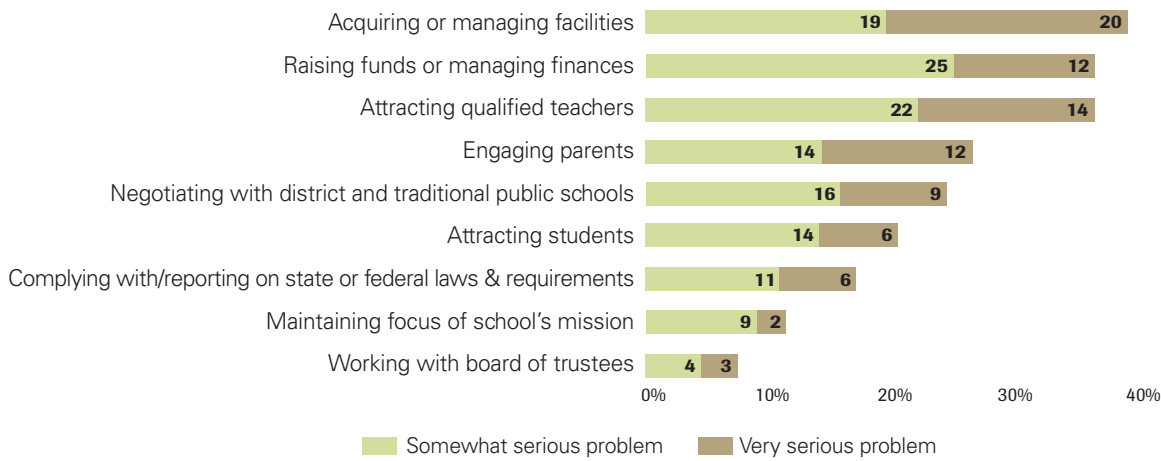
SOURCE: 2003-04 Schools and Staffing Survey, National Center for Education Statistics

For the charter school leader, there is no ce

... Taking on a Tough Job

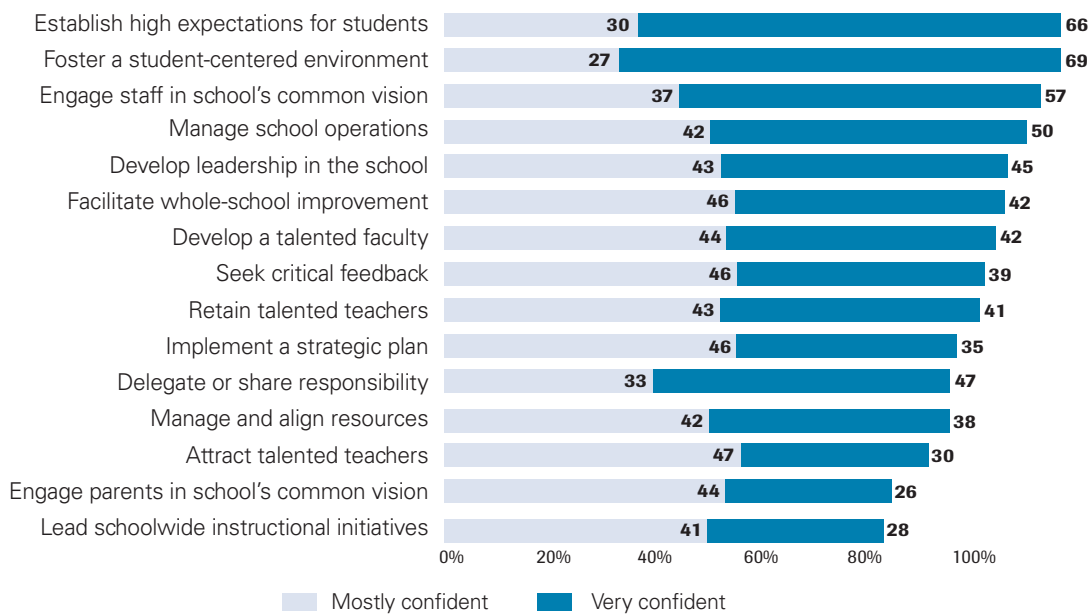
Organizational Challenges in Charter Schools

Charter school leaders say they rarely struggle with mission or even governance issues. In addition, few report conflict with their boards or find compliance and reporting to be a problem. The issues ranked as the most serious problems by charter leaders are finding and managing facilities, hiring qualified and talented teachers, and managing finances.



Confidence to Take on the Job

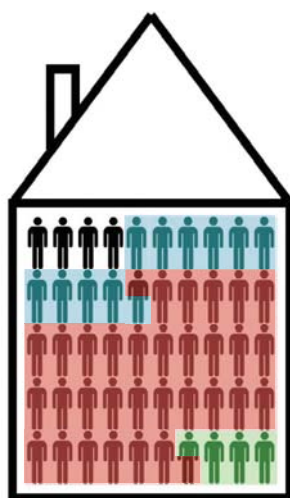
Charter school leaders are very sure of their abilities in areas related to school culture, with nearly all mostly or very confident in fostering a student-centered learning environment and establishing high expectations for students. More leaders express doubts in the areas of managing finances, hiring teachers, and leading strategic planning. Confidence levels depend on leaders' experience and other factors. Directors in their first or second year are the least confident in almost every aspect of school leadership.



High Turnover Predicted

As with many careers today, including the traditional public school principal, turnover among charter school leaders is common. One-third plan to leave their current positions in the next three years, and about 70 percent expect to move on in the next five years. Half of those departing charter directors intend to remain in the education field, although few expect to transition to other leadership positions in charter schools.

SOURCE: Survey of charter leaders in Arizona, California, Hawaii, North Carolina, Rhode Island, and Texas, National Charter School Research Project



Share of charter school leaders who plan to leave their schools

- ...in more than 10 years (8%)
- ...in the next 6 to 10 years (21%)
- ...in the next 2 to 5 years (64%)
- ...within the next year (7%)

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7

schools were making efforts to cultivate future leaders in those schools.

Leading With the Head, Heart

From recent graduates to those nearing the end of their careers, passionate, hard-working people appear to be stepping up to the challenge of charter school leadership. But our work suggests that such spirit needs to be met with the skills and confidence to handle the everyday demands of the job.

To reinforce their entrepreneurial energy and commitment to mission, charter school leaders—especially those new to school administration—need training and experience in the administrative aspects of their roles as school leaders. They also need willing teachers, staff members, and governing boards that are capable of sharing some part of these leadership tasks.

