

# **Creating and Sustaining Learning Communities: Early Lessons from Charter Schools**

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## Abstract

There has been a rapid increase over the past six years in the number of charter schools in the United States and in the enthusiasm for the concept among legislators, educators, and the general public. Although high-quality teaching and learning have always been key goals of those who design and support charter schools, little charter school research has addressed how charter schools create and sustain high-quality learning communities.

For this paper, the authors investigated how learning communities were created and likely to be sustained in 17 charter schools, focusing on: how school missions were developed and translated into classroom practice; how charter schools learned from what they were doing; and what factors seemed to produce high-quality teaching and learning. The authors identified four critical building blocks that charter schools used, with varying success, to create and sustain learning communities: the school mission, the school instructional program, the accountability system and school leadership. With each building block, charter schools displayed strengths that supported their development as learning communities and traits that seemed to impede their progress. The authors identified three enabling conditions that helped to explain variations in the success of the charter schools studied: school power and autonomy; the presence of supportive networks and organizations; and the presence of supportive parents. The authors conclude with some tentative recommendations for charter school founders and sponsors, including the need for more detailed, concrete information from schools during the charter application process, and for clarification of the roles and responsibilities of charter schools within the state public education system, particularly with respect to accountability and technical assistance.

## Introduction

**I**n the six years since Minnesota passed the first charter school law in 1991, more than half the states have passed some form of charter school legislation. As of September 1997, there were over 750 charter schools operating in 29 states and the District of Columbia (Saks, 1998).

The amount of legislation demonstrates strong bipartisan support for charter schools. At the federal level, successive administrations, Republican and Democratic alike, have stepped up their commitments to charter schools. In 1991, the Bush administration recommended funding for thousands of break-the-mold schools and since then the Clinton administration has endorsed charter schools. In 1995, Congress allocated \$6 million to charter schools. This amount tripled to \$18 million in 1996 and grew to \$51 million in 1997. For fiscal year 1998, President Clinton proposed an increase in charter school funding to more than \$100 million to support planning and start-up costs for up to 1,100 schools (Hoff, 1997). Early in 1997, U.S. Department of Education Secretary Riley announced that the administration's goal was to stimulate the creation of 3,000 charter schools over the next five years (*Statement by Richard W. Riley, 1997*).

The extent of autonomy given to charter schools varies considerably across state charter school laws, prompting some observers to distinguish between "faux" or quasi-charter schools and "the genuine article" (Vanourek, Manno, & Finn, 1997, p. 60). Some state laws grant charter schools full power over budget, organizational structure, personnel and curriculum; in other

states the control over such issues resides either partially or fully outside the schools (Bierlein & Mulholland, 1995; Buechler, 1996; Education Commission of the States, 1995; Wohlstetter, Wenning & Briggs, 1995). Although the optimal level of charter school autonomy is subject to debate, there is general agreement that an important purpose of charter schools is to improve student performance. This exploratory study investigated how a small sample of charter schools in three states went about creating and sustaining learning communities. Given the small and unique sample of charter schools in this study, the results cannot be generalized to all charter schools across the country, but represent the unique perspectives and experiences of the participants. However, the findings do raise interesting issues that merit exploration in a larger sample of charter schools, and in terms of comparisons between charter and non-charter schools.

Seventeen charter schools, located in Boston, Massachusetts; Los Angeles, California; and Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota, participated in the study. We were interested in: how school missions were developed and translated into classroom practice; how charter schools learned from what they were doing; and what factors were likely to produce high quality teaching and learning in charter schools. The design of the study did not allow us to specify direct connections between the nature and extent of learning communities and student achievement, but there is increasing evidence and general agreement that strong learning communities enhance school performance (Louis, Marks & Kruse, 1996; Odden & Wohlstetter, 1995; Wohlstetter, Mohrman & Robertson, 1997). This paper raises issues about the building blocks charter schools use

to create themselves and then suggests a set of enabling conditions that may help explain why some charter schools were more likely to be effective than others in creating and sustaining their learning communities. To set the stage, we first discuss the charter school concept and its assumed connection to improved school performance.

## **Charter Schools as Learning Communities: The Theory of Action**

Charter schools are publicly funded schools developed by individuals or a group of individuals, including teachers, administrators, other school staff, parents, or other members of the local community in which the charter school is located. State laws grant developers of charter schools the flexibility to choose their educational objectives and how to organize and manage the school. The charter school concept is intended to free schools from most of the administrative constraints that other public schools face in exchange for accountability for results: charter schools must have their charters renewed, typically every five years.

In addition to offering a new governance structure within the public education system, charter school advocates argue that the innovation has the potential to improve student performance through the development of high-quality learning communities, more rigorous curricula, and stronger bonds with students. As autonomous entities, charter schools increase consumer choice in public education, and aim to implement effective teaching and learning practices. Specifically, advocates posit that the increased autonomy granted to charter schools—in concert with increased

responsibility—will draw those with cutting-edge, innovative educational ideas into starting charter schools and will allow such innovators to fully and effectively implement their ideas (Nathan, 1996). The intended result is an expanded variety within the public school system of educational communities having one common characteristic—high-quality teaching and learning. The freedom of parents and students, the education consumers, to choose is believed to buttress the quality of charter schools, as high-quality schools will be in demand and flourish, while poorly functioning schools will be rejected by consumers and fail.

Research on charter schools to date has focused primarily on fiscal, legal and bureaucratic issues in the charter school development and approval process. These issues are emphasized in state charter school laws, but the legislation also addresses to varying degrees issues of teaching and learning (Wohlstetter et al., 1995). The Massachusetts charter school law establishes charter schools to: “stimulate the development of innovative programs in public education;” “provide opportunities for innovative learning and assessments;” and “provide teachers with a vehicle for establishing schools with alternative, innovative methods of educational instruction and school structure and management” (Massachusetts Ann. Laws Chapter 71, Section 89). The state goals for charter schools in Minnesota are to: “improve pupil learning;” “increase learning opportunities for pupils;” “encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods;” and create new professional opportunities for teachers, including the opportunity to be responsible for the learning program at the school site” (Minnesota

Statutes Ann. Section 120.064). The goals and purposes of charter schools in California are similar to those of Massachusetts and Minnesota, but the law also includes an emphasis on “expanding learning experiences for pupils who are identified as academically low achieving” (California Education Code Section 47600). In a recent survey Nathan and Powers (1996) found that state legislators who supported the charter school process cited improved teaching and learning most frequently among reasons for introducing charter school legislation. The development of innovative approaches to teaching and learning is one of the perceived benefits to states permitting charter schools, with the perceived assumption that such innovations will produce identifiable improvements in student achievement.

The importance of teaching and learning in the development of charter schools is also evident in the attitudes of charter school founders. In a 1995 survey by the Education Commission of the States, the top three reasons listed for starting a charter school included: “Better teaching and learning for all kids;” “Run a school according to certain principles and/or philosophy;” and “Innovation” (Education Commission of the States, 1995). Founders of charter schools appear to view their schools primarily as opportunities for building high performing learning communities, with the assumption that this will result in higher student achievement and other positive student outcomes (for example, developing positive attitudes toward learning) (Nathan, 1996).

The present study is distinguished by its focus on how charter schools go about creating and sustaining their learning communities for adults and students. As Sara

Kass, founder of City on a Hill, one of the first charter schools in Boston, observed:

*One thing that struck me as a great irony is that the product of school is learning, and yet we [schools] are not learning organizations...Schools tend to keep doing what they have always done—regardless of the results. What is innovative about charter schools is that we are constantly learning from what we are doing: revising, redefining, and making it better.” (Sommerfeld, 1996).*

This, however, can be a complex and challenging process of balancing curricular, financial, organizational and public relations issues (Nathan, 1996). What we learned from our research is what those working in charter schools already know: it is very hard work to design and operate a school that maintains its focus on teaching and learning. In this paper, we discuss four building blocks of learning communities and a set of enabling conditions that appears to support their development. Our aims are to offer strategic advice to teachers and administrators in charter schools, to identify recommendations for state and district policymakers, and to raise issues and questions for future consideration.

