the other hand, some charter leaders are highly experienced. Nineteen percent of such leaders have more than 10 years of experience as school leaders; 28 percent of traditional school principals have comparable experience.

**Why Do They Do It?**

It is clear from our survey of charter school leaders that what matters most to them is the school’s mission. By definition, charter schools are intended to be mission-driven organizations. They are places conceived of and built around a specific instructional imperative or intended to serve a targeted population of students—often students deemed at risk of failure.

Eighty-six percent of charter school leaders said the school’s mission attracted them to the job. When asked what satisfies them most about their jobs, the top three answers were: passion for the school’s mission; the autonomy gained by leading a charter school; and the commitment to educating the kinds of students served by the school; and the autonomy gained by leading a charter school.

Ninety-four percent of charter school leaders surveyed by the National Charter School Research Project said they felt confident or very confident engaging their staffs to work toward the common mission.

**Where Do They Struggle?**

Set against this dedication to mission are the many practical and administrative requirements for managing a charter school. Facilities issues top the list of challenges, with about 40 percent of charter school leaders reporting that securing and managing facilities is a problem. Unlike traditional public schools, charter schools must find their own buildings and pay for these facilities out of the education funds allotted per student.

Personnel and finances come next on the list of struggles. The need to attract good teachers, the constant necessity of raising money, and the challenge of matching expenses with enrollment-driven income are anxiety-provoking and time-consuming concerns for charter school leaders. In a traditional public school, the district’s central office takes care of these issues.

The lack of sufficient time for strategic planning—looking ahead to plot the school’s growth and build its capacity—is another daunting challenge, according to our survey. Almost half the respondents reported not spending enough time on strategic planning.

Nearly one in five charter school leaders reports being only slightly confident or not at all confident in implementing a strategic, schoolwide instructional initiative or schoolwide improvement plan. All of those concerns are more common among leaders with the least experience in the principal’s office.

It follows, then, that experience on the job is the No. 1 factor explaining confidence in charter school leaders, according to the survey, even more so than specialized training and experience.

That said, prior training and experience do play a role. Background in financial management seems to build confidence in the financial aspects of leading schools. Those with prior education from traditional colleges of education seem more confident in overseeing instruction and curriculum in the school. But leaders who have been principals (in public, charter, or private schools) for three years or more are the most confident about both financial and instructional matters.

**Preparing for the Change to Come**

Our survey also predicts a big turnover of charter school leaders in the near future. Ten percent expect to move on to new opportunities or retire in the next year, and 71 percent expect to have moved on in the next five years. The numbers of new leaders needed are not small, given the 4,300 charter schools currently in operation across the country.

Considering the importance experience plays in managing a charter school, the predicted turnover may be cause for concern. Only a handful of the charter school leaders in the survey said they plan to take on a similar position at another charter school. Instead, respondents indicated they would become school consultants, join charter management organizations, work in school districts or state departments of education, or work as education advocates.

Turnover is not necessarily a problem if schools are prepared for it. But almost half the charter school leaders in the survey could give no specific plan for leadership succession. Fewer than a quarter said their...