Expanding peer-mentoring opportunities for leaders is an easy and effective way for new leaders to learn and get support from experienced ones. More charter-specific training options that include meaningful internships would also go a long way to filling gaps in the skill sets of charter school leaders. Public and private financial-incentive programs could help stimulate the supply of more extensive on-the-job training and mentoring opportunities.

Distributing certain administrative, fundraising, and curriculum-development tasks could lessen the burden on charter leaders. Some charter schools do this by sharing leadership within the school. Other charter leaders rely on management organizations to help with the business side, so they can focus on instructional leadership. These strategies may open up more time for strategic planning, while also building management capacity and encouraging others to aspire to the role.

Our survey shows that charter school leaders with a handle on these tasks, especially the tough administrative and management ones, often have handled them before. It's a case where experience really does matter. Policymakers and funders need to recognize this and help charter schools build the management capacity necessary for their success.

Help could include state and local incentives for leaders to stay on the job, or sabbaticals that would let them refresh and return. Creating stronger incentives for experienced school leaders to try charter schools, and providing funding for promising teachers to receive leadership training, would also help grow a deeper pool of talented leaders.

Running a charter school is challenging. But committed, energetic, and entrepreneurial individuals have taken on this challenge, and countless more are willing to do so. For the charter movement to successfully sustain itself and grow, the commitment of these individuals needs to be reciprocated by the support of those in their schools and in the larger policy community. ■

Christine Campbell is a researcher at the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington, in Seattle; Betheny Gross is a senior researcher at the center; and Robin Lake is the associate director of the center and the executive director of its National Charter School Research Project.

The contents of this essay were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, award number U282N060007. However, it does not necessarily represent the policy of the department, and readers should not assume endorsement by the federal government.

“ They have more ‘distributed’ leadership, so that teachers within the organization take on tasks that are part of the leaders’ jobs, and this enables them to grow their own leaders.”

KATHERINE K. MERSETH

Senior Lecturer, Graduate School of Education, Harvard University

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

which holds a weeklong summer “boot camp” for charter leaders. “You almost never find all of that in one human being.”

Katherine K. Merseth, a senior lecturer at Harvard University’s graduate school of education, says she sees some common traits among leaders at five high-performing charter schools in Massachusetts that she studied for an upcoming book.

Those traits include “a singular focus on student outcomes,” an entrepreneurial mind-set, and a “nimbleness” to quickly shift gears if a particular strategy isn’t working, she says. “They push the kids, they push the staff, they push the parents. ... They feel this sense of urgency to serve these kids.”

Merseth also observed some key similarities across the set of Massachusetts charters in how they approach leadership.

“These five schools rely heavily on what we call home-grown leadership. They promote from within,” she says. “They have more ‘distributed’ leadership, so that teachers within the organization take on tasks that are part of

the leaders’ jobs, and this enables them to grow their own leaders.”

Support, Governance

In the charter sector, schools are free to devise their own management structures. Such freedom has led to a variety of hybrid approaches in which leadership is distributed across two or more individuals, or where a larger management organization or other support organization takes on core business and operations responsibilities.

Meanwhile, a component of leadership for charter schools that some experts say has not received nearly enough attention is the role of the schools’ governing bodies. Those boards generally are responsible for helping shape the schools’ direction, hiring principals, and providing oversight of finances and related matters. Many boards are ill-equipped to handle their crucial job effectively, experts say.

Ultimately, the final level of oversight for charter schools is their authorizers, whether state or local boards of education, universities, or other entities. Authorizers are charged by law with approving the creation of charter schools, monitoring their performance, and deciding whether their charters should be renewed or revoked.

Authorizers, too, have attracted growing attention from leaders in the charter movement, amid concern that some of those authorities have done an inadequate job of providing oversight and have failed to shut down consistent low performers.

With thousands of charter schools now up and running—and thousands more likely to open in the coming years—it seems clear that all such elements of effective leadership and management are critically important to ensuring that these public schools of choice deliver on their promise to serve students well. ■

ABOUT THIS REPORT



This special section is the fifth annual *Education Week* report examining leadership in education, an important topic in an era of high-stakes accountability for public schools. It includes research findings and commentary commissioned from the National Charter Schools Research Project at the University of Washington, in Seattle, by the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center. Christopher B. Swanson, the director of the EPE Research Center, provided oversight for the research appearing in the report.

The project is underwritten by a grant from The Wallace Foundation, which seeks to support and share effective ideas and practices that expand learning and enrichment opportunities for all people. Its three current objectives are:

- Strengthening education leadership to improve student achievement;
- Enhancing out-of-school learning opportunities; and
- Expanding participation in arts and culture.

For more information and research on these and related topics, please visit the Knowledge Center at www.wallacefoundation.org.

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Opening a School Draws On All of Founders' Skills

'To Do' List Includes Marketing, Hiring, Facilities

By Lesli A. Maxwell
New Orleans

Tiffany Hardrick and Keith Sanders arrive in front of a tidy, rebuilt brick home on a mostly deserted block where the floodwaters of Hurricane Katrina left every house in some state of ruin.

The founders of a new charter school for boys in New Orleans East are here on a humid spring afternoon to see Jordan Robinson, a 5th grader, and his family. Jordan, who has been attending a school taken over by the state of Louisiana after the storm, will be among the inaugural class of 6th graders at their school, the Miller-McCoy Academy for Mathematics and Business. Hardrick and Sanders, the co-principals, have come to talk with Jordan and his grandmother about expectations for Miller-McCoy students.

There will be homework every night, they tell Jordan, who listens quietly. Students must wear a prep-school-

style uniform featuring khaki pants, a tie, and a dark blazer bearing the school's crest.

"You're a Miller-McCoy man now," Sanders tells Jordan. "You represent our school everywhere you go."

And, if he keeps a grade point average of at least 2.5, the principals say, Jordan can play any of four sports—football, track, basketball, and baseball.

Each of them signs the Miller-McCoy "covenant," a document outlining the responsibilities of the student, parents or guardians, and the principal. Jordan's teacher will also sign the covenant.

Then the principals make a bold pledge to Jordan and his grandmother. "If you stick with us all the way through, we will get you to college," Hardrick says. "And at the end of the day, if we don't get you to college, it's not your failure. It's ours."

In less than a year, Hardrick and Sanders—working at least 70 to 80 hours a week in a shared office, from their sparsely furnished apartments, and sometimes in their vehicles—went from writing a charter school proposal to sitting in the homes of their new students to guarantee them and their parents academic success. They share an intense sense of mission that research shows is common to charter school leaders.