## Study Methods

To begin to understand the strategies for creating and sustaining learning communities in charter schools, we conducted focus groups including a combination of charter school founders, administrators and teachers, one each in Boston, Los Angeles and Minneapolis/St. Paul. We viewed this study as an opportunity to investigate areas where relatively little was known, as a first step preceding more ambitious efforts.

Our study included a total of 17 schools spread fairly evenly across the three cities: six schools in Boston, six schools in Los Angeles, and five schools in Minneapolis/St. Paul. We invited only schools that had been open for at least a year, so participants would have been through some building and learning experiences. Representatives of nearly all the invited schools attended the focus groups. Most of the schools had been open for at least two years. The schools were a mix of conversion sites (schools previously managed by school districts) and start-ups (newly created schools). In California, nearly all the participating schools were three years old and had converted from district-run site-based managed schools. The Minnesota charter schools were a mix of conversions and new start-ups. The charter school that had been operating the longest (five years) was from Minnesota, the first state to enact charter school legislation. The participating schools in the Boston area tended to be the youngest and all but one were new start-ups. Given the unique characteristics of these charter schools, they cannot be assumed to be representative of all charter schools across the country or all of the charter schools in each state.

The focus groups lasted between two and two-and-a-half hours. Each session was taped and was led by a professional facilitator. A member of the research team was present at each focus group meeting to serve as an observer/recorder.<sup>1</sup> Discussions were structured by a topic guide focused on the charter schools' experiences with teaching and learning: How does the school's mission guide classroom practice? How does the school learn which approaches are working and which ones need to be refined or discontinued? What kinds of

problem-solving approaches does the school use? Discussion of these topics centered around the curricular areas of mathematics and of language arts/English. Consistent with the belief that teachers' learning is central to the enactment and success of new policies designed to improve students' learning (Corcoran & Goertz, 1995; Goertz, Floden & O'Day, 1995; Darling-Hammond, 1996; Louis et al., 1996), we also probed the area of professional development, asking participants about the nature and extent of training available to support classroom teaching. In addition to information gathered in the focus groups, we obtained archival documents, including charter school proposals, school demographic data and school assessments/evaluations, from most participating schools. Following the three focus groups, the research team and the focus group facilitator met together in a debriefing session to analyze, across the three cities, the nature of the learning communities in charter schools and the features within the schools that, according to other research, were likely to affect teaching and learning (Elmore, Peterson & McCarthey, 1996; Odden & Wohlstetter, 1995; Robertson, Wohlstetter & Mohrman, 1995).

Charter schools participating in this study reflected different levels of schooling and a broad spectrum of school size and student body composition. The majority of charter schools in the United States are elementary schools (Buechler, 1996) and this was mirrored in the high percentage of focus group participants from elementary schools. Seven of the 17 schools in this study were elementary schools, three were middle schools, and one was a high school serving students in grades nine through twelve. The other six schools combined schooling levels:

two were K-12 schools; two served grades K-8; and two combined middle and secondary school levels. The largest schools tended to be elementary schools with student enrollments of more than 1,000. Many of the new start-ups were smaller than traditional schools and had 200 or fewer students.

Most participating charter schools served ethnically diverse student populations, although some schools in Massachusetts and Minnesota had predominantly white student populations. Statewide reports of charter schools in Massachusetts (Pioneer Institute, 1996) and Minnesota (Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, 1996) indicate a similar pattern.

California's charter school law requires that schools explain in their applications their methods for achieving an ethnic distribution of students that reflects the larger district in which the charter school resides (California Education Code Section 47600). The high number of minority enrollments in most of the charter schools participating in our study was consistent with the national experience. The Hudson Institute's Education Excellence Network found that 63 percent of students who attended charter schools nationally were minority group members. In our three states, the statewide percentages for minority students were similar: 78 percent in California, 65 percent in Massachusetts, and 51 percent in Minnesota (Finn, Manno & Bierlein, 1996).

Student populations varied in terms of educational background. Some charter schools focused on students who had not been successful in traditional schools, for example, a prep school for drop-outs, while others catered to parents and students looking for more rigorous academic

programs, such as an elementary school offering a "clinically-based, challenging curriculum for motivated students." The Minnesota charter schools that participated in our focus group tended to serve "high risk" students more than charter schools from the other two states, which served more varied student populations.

## **Building Blocks for Creating and Sustaining Learning Communities in Charter Schools**

In our analysis of the focus group discussions, we identified four building blocks that charter schools used to create and sustain themselves as learning communities. These critical components of the charter school process were tackled with varying degrees of success by the schools in our sample. The four building blocks include: school mission; school instructional program; school accountability system; and school leadership.

### **Charter School Building Block: School Mission**

The school mission is a touchstone for participants' passion and commitment to the school. When the mission is clear and specific, the school is better able to translate its mission into practice.

Nearly all participants in our sample viewed the school mission as the foundation from which all other aspects of the school is derived. In this section we discuss how school charters and missions were developed, similarities across school

missions, and the roles of missions in charter schools.

***Developing the school charter and mission.***

Among the schools represented in our three focus groups, the charter schools' proposals were developed by individuals and groups with varying levels of professional experience. Some proposals were drafted by a small number of committed individuals with no prior experience in running a school. One middle school charter, for example, was written by a group of parents "around a coffee table" who made the decision to start a charter school because they were dissatisfied with their local public schools. Five of the 17 schools in our study developed their missions based on relationships with national reform efforts, including the Edison Project, the Accelerated Schools Network, and the Coalition of Essential Schools. In each of these five cases, the school mission was specifically tied to the educational philosophy of the educational reform network.

The prior experience of those involved in drafting the charters appeared to affect the start-up process, in particular the transition from the dream of a school to an actual school. Charter schools developed by individuals with some experience in running a school (both on the instructional and managerial levels) had smoother, better-prepared transitions. Prior experience was more likely to be found in two types of schools: conversion sites and schools that were part of national reform efforts. The principal of an elementary school that converted from a site-based managed school described how the charter was drafted "in a second" because the school had already implemented many of the changes they wanted to make, had plans for other

changes, and were aware of many of the challenges of self-governance. Another charter school began as an alternative high school for drop-outs that featured individualized learning plans, high student-teacher interaction and an applied real-world focus. When this school applied for charter status, much of the foundation for its school mission was already in place. In comparison, a new start-up school designed by a committed, but inexperienced, parent group had a much rougher start. The parents were surprised when the charter was approved and were ill-prepared and unsure about how to proceed. They eventually contracted with a for-profit consulting firm to manage the business aspects of the school, which in turn hired the principal, who hired the staff. The staff had only eight days together to prepare for the school's opening.

Across many charter schools in our focus groups, the missions were often developed without soliciting input or feedback from key stakeholders—teachers, parents and students. Conflicts emerged later as a consequence, as stakeholders who had not been involved in drafting the mission disagreed with or misunderstood the school's instructional philosophy. In some schools parents complained because the schools did not use textbooks or standardized tests. At other schools, it was reported that teachers were not "getting on board" with the schools' instructional approaches: either they continued to use their old materials or they selected *among* the new approaches developed from the mission. The California charter schools generally included more stakeholders in the development process than schools in the other two states; this may be because teacher involvement is mandated by law. The California charter school law requires teacher approval for all

charter schools: for a conversion school, at least 50 percent of the teachers at the school must approve; for new start-ups, 10 percent of the teachers in the district must approve the charter school application (California Education Code Section 47600).<sup>2</sup> This requirement ensures some degree of teacher involvement in the drafting process because teachers must sign-off on the charter application for approval to be granted. A teacher from a California elementary school described how the parents were the driving force behind the charter application while the teachers were somewhat complacent. The parents, however, still had to solicit teacher feedback and win their support for the process because 50 percent of the teachers had to approve the application. Another factor broadening the involvement of stakeholders may have been the fact that the California sample of charter schools included many schools that had converted from school-based management to charter status, and thus, the schools had had prior experience involving teachers in decision-making.

### *Similarities across school missions.*

Although schools in our study varied in terms of student population, level of schooling, and whether they were start-ups or conversions, the themes of the school missions were remarkably similar. The concept of preparing students for a changing society in the “21<sup>st</sup> century” was referenced in the majority of school mission statements. All California schools applying for charter status must detail in the application “what it means to be an educated person in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (California Education Code Section 47600). The concept appeared frequently in school missions in the other states as well, for example, “meeting the challenges of a changing global society.”

Technology-preparedness was another theme found in many mission statements. Many of the schools included the goal of providing students with new skills to understand and utilize computer technology. One K-5 school had a two-year “technology goal” to bring computers into all classrooms. An administrator from another elementary school described how “adding computers and technology training” was a central part of how the school linked their math curriculum to the school mission.

A third similarity shared by all participating schools was consideration of students’ emotional needs and growth, in addition to their intellectual achievement. This concern was conveyed through a broad spectrum of personal characteristics, including self-esteem, creativity, moral development, emotion management and self-awareness. The sample charter schools generally were oriented toward knowing and caring for the “whole student,” including academic, emotional and social needs. This focus is consistent with the “structures of caring” that Darling-Hammond (1996) identified as key to helping teachers know students well and to providing students with personalized support.

Many mission statements were similar in terms of their lack of specificity. The missions were often organized around broad themes or goals—as one administrator offered, “The mission is a wide open door.” Other examples of broad and complicated mission statements included:

- “...the skills and understanding to participate productively in a multicultural, globally oriented environment, use technology to its full potential, and communicate

fluently in English and one other language.”

- “...prepare [students] for the 21<sup>st</sup> century through an emphasis on holistic learning, higher order and critical thinking skills, and practical application and integration of curriculum areas.”
- “...fostering an environment in which a strong academic program is emphasized, and where both creativity and self-esteem can develop in each student.”

The reliance on such general concepts presented problems as the schools tried to translate their school missions into specific curricular practices. While a broadly defined, generalized mission may have been useful in garnering political support during the charter school approval process, the broad mission was open to many interpretations and provided no specific direction in terms of teaching and learning. At one start-up middle school with a charter described by the administrator as “generic,” teachers were using different, sometimes inconsistent, approaches to math instruction. We were told that teachers at another school interpreted the broad mission as being able to “pick and choose whatever they wanted, although as a school we were committed to adopting a common math curriculum.”

***Roles of missions in charter schools.*** In many of the schools we studied, the missions grew out of strong, passionate feelings about schools and education and, as the schools evolved, the missions helped to sustain that passion and commitment within the school community. Comments such as “the mission is a living presence at our school,” “the

mission guides everything we do,” and “everything comes back to [the mission]” were common. Focus group participants tended to view their missions as guiding forces, both in terms of philosophical goals and in day-to-day operations. There was some evidence of this commitment among parents as well. For example, one teacher described how the school’s parent booster club raised all the funds needed to implement the technology goals outlined in its mission statement. Indeed, all the charter schools in our study made a concerted effort to highlight and provide on-going reminders of their missions to the local school community: reviewing the mission with parents and teachers at assemblies; having parents sign-off on the mission every year; posting the mission in classrooms and hallways; and printing the mission on mugs and T-shirts.

Across the charter schools we studied, the mission served an important purpose in staff recruitment and hiring, and in attracting students and parents. The charter schools often used the mission as a screen and to communicate to job candidates the schools’ beliefs and expectations about teaching and learning. At one elementary charter school, prospective teachers and staff were given copies of the charter at the interview and told explicitly that classroom practices must be consistent with the school’s mission, “If you don’t want to teach our way, there is no need to apply to teach [here].” Another school sent copies of its mission to job candidates and asked them to explain how they would implement the mission. The control charter schools exercise over personnel matters, of course, allowed them to hire selectively; this was evident even in California where state law mandates that charter schools hire only credentialed teachers.

We heard evidence that the mission was used as a student recruitment tool in building support for the school, and insuring its initial popularity. The broad, inclusive nature of many of the school missions sometimes led to confusion. At one new start-up school, for example, the charter was 85 pages long and the current administrator described it as “like the Bible,” with people interpreting it in varying ways. In the beginning the founder used the charter to help garner excitement and interest among parents and students; the founder emphasized different aspects of the charter based on the interests of the group being addressed.

This broad approach may have generated initial interest among diverse groups, but it left the school with a global mission statement that provided little specific direction for teaching and learning. School staff had to define the school’s curricular/instructional foci at the same time they were trying to teach. Although a few schools appeared to gain some benefit, at least initially, from a broader, more general mission, in the long term a broad mission presented roadblocks to developing a clear, consistent instructional program.

**Conclusions.** The school mission served as a touchstone in sustaining energy and involvement among members of the charter school community. However, many of the missions were very broad which sometimes interfered with the ability of implementers to translate the mission into specific curricular, pedagogic and assessment decisions. A specifically defined mission seemed to assist charter schools in developing focused, consistent learning communities.

### **Charter School Building Block: Instructional Program**

A high-quality instructional program has clear curricula and pedagogy, and details how teachers will lead all students to achieve at high levels. It derives directly from the school mission and is the blueprint for helping schools achieve their goals.

Similar to district-operated schools, the charter schools in our study found it difficult to develop coherent instructional programs. Other research (Gusky & Peterson, 1996; Slavin et al., 1996) has highlighted the challenges in developing instructional programs. The difficulty was exacerbated with these charter schools by vague school missions and pressure to create something within a short time. In this section, we review the content of the instructional programs adopted by the sample charter schools; how the programs were developed; and the professional culture at the schools in relation to decisions about teaching and learning.

**Developing an instructional program.** As the charter schools went about developing their instructional programs, educators were often faced with the challenge of developing curriculum and instructional strategies within a short time frame. This was a particular problem for new start-up schools; the conversion sites often had many instructional components in place prior to attaining charter status. The search for a quick fix sometimes led to tension between those who wanted to create their own instructional program and those who advocated buying an instructional package that could be put in place quickly. The make-versus-buy dilemma, although endemic not only to charter schools, was present in the schools we sampled, particularly in the start-up schools. Charter school participants in our three focus groups tended to have a pioneer

ethos, and this feeling often led to a strong desire to create their own instructional program—a time-consuming task that flew in the face of getting the charter school up and running.

Most of the schools' instructional programs featured some curricula developed by educators outside these schools. Some of these charter schools adopted whole design packages that connected the schools with experts and resources to help them implement the designs. Within our sample of 17 charter schools, five schools (including half of the schools from the Boston focus group) were connected with national reform efforts and had instructional programs, or at least guides, that were developed outside the school by education reformers. Two of the participating schools were members of the Coalition of Essential Schools; a third school was run by Edison; a fourth was part of the Accelerated Schools Network; and a fifth followed E.D. Hirsch's core classical education curriculum.

Other charter schools developed their instructional programs by putting together pieces from different sources—some bought and some made. The California schools tended to fall into this category. They combined pieces of their instructional programs from published curricula (one school used the early literacy program, "Writing to Read," a program for bilingual education, and the math packages, "Math Land" and "Math Their Way") with their own designs, for example, for integrating technology across the curriculum.

In many cases where at least some of the instructional program was bought, educators faced the challenge of integrating their unique educational missions and ideas about

education, their pioneer spirit, with existing materials. For example, one middle school's mission emphasized an integrated, holistic curriculum with real-world applicability, but early on when the school felt the pressure to have a program in place, they adopted "University of Chicago Math" and "Montana Math" although the curricula contradicted the school's philosophy not to teach math as a separate subject.

A third group of charter schools created their instructional programs from scratch, often "doing it as we go," which another participant compared to "building a plane while we're flying it." This approach was most characteristic of the Minnesota charter schools, where the schools tended to be smaller and served populations the public schools traditionally have not been successful in educating—at-risk students and students who have dropped out.