The school, which opened Aug. 11, serves 108 boys in 6th grade and 140 boys in 9th grade. Hardrick oversees

the middle school program, which will eventually expand to include the 7th and 8th grades; Sanders is in charge of the high school, which will grow to serve 10th, 11th, and 12th grade students.

"These types of school leaders really have a no-nonsense, bedrock belief that all children, regardless of income or background, can learn and achieve at higher levels than the rest of us in society tend to believe," observes Greg Richmond, the president and chief executive officer of the Chicago-based National Association of Charter School Authorizers. "Every kid coming into those schools quickly finds out that the leaders and the teachers really expect things from them and hold them to it, day after day after day."

Richmond, whose organization has been helping Louisiana vet and evaluate charter school proposals since the 2005 hurricane made charters a centerpiece of efforts to revive public education in New Orleans, emphasizes that such beliefs and characteristics are not unique to charter school leaders.

"It's not that people in charter schools are genetically better," he says, "it's just that the charter model allows them to do what they need to do for kids."

Hard to Resist

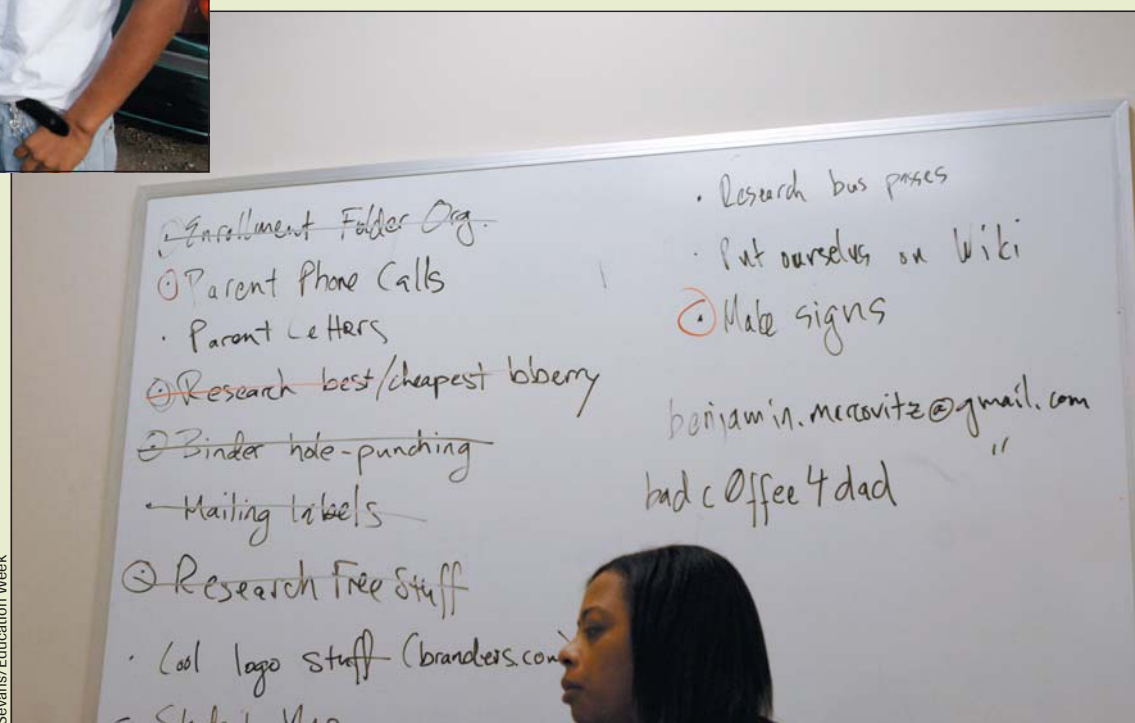
A little more than a year ago, Hardrick and Sanders weren't even considering leaving their jobs as

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Above: Keith Sanders talks to student Darryl Hill about the upcoming school year as his mother, Tysha Hill, and Tiffany Hardrick look on.

Right: A list of tasks covers a whiteboard in the office space provided for Hardrick by New Schools for New Orleans, which financially supported the launch of the new charter school.



Sevans/Education Week

An estimated 4,300 charter schools are up

Many Charter Boards Seen as Unprepared

Experts call for more training in members' responsibilities

By Catherine Gewertz

As charter schools have proliferated, they have been praised, criticized, and debated. Studies of their academic performance have stacked up on policymakers' desks. But the boards that run them serve in relative obscurity, even as they face distinctive challenges.

An estimated 4,300 charter schools are up and running in the United States, and they're required by state law to have governing boards. That means tens of thousands of board members are grappling with making such schools work. But no comprehensive profile of the panels has been compiled—an information gap that some researchers say impedes efforts to strengthen them.

"We're 17 years into the charter school movement, and we still don't have a good descriptive analysis of those boards," says Todd M. Ziebarth, the vice president for policy at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, located in Washington. "Without that, it is hard

to get to real specific prescriptions for improving effectiveness."

But gradually, rough outlines are emerging of the issues that are specific to the boards of these quasi-independent public schools.

Some problems—like micromanaging school affairs—are common to both charter and traditional school boards. At Silver State Charter High School in Carson City, Nev., for example, the board banned open-toe footwear after one member spotted a school secretary in sandals, says founding Principal Steve Knight.

Most states do not mandate training for regular school district or charter school board members. That leaves them unprepared for the challenges of managing complex finances and data systems, and of focusing on big-picture policy instead of day-to-day detail, says Brian L. Carpenter, who trains charter school boards across the country through his nonprofit Mount Pleasant, Mich.-based National Charter Schools Institute. Since charter board members don't have the expertise of a district's central-office staff to rely on, training is particularly impor-

tant for them, experts say.

A forthcoming study on charter school boards by the Center on Educational Governance at the University of Southern California's Rossier school of education found that of the District of Columbia and the 40 states with charter school laws, only one state's law—Florida's—requires training for charter school board members.

A Growing Issue

But training requirements vary widely, the center found. Florida's mandated 12-hour training covers topics including its charter school law, governance best practices, public-records and open-meetings law, accounting and attendance rules, insurance coverage, and facilities requirements. Nevada requires only that board members sign affidavits stating that they have read literature about their roles and responsibilities. In some states, training mandates are in written or unwritten rules, but not in law. In others, training is altogether voluntary.

Priscilla Wohlstetter, who directs the center, says fiscal mismanagement and poor governance are the two leading problems with char-

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Calif. Group Puts Muscle Into Charters

By Lesli A. Maxwell

In California, where a quarter-million students will attend charter schools this year, many charters have tapped a savvy advocacy group for support and expertise.

In the 16 years since the state first permitted the creation of the independent public schools, the California Charter Schools Association has evolved from a loose network of charter leaders and idealists swapping ideas and information to an influential political player with financial backing from such philanthropic heavy-hitters as the Walton Family Foundation. While most states where charter schools operate have some sort of umbrella charter group, the California association stands out for the range and sophistication of support it offers.

The association arranges financing to help new charters secure buildings and pay for the first several months of operating expenses. It offers technical-assistance programs and training for charter school leaders. The group set up a system for charters to collectively buy insurance policies, such as workers' compensation, more affordably. And it has built up a legal-defense fund, though the association keeps the dollar amount private.

"California's association was the first to take a very dramatic turn to a much more professional and multipurpose organization," says Nelson Smith, the president of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, based in Washington.

"They had funders and business leaders there who wanted to see a single, major voice emerge for charters, and they have committed tremendous resources to supporting charter schools throughout their whole life cycles."

Quality-Assurance Program

In May 2007, the association launched its Certified Charter Schools Program, the first time that a state's charter school sector had agreed on a set of quality stan-

dards and said it would recognize schools that lived up to them.

Now, 70 percent of the charter schools in California are CCSA members and are putting themselves under the scrutiny of an outside reviewer to judge how well they educate children, govern themselves, and manage their finances. Participation is a condition of being represented by the association.

This year, 70 to 80 new charters will open across California, joining nearly 700 others already operating. Of the 476 charter schools that are members of the association, 73 have already been "certified," and

403 others are in the certification pipeline.

The CCSA has evolved into a major force in California education since its formation in 2003, though the groundwork for the association had been laid by its predecessor, the California Network of Educational Charters. That organization, founded in 1993 to bring the state's early charter leaders together, saw its profile rise in the wake of a scandal in Fresno. A charter school operator there was accused of engaging in

erode such schools' autonomy.

"In some ways, that legislation was the impetus to create the association," says Caprice Young, who this month stepped down as the association's chief executive officer. "We could see a situation in which every time one charter school caught a cold, the legislature was going to prescribe penicillin for everyone. Our first job was to end this pattern of re-regulation and to make sure that legislators even knew what charter schools were, and that they all had charters operating in their districts."

The association's power and influence has grown steadily. It now has an annual budget of \$12.5

“The California association is its own powerful interest group that operates in the halls of the legislature and behind the scenes just like any other special-interest organization.”

BRUCE FULLER

Professor of Education and Public Policy
University of California, Berkeley

million, employs 60 staff members, including its own governmental advocates or lobbyists, and runs six regional offices.

"The irony is that in the 1990s, when grassroots charter activists were rising up in California and Minnesota, they would argue that the public schools were captured by special interest groups," says Bruce Fuller, a professor of education and public policy at the University of California, Berkeley. "But now, the California association is its own powerful interest group that operates in the halls of the

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and running in the United States.



Lee Celano for Education Week

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principals in Memphis, Tenn., where both were trained by the New Leaders for New Schools program. They'd had the same veteran principal as a mentor and were later chosen to lead two struggling middle schools in that city.

But during a May 2007 trip to New Orleans to help out with a principal-recruitment effort, they caught the eye of Matt Candler, who pitched them on the idea of leaving Memphis to start a new charter school here.

"It started as a conversation over dinner, and it was just obvious to me that they are extremely passionate about the outcomes of where students' lives can go if the conditions are right in schools," says Candler, the chief executive officer of New Schools for New Orleans, a nonprofit that supports charter schools. "What struck me about them was that they had a rare combination of being data-driven and were fluent in how important using

Sanders reviews the school's "covenant" with student Darryl Hill at his home. Both Sanders and Hardrick met with each of the 200 students before their school opened last month.

'data is in the culture of a school and the impact on student achievement.'

Hardrick and Sanders were interested. It was hard to resist the opportunity to create what they envision as an ideal school for poor and minority students. They also felt good about the shape their schools in Memphis were in and about their likely successors as principals, which made considering a move to New Orleans easier.

Two months later, they finished their detailed proposal for the school—right down to the name Miller-McCoy, inspired by Kelly Miller, a mathematician and Howard University professor who was the first African-American admitted to Johns Hopkins University, and Elijah McCoy, a prominent black inventor—and New Schools for New Orleans agreed to back them.

"What we did is put our passion on paper," says Sanders, 36. "We understood that there was a need in New Orleans for more good schools, and we had both had success in raising student achievement in our schools in Memphis. We had an idea we really thought would work."

The Miller-McCoy charter was approved last December by the

Charter Boards Wrestle With Oversight, Money

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ter school boards. Both are issues far from unfamiliar to traditional district school boards.

Charter school boards do confront issues that are unique to them, however. And the potential impact of failing to prepare them properly for their jobs is growing, authorities on school governance say.

"As there are more and more charter schools, this issue is bound to get bigger," says Donald R. McAdams, who studies and trains school boards through his Houston-based Center for the Reform of School Systems.

"Unlike traditional boards, they have fundraising responsibilities," notes McAdams, a former member of Houston's school board. "It's important that they know the charter laws in their states."

While most traditional district board members are elected, most charter board members are chosen by the school's founders. Often, they were friends or close associates of founders, or were leading activists in the gargantuan effort to get the school's doors open. Those dynamics, experts say, can both enrich and hamper a board's work.

"By their very nature, they are very close to their constituents," says Jan Rhode, the director of board development for the Minnesota School Boards Association, which helps the state department of education provide training for charter school boards. "They know the parents, the children, the teachers, and their hopes and dreams very personally. And that's good."

"But it puts them under tremendous pressure to respond to all those people and their specific issues," Rhode says. "They need to stay focused on vision, mission, goals."

Many boards find it tough to find make the transition from early-stage school startup to long-term vision, says Robin J. Lake, the director of the National Charter School Research Project

at the University of Washington. "Many boards started as friends of the school, or of the founder, with a very vested interest in the school's day-to-day operations," she says. "It can be hard for them to get some distance, to work like a professional, policymaking body."

Heather Shepherd, the first head of school at Channing Hall, a 2-year-old charter school serving grades K-8 in Draper, Utah, says she believes board members would benefit from three distinct stages of training: one during startup, to support them as they secure facilities, funding, and staff members to open the school; a second as the school opens, to help them step back from their original roles into bigger-picture oversight; and another in the school's second year, to solidify that new role.

Her board is "awesome" in its dedication and ongoing self-education, Shepherd says, but "they had trouble letting go"—including resistance to giving her authority over teacher hiring and firing—after the startup phase.

'Founderitis'

Carpenter of the National Charter Schools Institute often sees cases of "founderitis."