***Content similarities across instructional programs.*** We observed commonalities in the charter schools' approaches to instruction. Regardless of educational level or size of the charter school (the sample schools ranged from 80 to 1,300 students), instruction was generally characterized by low student-faculty ratios, small class size and personalized learning. In the three largest charter schools (having student populations over 1,000), the student-staff ratios allowed for class sizes between 10 and 20 students. Among the smaller charter schools with fewer than 100 students, class sizes were often ten or fewer students.

There was a major push in many of our sample charter schools to emphasize personalized learning. Several of the schools featured individualized learning plans for students. An administrator from one

secondary school explained, “Each teacher is responsible for creating an individual learning environment. Teachers seek to bring out the best in each kid...Kids are measured against themselves and against their goal.”

Instructional programs in charter schools tended to be interdisciplinary and focused on integrating the school with the community, often through applied, “real world” projects. Curricular requirements in one K-12 school included math and science “action projects” in which students developed and implemented work that solved practical real-world problems. At one middle school, afternoons were devoted to research projects in all curricular areas. Other schools had students use math skills to plan field trips, design family vacations, and manage household finances.

Across our sample of charter schools, there was a strong push to integrate teaching and learning with the school’s surrounding community. Many secondary schools created partnerships with local businesses and educational institutions, and students participated in internships and training activities that prepared them for college or careers. Some charter high schools had community service requirements for graduation. Some charter schools included community members in their schools’ instructional program. An elementary school, for example, implemented a tutoring program for at-risk students that brought parents and other community members (mostly retirees) into the school.

***Decision-making structure around curriculum.*** The charter schools in our focus groups reported varying levels of stakeholder involvement in curriculum decisions. Across most schools, there was a

push for broader involvement in decision-making, and there appeared to be tension between factions of the school community when this did not occur. In one K-12 charter school started about two years ago, curricular decisions were made by the six core staff members who founded the school. Parents and other teachers complained about curricular issues at staff and board meetings, but there was no formal structure to solicit their involvement in or feedback about curricular decisions made by the core group.

Decision-making structures in many other schools tended to be decentralized through committees, families, task forces or teams (usually organized by subject areas or grade levels) having decision-making responsibility for curriculum. Several schools opened with no formal decision-making structure in place, in spite of the research suggesting the importance of formal structure (Elmore, 1995; David, 1996; Wohlstetter et al., 1997). The administrator of one new elementary school explained:

*We limped through the first year in our approach to math—we had no textbook, no formal curriculum, and no one in charge of making those decisions. In the second year, we set up a formal math task force that included teachers, parents and board members to address the issue of a math curriculum for the school. This group looked around and identified several different math approaches and this year we’re piloting them.*

Within our sample of charter schools, those in California were far more likely than the schools in the other states to have formal structures in place at the outset for involving various groups in decisions related to

teaching and learning. The California schools' experience with school-based management—all the California schools had converted from school-based management to charter—may help explain why the California schools created formal decision-making structures, while many of the new start-up charter schools did not. As noted earlier, the literature, particularly research in site-based management of schools, has emphasized the importance of decision-making structures organized around the business of schooling—curriculum, assessment, budgeting and personnel (David, 1996; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Wohlstetter et al., 1997).

A noteworthy distinction between district-run site-based management schools and charter schools was the involvement of parents in decisions about teaching and learning. Charter schools in our sample tended to include parents formally in such decisions; in contrast, district-run site-based management schools typically leave such decisions to professional educators, involving parents in oversight or advisory roles with respect to curriculum and instruction decisions (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Wohlstetter et al., 1997).

***Teachers' professional culture.*** The culture for educators across the charter schools we studied was an eclectic mix, often characterized by high levels of professionalization and commitment but, at the same time, we found many instances where teachers seemed to ignore the existing professional knowledge base and expertise.

Focus group participants across the charter schools described teachers as having a strong sense of collective responsibility for their schools. This was true regardless of the size

of the school faculty. An administrator at an elementary charter school with 1,300 students commented on the sense of collective responsibility among all 60 faculty members, "There is a sense of teamwork... you are all on the line. A student can't come to your classroom and not make any progress." A founder at a smaller secondary school offered a similar comment:

*Each person is totally responsible for making the school successful. When evaluators visited our school, they commented that all the students were inclusive with each other—few cliques, and a feeling of collaboration and community. The teachers try hard to model for the students. The teachers also are inclusive and interdependent in their relationships with each other.*

We were surprised to learn of only a few formal structures that allowed teachers to work collaboratively on issues of teaching and learning. There were some reports of informal collaboration at the charter schools in our study, typically when one teacher visited the classroom next door to "dialogue about why something worked in her room but didn't work in mine." The problem with this practice was that it was not systematic, but highly dependent on the initiative of one teacher taking the time to visit with another.

We observed another attribute of school culture associated with high levels of professionalism—the teachers' orientation toward continuous improvement and reflection on what they were doing with students in their classrooms. Focus group participants, including teachers and administrators, generally recognized the need for an assessment system that would provide feedback on what was working and what

was not. One elementary charter school initially implemented a process-oriented, “real-world” approach to math, consistent with the school mission. When student math scores declined, the faculty experimented with more traditional approaches to math instruction, and now the school incorporates a blend of traditional and non-traditional approaches. There was evidence that problem-solving was an open, ongoing collective process in some charter schools. For example, staff in one school posted identified problems on the wall in the main office to solicit suggestions and ideas from the whole school community. In another school, teachers held daily “communication group” meetings for sharing problems and ideas.

Aside from these attributes commonly associated with professionalism, the focus groups did not describe professional development—that is, the process by which teachers acquire new knowledge and skills—as present at the levels typically observed in high-performing schools (Louis et al., 1996; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). Several focus group participants described how their schools seemed to assume that teachers had the expertise to implement the instructional program and made decisions on faith. Teachers at one middle school selected several math curricular packages during the initial start-up, but they had little training and ongoing planning time to gain the knowledge and skills needed to use these approaches. Similarly, after math manipulatives and math games were chosen at another middle school, it was just assumed that teachers would know what was expected without organized, ongoing training. A K-8 school adopted a multi-age group approach to reading but without organized professional development; so the

change evolved slowly without formal teacher preparation or follow-up. The elementary school that purchased Hirsch’s core classical curriculum rejected the recommended training. Underlying these decisions is the assumption of expertise: teachers have the expertise; all they need is a good curriculum.

Some charter schools that converted from existing schools provide a counterpoint to these examples. The conversion schools, particularly those that had been site-based management schools, were described by participants as making more attempts to consider or integrate professional knowledge into their curriculum decisions. One elementary school created a curriculum committee specifically to research and investigate curricular changes. Another elementary school hired a “standards consultant” so they could apply professional standards and expertise in developing their own curriculum. Only one school among our sample of 17 charter schools was described as having a formal schoolwide professional development program. This elementary school had converted from a site-based management school. It had a highly-structured, focused professional development program. All staff members were required each semester to attend professional development retreats that were organized around specific curricular changes scheduled for implementation. The professional development program also featured follow-up evaluations with teachers to determine the extent to which changes were implemented in classrooms. The school’s fiscal and decision-making autonomy, in concert with the educators’ prior experience, seemed to facilitate adoption of this program. There was control over how much money would be spent on

professional development and what professional development requirements would be implemented at the school, as well as an understanding of what was needed to implement a professional development program effectively.

At other schools where collective time was set-aside for professional development, the time appeared to be used more for planning and school culture-building than for helping teachers master new skills related to curriculum and instruction. We heard about forums that facilitated ongoing dialogue among teachers but surprisingly little formal, topic-focused professional development. Another characteristic of professional development reported across several of the charter schools was an emphasis on personal mastery rather than on whole-school learning. This approach tended to surface in schools that used an individualized/personalized approach to teaching and learning. As the administrator of a charter high school argued, “Teachers in our school are responsible for creating an ‘individual learning environment’ for each student and so professional development is individualized/personalized as well.” In this school and in others with similar instructional approaches, there were no professional development standards or professional development curriculum common across the school.