Out of allegiance to a founder who "moved heaven and earth" to open a school, and then chose them to serve as its first board, panelists abdicate too much authority, he says, and the founder "ends up in charge of everything, and the board does what he tells it to do."

Marci Cornell-Feist, a Harvard, Mass.-based consultant who has trained charter school boards nationally for 10 years, says the power to select board members is a potentially important tool in building a strong board well matched to a school's needs.

"You can identify skills and qualities you are looking for," she says, "instead of just holding an election and seeing who runs."

Authorizers—the state agencies or other bodies legally empowered to grant charters—can play a major role in ensuring strong charter boards, Cornell-Feist says. In Massachusetts,

for instance, the entire founding board must be extensively interviewed before a decision to grant a charter is made, she says.

Too many charter school boards lack sufficient independence from their schools' managers, governance experts say. Carpenter knows of several schools in which a brother or sister of the school director serves on the board. Rhode points out that Minnesota—the first state to establish charter schools—requires that teachers form the majority on charter school boards.

"How does a teacher truly take their teacher hat off when they come into the boardroom?" Rhode asks. "How do they deal with salary issues? How can they go against the recommendations of their director when their director is their immediate supervisor?"

The question of board independence has been particularly pointed when a large nonprofit group or for-profit company manages charter schools. Carpenter cites one instance in which an education management organization that he declines to name chose the auditor for its schools, and the board approved it without a question.

A 2007 report by the Ohio state auditor found that many of the charter schools run in that state by Akron-based White Hat Management had the same handful of board members in common. White Hat spokesmen did not return calls for this story. But a company spokesman has said previously that White Hat does not pick board members for its schools. The Ohio Federation of Teachers' research into four private-management organizations in the state, including White Hat, has found overlapping board memberships or a "superboard" controlling all of a company's charters. (*See Education Week, March 15, 2006.*)

Gary J. Miron, a Western Michigan University education professor who co-wrote a 2002 book about how private management affects public schools, says his research, which focused on schools in Michigan, shows that large management companies often initiate the charter school idea, recruit board members, and take the lead in writing the proposal.

"It's getting the cart before the horse," he

Misconceptions about the very nature of

Louisiana board of education. The two have hardly slowed down since, even as they've endured trying personal circumstances.

Hardrick, 32, is a divorced mother of two who had been a community college professor in Arkansas and a high school math teacher in Memphis before becoming a principal through the New Leaders program. For nearly a year, while she and Sanders planned Miller-McCoy, she drove 800 miles round trip most weekends to visit her two young children, who stayed in Memphis until she relocated them to New Orleans just last month.

Sanders, 36, did the same. His wife and child also remained in Memphis, and will move to New Orleans later this month after his second child is born.

Incubation Money

With only nine months until Miller-McCoy would open in August, Hardrick and Sanders had to recruit local residents to serve on its governing board, hire roughly 20 teachers and other staff members, and secure a building for the school—no easy feat in a city still vexed by a shortage of inhabitable school buildings. By the

end of March, they had lined up space in modular buildings in New Orleans East, on the campus of a school badly damaged by Katrina.

There was also the matter of developing a curriculum that was aligned to the ACT college-entrance exam and incorporated what they consider to be the less rigorous Louisiana state standards. They also faced recruiting students in a highly competitive market.

As the leaders of a charter selected for "incubation" by New Schools for New Orleans, Hardrick and Sanders were each guaranteed \$10,000 a month for 13 months to cover their salaries, benefits, taxes, and incidentals. They also received a \$5,000 technology stipend that pays for the laptop computers and BlackBerrys that Hardrick and Sanders are never without. New Schools provided \$50,000 to help pay for training and professional development for the two principals and the nine school board members, who were selected with New Schools' help. Hardrick and Sanders used some of that money to pay for visits to successful charter schools, including Noble Street College Prep in Chicago and North Star Academy in Newark, N.J., where they looked for ideas and practices to copy.



Lee Celano for Education Week

They set up an office at New Schools for New Orleans' headquarters with other startup charter school leaders and hired their first employee—a staff member who moved from Memphis—to help manage marketing, budget, and enrollment duties.

A big challenge, they knew, would be attracting students. In a city awash in charter schools—roughly 60 percent of public school students attend one of

Hardrick talks with a group of teachers during orientation on July 21, three weeks before the start of school. She was able bring a half-dozen teachers and other staff members from Memphis with her to New Orleans.

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says. "The boards should be the one choosing the management companies. Charter schools are supposed to come from the community, and be autonomous and locally run."

Stewards of Public Schools

Cornell-Feist, the Massachusetts-based consultant, says hiring a nonprofit or for-profit education management company can be a smart decision for a charter school board, because the company can provide curriculum or managerial expertise and financial efficiency the board doesn't have on its own. But she cautions that "where it works well, there is a strong board that hires a strong management company. It doesn't work well where a management company cre-

"It's not a private school," he emphasizes. "You are governing on the public's behalf."

Knight, the principal of Nevada's Silver State Charter High, says his board was "six months into their board term, and they thought we charged money [to attend the school]. They didn't understand how a charter works. Training leaves a lot to be desired."

Awareness of the problem appears to be growing, though. Trainers such as Carpenter and Cornell-Feist report a rising demand for their services. States and charter school associations are also taking steps to educate boards.

The Idaho Charter School Network, for instance, dispatches volunteers from charter schools there to do "team assessments" of network schools that request it. Using four "areas of

or accounting—that can be resources to the schools, says Wohlstetter of USC's Center on Educational Governance.

New Orleans is developing a recruiting system designed to ease the shortage of board members that the city experienced when it tried to get charter schools in place after Hurricane Katrina disrupted the school system in 2005, and to ensure that board members have strong skills. Cornell-Feist works with New Schools for New Orleans, which has incubated many charters, to hold open forums to find interested candidates, and to hunt among respected community members to build a "bank" of those qualified and interested. An initial orientation acquaints candidates with the duties of the position.

Then comes what Cornell-Feist calls "speed-

“The boards should be the one choosing the management companies. Charter schools are supposed to come from the community, and be autonomous and locally run.”

GARY J. MIRON

Education Professor, Western Michigan University

ates or is hired by a weaker board."

Misconceptions about the very nature of charter schools can affect board members. A 2006 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll found that most respondents believed charter schools are private schools. Such misconceptions can aggravate a problem observers say is too common to charter boards: failing to understand their role as stewards of public schools.

During a recent visit with a charter school board in Texas, Carpenter of the National Charter Schools Institute listened as the panel's talk turned to choosing a successor for the school's founding chief executive officer.