**Conclusions.** Few of the focus group participants described a well-articulated and integrated instructional program, and even fewer reported any consistent, content-based professional development system. Although many of the schools were struggling with the decision to make-versus-buy their instructional programs, simply buying or adopting an instructional system did not

appear to be the most effective approach. They needed ongoing, schoolwide professional development built around curricular issues and opportunities for teachers to interact around the curriculum. Other researchers have noted the importance of formal and informal structures that support teacher collaboration (Darling-Hammond, 1996). Perhaps the small size of some schools, many having faculties of 40 or fewer teachers, was a factor contributing to the informal sharing reported in the charter schools studied. For an instructional program to be adopted schoolwide, however, school leaders need to manage the school around that purpose, providing time and formal structures for staff development and collaboration.

### **Charter School Building Block: Accountability System**

The accountability system includes performance standards, assessment strategies and consequences based on performance. One of the basic premises of charter schools is that schools should have more control over budget, personnel and curriculum issues in exchange for being held accountable for results.

An integral part of the charter school policy discussion is that high-stakes accountability entails significant consequences for charter schools, such as renewing charters or closing schools. We found that accountability requirements of sponsoring agencies—including the state, district, university or other groups—tended to be weak as the reform is being implemented. In general, charter schools in all three states were charged with creating their own accountability systems. We found that the myth of greater accountability for charter

schools far exceeded the reality, particularly in terms of formal external accountability systems.

***Defining and assessing accountability.***

Consistent with the research on accountability (Elmore, Abelman, & Kenyon, 1997; Kirst, 1990; Newmann, King, & Rigdon, 1997; Wohlstetter, Smyer, & Mohrman, 1994), we defined accountability as the process by which sponsors of charter schools and other stakeholders, such as parents and students, ensure that charter schools meet their goals. Charter school accountability systems require:

- *Performance standards* for judging whether or not charter schools are meeting their goals.
- *Assessment information* for evaluating student performance at charter schools.
- *Rewards/sanctions* for the success or failure of charter schools in meeting their goals.

We found that sponsoring agencies, in general, required assessment information on performance from charter schools (sometimes via standardized tests, sometimes via internally-generated assessments), but often failed to specify any clear performance standards or consequences.

State charter school laws typically prescribe three general criteria: reasonable progress on meeting the individual school's goals for its students; standards of fiscal management for the proper use of funds; and general probity and avoidance of scandal (Finn et al., 1996). Based on limited implementation experience, the initial focus of sponsoring agencies has

been on fiscal management, and, to a lesser extent, on general probity. At the time of this research, there had been school closures due to fiscal, administrative or ethical violations, and a few charter schools had been sanctioned for under-performance. The standards for charter schools remain vague, and whether charters will be revoked because of poor student performance remains to be seen.

Analysts of charter school legislation have deemed Massachusetts one of the strongest states in terms of accountability requirements (Finn et al., 1996). Charter schools are accountable to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, which grants five-year charters, and monitors student enrollment and demographics. Massachusetts evaluates charter schools according to three questions that must be addressed in the schools' annual report: Is the academic program a success? Is the school a viable organization? Is the school faithful to the terms of its charter? Massachusetts charter schools receive a one-day evaluation visit every year. When a school applies for the renewal of its charter a site visit lasting several days is conducted. However, for all the effort Massachusetts puts forth to clarify accountability issues, there is still little real specificity. It is not evident what level of school performance is good enough for renewal at the end of five years, or whether Massachusetts can close a school for not performing as specified. The standards for charter schools remain vague, and whether any charter school will be closed because of poor student performance remains to be seen.

Given the unique missions of charter schools, it is not surprising that state legislatures invested the schools with the authority to set their own performance goals. State charter

school laws generally require that schools discuss goals, performance standards and assessment measures in their charter school applications, but the laws offer little guidance to schools. Many focus group participants reported feeling that the external accountability system was weak because their state did not provide solid performance standards or goals for the schools. What has emerged is a continuing dispute over standards for student performance: should the performance of charter schools be judged by the relative improvement of their students based on the school's unique mission and goals, or by state performance standards, like other public schools? Current practice in charter schools tended to be a combination of both. If states had statewide assessments, then charter school students typically were expected to take those tests.<sup>3</sup> This requirement sometimes led to outright hostility and derision, partly related to feelings that standardized tests were inappropriate for charter schools' special student populations and their unique missions. One focus group participant said, "We buck the accountability plan. I simply say I don't know the regulations."

Charter schools were encouraged by their sponsoring agencies to develop their own evaluation measures to document progress in their own terms. One high school preparing students (former dropouts) for college or career adopted "testing out of college entrance exams" as one of its outcome measures. The make-versus-buy dilemma also surfaced with assessment. Many of the charter schools we studied elected to buy standardized testing materials, mainly because staff members did not have the experience, the expertise or the time to develop their own performance-based systems. At the same time, participants

expressed strong concern about the accuracy of results because the purchased assessments were not tailored to the school's curriculum—"Can the tests adequately measure changes in student achievement stemming from our instructional focus on the real world?"—nor were the assessments integrated into the school's curriculum.

Some state charter school laws allow schools to submit applications that leave open the specific standards and measures schools plan to use, deferring to some future time when the schools would actually develop or decide what they would use. The charter school application of one K-8 school promised that the school "would implement a plan to evaluate students after the 8<sup>th</sup> grade to determine the effectiveness of [the]...School." At the time of the focus group (two years after the school had opened), the administrator reported a continued lack of clear, specific assessment methods and indicators, even though he felt this was a critical task for the school to accomplish. As Newman and others (1997) have argued, the administrator said that the absence of an accountability plan was largely due to weak organizational capacity: "Everyone is a bit afraid of evaluation. No one is really sure how to go about it, and teachers just don't have time to commit to making decisions about which tests are suitable for our students and the performance levels they should achieve."

Although none of the schools participating in this study were described by focus group participants as having a strong internal accountability system in place, many of the schools appreciated the need for such a system and were working on developing one. However, the schools faced a major problem in the scope of student outcomes beyond

those that were strictly academic and content-based. Many of the sample charter schools emphasized in their applications a focus on outcomes related to students' social and emotional development: "the ability to function as a citizen," "to demonstrate the appropriate control and release of emotions," to "identify and implement ways to develop a better self," and "having an ethic of giving." Such learning processes are often difficult to define and measure, even by those with specific expertise in the area.<sup>4</sup> Many focus group participants defined success based on vague social/emotional criteria, such as "not letting kids fall through the cracks" or "making a place where kids feel they belong." In sum, the charter schools' performance standards, both in terms of academic achievement and emotional development, were unclear. In addition, there was a general lack of understanding about how to assess results—"We know there is change, we just don't know how to show it."

Among the higher-capacity schools (where participants described stronger and more cohesive organizational and teaching/learning structures), teachers and administrators focused on establishing comparison groups for their students. As one administrator reported, "It took us three years to get our act together and we still don't have a system of how to compare our students to other students in the state. We're working on this now." Another administrator agreed, "One of our goals is to develop an assessment tool for comparing students. We chose one [assessment instrument] the first year but that didn't work out. We eventually abandoned that and developed our own portfolio system. Now we're in the process of trying to develop a more comparison-based assessment instrument."

Although difficulties regarding outcome accountability were prominent in each of our three focus groups, we also heard about the importance of professional accountability at these schools, feelings of collective responsibility among administrators and teachers for school performance. A complex of charter schools, which form a feeder system, set aside time every Friday for cross-campus dialogue and coordination.<sup>5</sup> As one of the principals reported, "There is a feeling of teacher-to-teacher accountability in all our schools and across the complex. We all know that the kids from one teacher at one school will eventually end up in another teacher's class at one of the other schools in the complex, and that teacher will know who was responsible for the child's prior instruction."