"The founder said, 'Oh, you guys don't need to worry about it—it's specified in my will who will take over upon my demise,'" Carpenter recalls. "I nearly fell off my chair. But that perception is prevalent, even among board members.

excellence" defined jointly with California, Colorado, Minnesota, and Oregon, the teams evaluate schools and their boards and produce recommendations for improvement. The network then offers training tailored to a school's needs.

In Utah, charter school leaders have formed a group called CharterSTAR that trains board members in their proper roles and responsibilities.

The federally funded National Resource Center on Charter School Finance & Governance has outlined those and other promising board practices in a recent governance report.

Authorities on the subject say that as more attention is being paid to the need for stronger charter school boards, promising strategies are emerging.

Charter schools are becoming "savvier" about deliberately building boards of professionals with high-level skills—such as in real estate

dating." Charter school representatives sit at tables around the periphery of a high school gym, and potential board candidates rotate around the circuit, talking with them to gauge a good mutual fit. She says the process represents "some powerful board-building" and fuels her optimism that capable boards can be the "unsung heroes" of school reform in needy urban areas. But she still is uneasy that so many board members lack effective preparation.

"As charter schools grow, and as we get networks of charter schools, boards are overseeing \$20 million and \$30 million of public money, and they haven't received training," she said. "It's a weighty thing." ■



A link to "Developing Training Programs for Charter School Governing Board Members" is provided at edweek.org/links.

charter schools can affect board members.

Management Networks Strive To Grow Like-Minded Schools

By Erik W. Robelen

A new approach to the leadership and management of public schools has taken hold over the past decade, with the emergence of nonprofit groups that start and operate networks of charter schools.

Aspire Public Schools, one of the largest of these charter management organizations, or CMOs, has seen its efforts mushroom. The Oakland, Calif.-based organization now operates 21 schools serving some 7,000 students, making it bigger than many school districts. And it plans to keep growing. And growing.

CMOs have sprung up rapidly across the country, from High Tech High in San Diego, to the Noble Network of Charter Schools in Chicago, to Achievement First, which runs charters in Connecticut and New York City.

The organizations aren't easy to categorize. In some ways, CMOs are quasi-school districts, creating alternative systems of centrally managed and supported public schools, typically targeting low-income and minority students in urban areas. But they also are entrepreneurial, independent nonprofit groups that take some of their cues from the corporate sector, and often have people with M.B.A.s in their senior ranks.

Bryan C. Hassel, a charter expert based in Chapel Hill, N.C., says he sees great potential in the CMO approach when compared with that of traditional school districts. But he says that potential may not be easily realized.

"A CMO, at least in theory, can say, 'This is the kind of school we're trying to make, and we're going to build everything to do that,'" he says.

"Most worrisome is just that it's inevitable if you're going to go to scale, you have to standardize things, you have to build processes that then are constraints, and there's not really any way to avoid that altogether."

It's too soon to know the staying power of CMOs, and how big a presence they ultimately may establish in the education landscape. Some analysts say many have taken longer to grow schools than proponents had first expected, and at higher costs than anticipated. Most, if not all, such organizations still rely on philanthropies to help pay the tab for what's usually called the "home office." And CMO leaders admit that they often struggle with the organizational demands of growth.

"There was a time when everybody knew everybody else," says Don Shalvey, the chief executive officer of Aspire Public Schools, founded in 1998. "We're worried about that. ... It's very important to us that people feel connected."

A critical question, especially as CMOs open more schools and expand as organizations, is whether they will be able to live up to the promise of delivering consistently strong academic performance over time.

Concerns About Quality

CMOs have emerged, in part, to provide an alternative to the creation of stand-alone charter schools, amid concerns about the wide variations in quality across the charter sector.

"The basic pattern is, it starts with a high-performing school, or alternatively, a high-performing team of experienced school operators," says James A. Peyser, a partner at the New-Schools Venture Fund, a San Francisco-based

philanthropy that has worked closely with and provided financial support for many CMOs. "It's starting with this core of quality and clarity about the brand, about what the education program and design is, and trying to replicate that, and bring it to scale at multiple schools."

Beyond providing leadership in shaping and maintaining the educational approach and culture of schools, CMOs offer business and operations support that individual charters often struggle with.

The closest cousins of CMOs are probably for-profit educational management organizations, or EMOS, like Edison Learning, formerly Edison Schools Inc. The New York City-based Edison operates dozens of schools, mostly charters, across the country. But it and many other for-profit companies have struggled to make money from running schools.

The CMO idea, which analysts say lacks the political baggage that trails the for-profit groups, has rapidly picked up steam, with financial backing from deep-pocketed donors such as the Seattle-based Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Los Angeles-based Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation. (Both foundations also provide grant support for *Education Week* projects.)

But critics say that CMOs are a far cry from the original idea of charter schools, and that the networks have attracted oversize support from foundations.

Michael Klonsky, the director of the Small Schools Workshop in Chicago and a longtime adviser to small-school startups across the country, including some charters, says CMOs go against the idea that grassroots communities should play an integral role in creating charter schools.

"Somebody with a big idea about schools and a million dollars from Mr. Gates or Mr. Broad comes into a community and plops it down," he says.

"The charter movement was founded as a re-

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Calif. Association Offers Charters Strong Backing

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legislature and behind the scenes just like any other special-interest organization."

The association's growth has been fueled by the infusion of millions of dollars from the Walton Family Foundation, based in Bentonville, Ark., and the San Francisco-based Pisces Foundation, which expanded the association's budget to pay for regional offices and hiring more staff members.

Another factor was the hiring of Young, a former president of the Los Angeles Unified School District's board, to be the association's leader and the chief spokesperson for California's charter movement. And the high-profile involvement of entrepreneurs such as Reed Hastings, the founder and chief executive of Netflix, the online DVD-rental service, who served as president of the California state board of education, and Steve Poizner, who

is California's insurance commissioner, brought clout and credibility to the association and its goals.

"There was this core group in the charter movement from the beginning that believed that everything needed to be about the quality of schools, and that we had to make charter schools and high performance mean the same thing," says Jim Blew, the director of K-12 education programs for the Walton Family Foundation. "Then when you start to give resources and get a leader like Caprice at the helm, that gets a lot of traction."

Legal-Defense Fund

Since 2003, Walton has given more than \$6 million for the association's general operations, says Blew. The foundation has also contributed to its legal-defense fund and its insurance program, known as CharterSafe. Young serves on the board of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools and is a widely sought-after expert in other states that are aspiring to emulate some of the California association's strategies and initiatives.