**Market/client accountability.** Across all the charter schools in our study, the strongest feeling of accountability was to the local school community, especially to parents and students. One focus group participant noted, "We know we are being watched and evaluated by parents on an ongoing basis, and there is the pressure to live up to the standards and goals of the parents." One elementary charter school created a three-page "Home-School Contract" that parents must sign, requiring them to volunteer thirty hours each year at the school. One page of the document outlines the school's responsibilities to each child: the school is obligated to provide a safe environment, monthly reports to parents regarding a child's performance, and translators for parent-teacher conferences. Another page of the contract details what is expected of parents: parents are bound to return all necessary forms and documents to the school on time, obtain a library card for their children, and ensure that homework is

completed and reviewed. On a more basic level, the clearest measure of accountability for some focus group participants was student enrollment: if the school did not attract enough parent and student “customers,” it would have to close.

Strong feelings of accountability to students were reported by teachers, administrators and founders. One high school in the study held daily discussion groups with students to obtain feedback about their experiences and evaluation of the school. A focus group participant from a K-8 charter school summarized, “Our decisions are based on what kids need.” A number of the schools required parents and upper-grade students to read and sign-off on the school charter, and conducted annual satisfaction surveys of parents and students.

In sum, self-generated accountability systems in the charter schools we studied tended to emphasize internal accountability to the local school community, both parents and students. The systems tended to rely more on informal reports of progress than on formal documentation through standardized test scores.

***Performance rewards.*** We found that neither the charter schools nor their teachers received significant monetary rewards based on the performance of their students, a finding consistent with recent studies of restructuring schools (Newmann et al., 1997; Wohlstetter et al., 1994). Although most of the charter schools had the control over their budgets and the autonomy to create an incentive system, only one school did. The exception was an elementary school that designed a performance-based reward system from the best ideas from research in schools and private sector organizations (Kelley,

1997; Kelley & Odden, 1995). Pioneered by strong leadership from the principal (who learned about the ideas from one of her professional network connections), this charter school rewarded all teachers with bonuses if test scores across the school were raised to a previously established level. Additional bonuses were given to individual teachers if they met performance standards (based on standardized test scores) they set for their own classrooms.

Some focus group participants mentioned so-called “soft” extrinsic rewards, including parent-sponsored faculty appreciation luncheons, recognition in school newsletters, thank-you assemblies, staff appreciation days, and showcase displays on campus. More often, administrators and teachers talked about the rewards of working at a charter school—the collaboration among professionals, advanced technology resources, additional staff development, and control over what went on in the school, from hiring colleagues to shaping classroom practices. Educators in charter schools viewed their working conditions as high-quality and professional, and these conditions offered powerful rewards to the people working in the charter schools (for similar findings, see Newmann et al., 1997; Wohlstetter et al., 1994).

***Conclusions.*** Teacher focus group participants expressed strong feelings of informal accountability to parents and students, but formal accountability systems and standards were lacking in the charter schools we studied. In the absence of clear direction from the state, the charter schools were typically left to draw on their own organizational capacity to generate accountability plans, but few schools had a strong enough capacity to do so (see

Newmann et al., 1997). Charter schools in this situation frequently purchased assessment materials, even though the educators often had doubts whether the tests accurately measured what they were trying to teach.

### **Charter School Building Block: School Leadership**

School leadership provides the compass for development and sustenance of the charter school as a learning community; a key component of leadership is negotiating many role demands.

Strong school leadership plays a critical role in fostering effective teaching and learning (Lindle, 1996; Murphy & Beck, 1995; Robertson et al., 1995). The charter schools in our study varied in their approaches to leadership and management. We heard from many schools about their struggles to design an organizational structure that distributed leadership responsibilities in ways that worked best for the particular school community. The varying levels of staff experience in leadership positions complicated this process.

***Characteristics of school leadership.*** The experience of the leaders in our sample of charter schools varied, but several common traits emerged. Many charter school leaders exhibited an “outlaw mentality”: they usually came from outside the public school system or had worked within the public system but had a history of challenging the status quo. These “outlaws” saw themselves fighting what they perceived as wrong with American public education by starting a charter school. One high school administrator at a charter school for student drop-outs had worked in prison education. She commented that she

had shunned the public school system before charter schools because “I could not do the things I wanted to do without getting into a lot of trouble.” Another leader who founded a K-12 charter school described how the school was started by teachers with a common bond—a dissatisfaction with public school education. The outlaw mentality appeared to play an important role in generating and maintaining commitment to the charter school, since through their involvement, leaders were able to address what they saw as serious flaws in the public education system.

A second characteristic common to many charter school leaders was a sense of entrepreneurship. These leaders worked to establish linkages with resources often outside the district, including professional networks and service providers, to bring new ideas about teaching and learning into the schools. The fiscal autonomy granted to charter schools provided teachers the freedom to seek and use alternative resources and various types of support.

School leaders also worked with municipalities to secure school buildings, teacher training opportunities, support for curriculum development, and social and health services for students. One elementary conversion school offered the school facility for various community meetings and continuing education courses. Moreover, the principal bargained with service providers so faculty and staff could attend these activities at free or reduced rates. Another charter school rented space from a city recreation center at the low-cost nonprofit community rate. The charter schools in our sample having a strong school-to-career focus developed relationships with local businesses and colleges to provide hands-on training

and internships for students. One charter school developed an ongoing relationship with a business collaborative for this purpose. Several charter schools served as teacher training sites for local colleges or universities. Focus group participants pointed out that these partnerships contributed resources (such as student teachers) as well as new ideas about teaching and learning.

Finally, members of the focus groups characterized school leadership in charter schools by a sense of collaboration between administrators and teachers. Sometimes collaboration occurred through formal structures (teacher committees or “families” working with the principal); often collaboration was more informal—discussion groups or posting problems in the main office to solicit teacher-suggested solutions. Participants in the three focus groups talked frequently about teams of people working toward a common goal. An administrator from one of the elementary charter schools summed it this way, “We’re all here for a purpose...we’re all here together because we chose to be.”

***Tensions between centralized and decentralized management.*** An ongoing tension mentioned by many focus group participants was, on one hand, a desire for total staff inclusiveness in decision-making, and, on the other, a concern about greater efficiency, which often led to demands for a centralized organizational structure. In general, we found that individuals involved in the initial design and development of charter schools tended to reject hierarchical structures and to value a more even distribution of power within the school community. Such an approach sought contributions equally from all participants in

school decision-making, with the goal of building consensus. However, once charter schools opened and continued to add faculty and staff, participants began to feel the press for a more centralized system of decision-making that could lessen the time teachers spent on issues unrelated to teaching and learning. Focus group participants reported that radically decentralized decision-making made it difficult for decisions and follow-up actions to take place in a timely manner. As one participant noted, “When push comes to shove, someone has to make a decision.” Thus, at many charter schools, designing an organizational structure was a dynamic, evolving process that focused on balancing a desire for inclusiveness with the more practical need for more centralized structures. However, the ability of charter school leaders to create an effective balance often appeared to be hampered by their lack of professional knowledge and experience in management. Few school leaders had a strong professional understanding of participatory management or high-involvement organizations, further complicating efforts to establish an efficient decentralized system.

The experience described at one elementary school illustrates the changing nature of school organization. When the school first converted to charter status, the school’s leadership attempted to involve all teachers and staff, and to some extent parents, in every important decision. After three years of total inclusiveness, the participants wanted to “rethink this process.” They felt that the process was slowing decision-making and implementation. They argued that some top-down structures were needed for the school to function more effectively, that not everyone can manage every aspect of the school.

Similarly, a new start-up secondary school experienced dramatic changes in its organizational structure during the first years of operation. When the school first opened, the staff attempted to make all decisions by full consensus, but, “in effect, we made no decisions.” In the school’s second year, the faculty shifted toward wanting a school leader and more centralized decision-making structures. The process of balancing between centralized and decentralized management appeared to be an endemic issue for nearly all the sample charter schools. The evidence we heard suggested that a balance was reached more easily earlier in the life of a school, before structures became routinized or unwieldy. Furthermore, the autonomy over school governance granted by the three state charter school laws both created the need to address the issue of self-government and helped schools to work through the process successfully.

***Types of leadership: managerial and instructional.*** Regardless of how charter schools were organized, two distinct areas of leadership were evident—managerial leadership and instructional leadership. We found that charter schools that had greater autonomy from their districts were more consumed by managerial decisions. The day-to-day running of charter schools included issues of budget; relevant district, state and federal policies; insurance; meals; security; custodians; substitutes; psychological services; and bus companies. As one school administrator commented, “The logistics can kill you. The smallest part of my time goes to teaching and learning issues.” This is consistent with other research on self-managed schools (for example, Caldwell, 1996; Levacic, 1995; Odden & Odden, 1996).

The multiple demands on school managers were often encountered by leaders with weak management experience. Although a few charter school administrators had experience in running schools as principals in private, public or alternative schools, many charter school leaders had only teaching experience. A number of teachers across the three focus groups specifically noted that training in managerial and fiscal issues was a major deficit at their schools. However, even administrators having prior management experience found that charter schools presented difficult, new demands. As one administrator who had previously run an alternative school commented, “We are building a ship that is heading out to sea and winter is approaching and we’re in the North Atlantic.”

The division of responsibility across the two types of leadership varied among the charter schools in our study. In some schools, managerial and instructional leadership were integrated in the same individual or group of individuals who held responsibilities in both areas. When this occurred, however, school leaders were often overwhelmed with demands. An administrator from a K-12 charter school described the situation, “The old principal left because of the overwhelming responsibilities of running the school. It was a crushing weight for the guy to carry.”

In other charter schools, managerial and instructional leadership responsibilities were divided with a clear distinction between those involved in each type of activity. “I do out-house and my staff does in-house,” remarked one elementary school principal. “I’m responsible for management and money issues and my staff is responsible for day-to-day instructional issues.” In several charter

schools, management responsibilities were contracted to experts so staff members were not distracted from instructional concerns. Finance consultants were often used to handle fiscal matters.

In our focus groups we did not probe whether dividing leadership responsibilities produced communication difficulties. However, in studies of leadership in site-based management schools (Louis & Kruse, 1995; Murphy & Louis, 1994; Wohlstetter & Briggs, 1994) some principals were accused of being preoccupied with external responsibilities. It is possible that, consistent with the school-based management research, leaders with an external focus may need mechanisms for staying in touch with internal school needs.

**Conclusions.** The charter schools in our study benefitted from the passionate, committed attitudes of their school leaders. Leaders were faced with negotiating difficult tensions between centralized and decentralized decision-making and between management and instructional responsibilities. School leaders with more experience in site-based managed schools were described as being better able to negotiate these tensions. Furthermore, we heard that while the autonomy given to charter schools helped facilitate the schools in addressing these issues, at the same time, the autonomy created new, more complex governance concerns for school leaders.

## **Enabling Conditions for Creating and Sustaining Learning Communities in Charter Schools**

The preceding discussion of the “building blocks” for developing charter schools as learning communities evidences variation among the sample schools in their ability to put the building blocks into place. Some schools had successfully managed the process by the time their doors opened, while other schools continued to struggle. Three enabling conditions help to explain variation in the success rates of the charter schools we studied: school power/autonomy; presence of supportive networks/organizations; and presence of supportive parents. We offer these key issues for further exploration in charter schools nationally.

### **Charter School Enabling Condition: School Power/Autonomy**

Charter schools are, to varying degrees, empowered with control over budget, personnel, school governance, and curriculum. Schools with more power were better able to create and sustain a learning community. For example, schools with extensive control over the budget used money in new ways specifically tailored to school needs—for facilities, curricular materials, professional development or monetary incentives for teachers. Similarly, power over school governance allowed charter schools to experiment with decision-making structures, length of school year, and the weekly school schedule.

Charter schools were able to avail themselves of community resources and opportunities more easily without the constraint of the district office. The schools we studied tended to make decisions about professional development, for instance, based on staff interests and needs, not based on what the district offered at a convenient time. Schools with a high degree of

autonomy, moreover, had the ability to respond quickly to resolve problems, rather than contend with an approval process that can take months. Charter schools were able to recruit, train, and socialize their staffs, which proved critical for sustaining passion and commitment to the school mission. Finally, the autonomy of charter schools offered opportunities for implementing cutting-edge innovations in teaching and learning, although many charter schools did not capitalize on this power.

The way in which school power enabled charter schools was demonstrated in California through an informal comparison of charter schools with full fiscal autonomy and those that remained fiscally dependent on the district. The charter schools with high levels of autonomy described how they were able to research, select and adopt new curricular programs with relative ease. One elementary school sent teachers to visit other schools to observe classroom practices; the teachers, working through the curriculum committee, brought a recommendation to the school council; the council voted and the curriculum was ordered immediately. One focus group participant reported, “I got on the phone that day, placed the order, and we had the curriculum and all the instructional materials in a week.”

The schools described as making the best use of their autonomy/power were those with some degree of organizational capacity to support teaching and learning. Schools with weak organizational structures appeared to have more difficulty capitalizing on their autonomy to develop and foster a high-quality learning community.

The seemingly paradoxical relationship between charter school performance and the

strength of charter school legislation is an area for future exploration. Policy researchers have argued elsewhere (Bierlein & Mulholland, 1995; Buechler, 1996) that expansive charter school laws are those that grant the greatest degree of autonomy with few regulations or restrictions; that make it easy for a variety of individuals and groups (public and private) to obtain charter school status; and that allow large or unlimited numbers of charter schools in the state. Expansive laws, in theory, are supposed to be more lenient—allowing charter school sponsors to be more risk-taking, and approving more innovative schools than states with more restrictive laws. Results from our focus groups, although admittedly limited, raised the issue of whether charter schools would benefit from a mix of freedom and standards for operators. The schools described as using their autonomy to the greatest advantage were in California, the state with the most restrictive provisions of the three we studied (Buechler, 1996).

### **Presence of Supportive Networks/ Organizations**

In 1989, when England created grant-maintained schools, its version of charter schools, the central government created the Grant-Maintained Schools Foundation at the same time, an organization to assist schools moving to charter status and to provide technical assistance once schools opened (Wohlstetter & Anderson, 1994). In the United States, although both the federal and state levels of government are becoming more financially supportive of charter schools, neither has established a technical assistance organization parallel to England's Grant-Maintained Schools Foundation. Instead, states with charter school laws typically have added a "charter school unit" to their state departments of education. The chief purpose of these units is to administer the charter school law, which often includes overseeing the application process, developing an accountability system and evaluating implementation of the law. In California, where administration is more locally driven, the State Board of Education's role is largely limited to disseminating information about charter schools, assigning numbers to schools, and considering waivers of the cap. There has been continued controversy over whether such units should provide technical assistance to schools. Consequently, at the time of this research, there were few government units providing support to charter schools in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

Instead, a growing industry of organizations are assisting charter schools. In the three states we studied, one group was informally anointed to provide such services. Each group was led by a charter school expert, typically someone identified as a charter

school advocate: Eric Premack is director of the Charter Schools Project at the California State University Institute for Education Reform; and Joe Nathan is director of the Center for School Change at the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota. The services provided by these groups vary from workshops for groups of charter schools to on-site visits to individual charter schools. The Charter School Resource Center in Boston, directed by Linda Brown, provides the most comprehensive services of the three. The Center assists charter schools by hosting bi-monthly Charter School Roundtable sessions where approved charter schools come together to share problems and best practices. Center staff visit individual charter schools at least twice a year to assess organizational strengths and weaknesses, and provide timely feedback to school leaders. Center staff also help charter schools and potential charter school founders in outreach to the foundation and corporate community, with legal research, and in keeping legislators informed about charter school laws and current implementation issues. Other supportive organizations in the states we studied include the California Network of Educational Charters (CANEC) and the Minnesota Association of Charter Schools.