Fuller, the Berkeley professor, points to the association's influence

on Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and cites its success in persuading the Republican governor to include a special set-aside for charter schools—nearly \$500 million—in California's most recent statewide school bond for education facilities.

"This governor, during his two terms, has come out with glowing press releases about charters, and he's given them more operational dollars and boosted their facilities support," Fuller says. "The association and Caprice Young are behind all of that."

In the Democratic-controlled legislature, though, the CCSA has won few reliable allies in the majority party, Fuller says. But one of its frequent opponents says the association is still a formidable force in legislative and legal matters.

"They've been more effective at playing defense in the legislature and in influencing the actions of the state board of education," says Scott P. Plotkin, the executive director of the California School Boards Association. And, Plotkin says, the association has been particularly good at wielding influence at the local level, sometimes in what his group sees as a negative way.

"There is a strong view among

many school board members that charter people have managed to insinuate themselves to the head of the line, even though they say all the time that they don't get their fair share," Plotkin says. "And, more and more, there is a growing perception that with their growing legal fund they are going to go district to district and threaten major lawsuits."

Earlier this year, the CCSA settled a lawsuit with the 708,000-student Los Angeles Unified district over what it argued had been the district's failure to provide adequate space for charters.

Still, the association, in many ways, sees itself as the scrappy outsider that doesn't have the same power as the California Teachers Association or the school boards' group.

"[W]e are still aware of the fact that we could be crushed in a heartbeat," Young says. "But the fact of the matter is that there are a quarter of a million kids receiving high-quality education in charters in this state, and the families of those students are not going to allow that option to be taken away."

"There is power in that." ■

Critics say CMOs are a far cry from the





Above: Hardrick and Sanders observe a class on Aug. 11, the opening day of school. **Left:** Students line up outside the modular building in East New Orleans, behind a school damaged by Hurricane Katrina. **Below:** Math teacher Angie Hunt gives 6th grader Alvito Jones a high five.

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the more than 40 charters that have proliferated since the hurricane—there’s a lot of competition. Miller-McCoy’s identity as a school for boys set it apart immediately, but also led to some initial confusion among New Orleans parents who had only known all-boys schools that were parochial or private and cost money.

“We had to add ‘free tuition’ to our marketing campaign so that parents wouldn’t assume that Miller-McCoy would be out of reach,” Hardrick says.

Staking Out Neutral Ground

Breaking through the dense layers of charter school promotions wasn’t easy. Last spring, dozens of different charters had enrollment campaigns under way, with radio spots, advertisements on city buses, and signs cluttering New Orleans’ grassy medians, known locally as neutral ground.

On a sweaty April afternoon, Hardrick and Sanders drove across the Mississippi River bridge to set up signs in Algiers, part of New Orleans’ West Bank community. It was their first outreach in that part of the city, which suffered less storm damage and had become home for many returning residents. Scouring for empty or nearly empty pieces of neutral ground that other charters hadn’t targeted already, they staked some 50 signs within a half-hour. Then it was back over the bridge to start the evening’s round of home visits with students and parents.



Photos by Lee Celano for Education Week

Their biggest marketing coup, Hardrick says, was the billboard they leased on Interstate 10 in downtown New Orleans, near the Superdome. The sign included their personal cellphone numbers, and as soon as the advertisement was up, “the calls started rolling in,” Hardrick says. When they could gain access, the principals visited schools around the city to tell students about Miller-McCoy.

Collaborative, Not Timid

Terrence A. Brown, a regional superintendent in Memphis who mentored Hardrick and Sanders, says the two leaders succeeded at their respective middle schools. Both oversaw significant increases in test scores in two to three years. At Lanier Middle School, Hardrick expanded the number of single-gender courses that had started when

Brown was principal. She used data to show skeptical teachers that in a mathematics class of mixed-ability 7th grade girls, 100 percent passed the state math exam.

“They are both collaborative leaders, and neither of them is timid about holding people accountable,” says Brown, who has advised them on the development of their curriculum and instructional models for Miller-McCoy.

Hardrick and Sanders also have drawn on their Memphis network to bring a half-dozen teachers and other staff members to Miller-McCoy. One of them will be Miller-McCoy’s athletic director and dean of discipline.

Science teacher Detra Humble, another Memphis recruit, says she was willing to uproot so she could continue to work for Sanders, who had been her principal at Riverview Middle School. She arrived here in July and became immersed in planning lessons and

writing interim assessments with the school’s other science teachers.

“When Mr. Sanders first told me he was leaving, I was disappointed, but when he said he’d be starting a charter school in New Orleans, I told him right away I wanted to come too,” Humble says. “I am still a new teacher, this will be my fourth year, and I still have a lot of optimism and idealism about what I can do in the classroom for kids. But I wanted to be sure I’d still have a boss that believes the same things and has the same passion.”

Richmond of the national charter school authorizers’ group says cultivating teachers like Humble is a hallmark of the best school leaders.

“They inspire teachers, and they can turn around the careers of teachers who have been frustrated or have been burned out,” he says. “They also are capable of involving the broader community and bringing the outside world into their school.”

But to the hard-charging Hardrick and Sanders, no part of preparing for the opening of Miller-McCoy has been as important, or time-intensive, as the home visits with students and families. The same night they visited Jordan Robinson and his family, the two principals delivered their college pledge to three more boys and their families.

And in the weeks that followed, nearly 200 other students and parents heard it as well. The promise of preparing their students for college is the central tenet to which Hardrick and Sanders adhere, although in a city where most public school students lagged academically before Katrina, and many missed school after the storm, delivering on that pledge won’t be easy.

“To go and visit all of these kids in their homes and sit on their couches with their parents is the most important work we can do right now,” Sanders says after leaving the Robinsons’ home. “I think it has a powerful impact on all of us. It establishes accountability for everyone. If we didn’t believe this was possible, we wouldn’t be pledging what we are to parents.” ■

original idea of charter schools.

Quasi-Districts Aim To Guide Charters

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jection of public schools managed from a central office,” says Marc Dean Millot, the editor of the Alexandria, Va.-based online newsletter *School Improvement Industry Week*, in a 2007 podcast for the newsletter. “Today, the movement appears to celebrate top-down strategies that rely on management elites and standardized school designs,” says Millot, who also writes edbizbuzz, an independent blog on edweek.org.

But Hassel, the North Carolina-based expert, says CMOS bring a welcome diversity to the sector.

“We shouldn’t be thinking, ‘Every school should have total autonomy, and any move away from that is a betrayal of the [charter] concept,’” he says. “Freedom from the constraints that get in the way of results is the important concept, whether that freedom resides at the CMO level or the school level.”