Most of the participants in the three focus groups had sought assistance from their state charter school group on educational matters related to their missions, accountability issues, and ways of coping with special education requirements. The charter schools in our study also received advice on business matters from these groups.

We also heard about support some sample schools received from the national education reform networks with which they were

affiliated. Help from these groups related mostly to curricular and instructional issues. The assistance was often provided through workshops attended by members of the network, including some charter schools but mostly district-operated schools. One charter school principal was affiliated with a policy research group, the Consortium for Policy Research in Education, and used the link to bring best practices in performance rewards into her school.

### **Presence of Supportive Parents**

We have presented examples in this paper of how a supportive base of parents facilitated the creation and nurtured the ongoing development of charter schools. Parental interest can be a driving force in creating the passion and commitment needed to establish a school, and an interested group of consumers is necessary for a school to have students to teach. Many focus group participants reported that receptive parents provided a great deal of encouragement and assistance in the start-up of their charter schools. This often was followed by a honeymoon period for the schools, during which they could count on a good deal of unconditional support from parents. As one administrator commented, “Parents signed up when we were selling air.”

However, not all charter schools with high initial parental interest experienced a honeymoon. At a few schools, parental interest escalated into what was perceived by school staff as parental meddling. For example, when one school implemented a global, thematic approach to math that excluded textbooks, the parents protested loudly and strongly enough that the school eventually adopted textbooks for some classrooms.

Beyond start-up, longer-term support from parents can contribute significantly to the level of resources the school enjoys, from facilities to curricular and instructional materials. Focus group participants mentioned many types of ongoing support from parents. As one teacher remarked, “We are cared for by the parents.” Similar to site-based management schools, parents sometimes participated in training sessions, in discussion groups that focused on instructional issues, and in various decision-making structures. Parents were also active in more conventional ways: volunteering for special tutoring programs, providing food for staff meetings, and donating time to beautify the schools. Through booster clubs, parents provided financial support that was used for school equipment, supplies and teacher training. When such support was absent, schools experienced noticeable difficulties, as one administrator commented, “Our school is about self-realization—we need more parent involvement to make this school happen.”

### **Conclusions and Policy Recommendations**

We began our study by asking: How did charter schools create and sustain learning communities? How were school missions developed and translated into classroom practice? How did charter schools learn from what they were doing? What factors seemed to produce high-quality teaching and learning? In the charter schools we studied, we identified four building blocks critical to the development of high-quality learning communities: the school mission, the school instructional program, the accountability system, and school leadership.

We found that the charter schools' approaches to these building blocks both supported and hindered their development as learning communities. For example, the schools appeared to benefit from the commitment and "outlaw mentality" of the stakeholders (founders, teachers and parents), but the lack of clarity around school mission, instruction, professional development and governance interfered with school progress. Accountability appeared to be an issue of particular difficulty for charter schools. Although charter school participants expressed strong feelings of informal accountability to their colleagues, parents and students, strong formal internal and external accountability systems were lacking.

We identified three enabling conditions that helped to distinguish schools in their abilities to establish critical building blocks. Schools that had higher levels of autonomy, that were linked to supportive networks/ organizations, and that had high levels of support from parents tended to be more successful in creating learning communities.

Given the exploratory nature of this study and the limited number of schools studied, we offer these findings mainly to guide additional, in-depth research of charter schools throughout the United States. However, the findings are a useful basis for discussion about the connections between charter school policy and practice. Based on the experience of the charter schools we studied in California, Massachusetts and Minnesota, we have generated tentative policy recommendations in two areas.

***The chartering process.*** Sponsoring agencies should improve the charter school application and approval process by requiring more concrete, detailed

information from applicants. Based on what we have learned from this study, tighter policies that hone the specificity of charter school applications may foster more stable learning communities in charter schools. To win approval, founders of prospective charter schools should be more specific about:

- *The school mission.* Does the charter school have a clear and specific mission statement that is focused on student achievement in core curricular areas?
- *The school instructional plan.* What are the specific instructional practices and curricular materials the charter school will use to teach students?
- *Professional development.* How will the charter school provide professional development, prior to opening and on an ongoing basis?
- *Accountability plan.* What are the specific performance standards and assessment strategies the charter school will use to evaluate its success?

***Managing alternative resources.*** This recommendation is directed to policymakers who design charter school laws and to educators working in charter schools. It is based on our findings about the importance of resources and networks to charter schools. Charter schools need to cultivate and manage alternative resources, frequently located outside the local school community, in order to create and sustain successful learning communities. These resources are likely to include linkages with:

- National education reform networks
- Consultants who are expert in management and fiscal matters
- The business community, social service agencies and institutions of higher education
- Consultants who are expert in academic standards and assessment
- State department of education administrators (concerning legal requirements, for example, in special education)

Charter school laws need to allow participants the flexibility to contract for services easily and in a timely fashion. District and state education departments could serve as an information clearinghouse to help charter schools get in touch with professional networks and organizations that provide needed resources and services. Finally, charter school participants, at least those in leadership positions, need to assume responsibility not only for managing people and resources, but also for building connections between the charter schools and businesses, universities and other organizations to increase resources and to generate opportunities for faculty and students.

Charter schools, like other successful learning communities, need to constantly evolve and adapt to new information and changing demands. Charter schools should be in the practice of continually re-examining their practices and methods, and making informed changes consistent with professional knowledge. Charter schools, like other learning organizations focused on

continuous improvement, would benefit from a consumer's guide that contains systematic information about different curricular models—what works and what does not—to help educators make better teaching and learning choices. The consumer's guide would describe highly effective and replicable methods and materials, organized by subject area, and include the following information: professional development requirements; appropriateness for different student populations; evaluation and assessment evidence; consumer reviews; and costs. Such a guide would complement the interest of the U.S. Department of Education in the diffusion of educational innovations and in charter schools.

In theory, charter schools accept increased accountability in exchange for independence and decreased regulation. Findings from this exploratory study suggest that individual charter schools are operating in environments that afford varying mixtures of autonomy, assistance and accountability, and that the mix is a strong influence on the charter schools' abilities to create and sustain themselves as learning communities. The challenge for future study is to enhance our understanding about the connections between state and district charter school policies and practices in charter schools.

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## End Notes

1. In addition to the authors, members of the research team included Charles Abelmann and Richard Elmore of Harvard University, Allan Odden of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and professional facilitator, Janice Ballou, director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics' Center for Public Interest Polling at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.
2. Minnesota's charter school law also has a teacher support provision, but the provision applies only to conversion schools, not new start-ups, and the vast majority of charter schools in Minnesota are new start-ups.
3. None of the three states in our sample (California, Massachusetts and Minnesota) had statewide assessments in place, although the three state charter school laws required charter school students to take tests other public school students take.
4. Just as charter school participants appeared to reject the knowledge base about curriculum and instruction, the schools typically did not draw on expert knowledge in their attempts to create an assessment plan. For instance, schools proposed that they would design measures for assessing student self-esteem or moral development, rather than fine tuning existing measures.
5. Through time-banking, where teachers have longer school days on some days and bank the extra time, the schools in the complex coordinated their pupil-free time so they could meet and plan together.
6. An exception to this is Minnesota which in recent years has stepped up its assistance to charter school organizations and charter schools themselves. In the fall of 1996, the Department of Children, Families and Learning awarded a grant to the Minnesota Association of Charter Schools to hire a special education director to work with all charter schools to improve special education services and reporting. In the spring of 1997, the department sponsored a charter schools workshop to identify and prioritize charter school needs. As a follow-up, the department is assisting the charter school association in developing a support network for assistance and training to maximize human and financial resources. (R. J. Wedl, personal communication, 1/9/98; 11/12/97).