Getting an accurate count of CMOS isn’t easy. It depends on how they’re defined, and some are just emerging. One recent estimate placed the number at about three dozen. That figure comes from the designers of what’s being billed as the first comprehensive look at the efficacy of CMOS nationally. The longitudinal study, led by the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington, in Seattle, and Mathematica Policy Research, of Princeton, N.J., will examine the impact of CMOS on student achievement, and the internal structures, practices, and policy contexts that influence those outcomes.

Robin J. Lake, the associate director of the center, says the data she’s seen suggest many CMOS are showing strong academic achievement in their schools in comparison with neighboring districts. But she cautions that the results generally are not based on very sophisticated measures, a shortcoming the study aims to overcome.

One factor to consider, analysts caution, is that charters, as schools of choice, may be attracting families that are more motivated than those whose children remain in regular public schools.

‘Growth Is Critical’

Even as CMOS bear some striking resemblances to school districts—the organizational charts, for instance, often look similar—there are plenty of differences.

“School districts are kind of like archaeology digs,” says Peyser of the NewSchools Venture Fund. “There are these layers of reform initiatives and programs and practices that get piled on top of one another.”

By contrast, he says, “the luxury CMOS have is they are starting with a blank sheet of paper, which allows them to build the systems and infrastructure around a specific—and, one hopes, high-performing—school design or set of educational principles.”

Also unlike districts, CMOS are not governed by publicly elected or politically appointed school boards. Advocates note that this difference helps them avoid shifting political winds that might dramatically change their work. Instead, like most nonprofit organizations, they are overseen by self-perpetuating boards of trustees. The ultimate accountability mechanism comes through the charter contract for each school with an authorizer, such as a local or state board of education. Authorizers are charged by state law with approving the creation of charters schools, monitoring their performance, and deciding whether to renew or revoke their charters.

Another difference from districts is that some CMOS manage schools in multiple cities or states. Aspire’s network includes schools in Oakland, Stockton, the Los Angeles area, and other California cities. And CMOS must create demand by attracting families to their schools of choice.

‘A Very Clear Opinion’

A crucial goal of the organizations usually is expanding their market share.

“School districts only grow when they absolutely have to,” says Shalvey, a longtime public school educator and former superintendent, who teamed up with Silicon Valley entrepreneur Reed Hastings to found Aspire. “Growth is critical for our strategy.”

Over the next decade, Aspire aims to operate as many as 65 schools, serving some 25,000 students, Shalvey says, but he says the organization might stop short of those marks. “I don’t know how big is too big,” he says.

Aspire also seeks to have a broader influence in California by sparking changes in district practices, building capacity among other char-

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THOMAS TOCH

Co-Director
Education Sector

ters and CMOS, and advocating policy changes.

Aspire aims to provide consistency in key areas across its small, college-preparatory schools. Among the seven core elements of its education design are high standards with clear learning goals, a sense of community, more time for learning, and rigorous assessments.

“There is a consistent assessment program, a consistent fidelity to the standards, a consistent implementation of what we call ‘cycle of inquiry,’ which is essentially professional conversations about student achievement and teacher practice,” Shalvey says.

Aspire’s “instructional guidelines” set expectations around practice and pedagogy. And, he says, “there is a strong culture of expectation around [students] going to college.”

Yet a 2007 report by the National Charter School Research Project, part of the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington, found that both CMOS and their for-profit counterparts struggle with uneven implementation of their instructional designs.

Dacia Toll, the co-founder and co-chief executive officer of Achievement First, which operates 15 academies serving some 3,700 students, says her organization employs a variety of tactics to bring consistency and high quality across campuses, “but we don’t do it through mandates.”

The chief means, she says, come in the hiring and regular coaching of like-minded staff members; the administration of a common set of interim assessments across schools every six weeks, with careful analysis of the results; and ongoing conversations between school leaders and upper management at Achievement First.

“Every school has an assistant superintendent who is a coach and a thought partner,” she says.

Toll also emphasizes that the Achievement First model evolves in collaboration with schools, and that the academies “are by no means cookie-cutter copies.”

When push comes to shove, though, the CMO can take more-serious steps if a school veers off track.

“We still influence a lot at the school site—most importantly, the decision to hire the principal,” says Toll. “If a school is struggling and not improving, we still have enough authority and responsibility to change whatever is necessary.”

Analysts say CMOS wrestle with striking the right balance between central control and local autonomy, and the dynamic tends to evolve. But while there is variation across CMOS, the core vision is usually pretty firm.

“CMOs have a very clear opinion about what kind of education will work in their schools,” says Lake of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, who also is the executive director of the National Charter School Research Project. “I suspect that we’ll see some CMOS that are giving their schools more autonomy [than traditional districts], but most of them are not letting the schools stray too far.”

At both Aspire and Achievement First, schools do have clear autonomy in some areas, leaders of the organizations say, especially in running their budgets and hiring and firing teachers. “We don’t want to lose that important sense of ownership that is one of the truly special things about charter schools,” Toll says.

A Good Strategy?

One big challenge CMOS face is financial. They generally rely on philanthropies to supplement the home-office budget.

“CMOs are being heavily subsidized by foundations, and absent that support, they would be hard-pressed to expand,” says Thomas Toch, who plans to publish a study on CMOS this fall and is a co-director of the Washington think tank Education Sector.

Aspire charges individual schools about 7 percent of their public funds for central-office functions. For the current fiscal year, it is receiving about \$5 million in philanthropic aid, but the organization eventually expects to be self-sustaining without the extra support.

Aspire recently went through an important evolution in its leadership structure, adding regional vice presidents for Los Angeles, the Central Valley, and the San Francisco Bay Area. Individual schools no longer report directly to the home office, and are now managed by the regional leaders. “We think some work needs to be done as close to the school sites as humanly possible,” Shalvey says.

As of this past summer, Aspire employed about 45 people, according to Shalvey, including several in regional offices. About half the central-office staff members, he says, spend most of their time in schools as instructional coaches or as providers of special education services.

Some observers question whether CMOS are a good strategy for expanding the charter sector. “Central management doesn’t work very well [in operating schools],” Millot says in an interview.

A more promising, and cost-effective, approach is to focus more on creating support organizations for stand-alone charters, he argues. He also says CMOS face pressure from foundations to open new schools too quickly.

Toll says one of her top concerns, and priorities, as Achievement First grows—as of this past summer, it had about 35 employees in centralized support roles—is maintaining its culture and values.

“We could become large and bureaucratic, the very thing we were reacting against,” she says. “If people somehow perceive themselves as cogs in a larger system, we’re dead.” ■