School Restructuring Options Under No Child Left Behind:
What Works When?

Reopening as a Charter School

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Introduction to the *What Works When?* Series

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act has led to a seismic shift in how states and districts approach school accountability. Before passage of the law, most states and districts already had accountability systems based, in part, on standardized test scores. These accountability systems were tied to a variety of rewards and consequences for schools that did or did not meet student proficiency standards. The measures of proficiency varied, as they still do, based on each state's standards.

With the reauthorization of Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the passage of the NCLB Act in 2002, the federal government revised the existing federal accountability framework. Although this revision relied heavily on existing law—which included less frequent required testing, a less specific definition of adequate yearly progress (AYP), and less prescribed responses by districts and states to low-performing schools—it also introduced new measures designed to make schools more accountable for academic outcomes. Required annual assessment of student learning, a timeline specifying consequences for schools not meeting state-determined proficiency targets, consideration of significantly more dramatic school restructuring options, and a much stronger impetus for improvement from the federal rather than state level are critical aspects of the revised law.

Several years after the passage of NCLB, there are persistently low-performing schools in every state that face increasingly strong consequences for failing to improve student achievement sufficiently. In particular, schools that fail to make AYP for five consecutive years must engage in restructuring to improve student learning. Districts have several options for restructuring these schools. Although constrained to choose an option that is consistent with existing state law, districts can:

- Reopen the school as a public charter school.

- Replace "all or most of the school staff (which may include the principal) who are relevant to the failure to make adequate yearly progress."

- Contract with "an outside entity, such as a private management company, with a demonstrated record of effectiveness, to operate the school."

- Turn the "operation of the school over to the state educational agency, if permitted under State law and agreed to by the State."

- Engage in another form of major restructuring that makes fundamental reforms, "such as significant changes in the school's staffing and governance, to improve student academic achievement in the school and that has substantial promise of enabling the school to make adequate yearly progress." (No Child Left Behind Act, 2002)

The *What Works When* series is designed to help district leaders understand what is known about when and under what circumstances each of these options works to improve student learning. The first four options are newer and more dramatic than most school reform efforts employed in the past. Each has high potential when large change is needed, but each also carries risks. The goal of this series is to help district leaders determine which change is the right change for each

school. The fifth piece in this series, *What Works When: A Guide for Education Leaders,* will help districts through the process of deciding when to use each of the five strategies.

Focus of This Paper: Chartering

This paper is focused on the first option, reopening an existing school as a charter school, which we will call "chartering." Additional papers in the *What Works When* series will explore the second, third, and fourth options. *What Works When: A Guide for Education Leaders* will help states and districts choose among the five options for each school.

This paper examines what we know about when chartering may work for districts grappling with individual low-performing schools. The contents are organized into the following sections:

- Methodology
- What Are Charter Schools?
- What Is Chartering Under NCLB?
- What Is the Experience With Chartering?
- What Do We Know From These Experiences? Key Success Factors and Key Challenges
- What Further Research Is Needed to Understand Chartering?
- Conclusion

Methodology

To identify what we know about reopening an existing school as a charter school, we conducted a thorough literature review, and we interviewed researchers and practitioners across the country who are familiar with or have been directly involved in two kinds of charter school openings. One kind is the reopening of a school to replace a low-performing district school (*reopening,* also called *starting fresh* and *charter conversions*). The other is opening anew without closing another school in the process (*start-up*).

Our research also included evaluations of district reopening of schools in noncharter fashion and cross-industry research about large organizations that effect successful internal start-ups. No published research has been conducted about the distinguishing characteristics of successful charter school leaders, even though this appears to be a strong factor in charter school success. Thus, we turned to cross-industry research about successful start-up leaders and, by way of contrast, similar research about successful principals in regular district schools.

Our interviews were conducted over the telephone and were guided by open-ended interview protocols. The literature and interviews yielded some important lessons about policies and practices that foster success with chartering and may ultimately improve student performance.

What Are Charter Schools?

Though chartering works very differently in different contexts, charter schools are generally autonomous public schools that receive a contract called a charter from a public entity such as a local school board, a public university, or a state board of education. The entity giving the charter is called an authorizer. Charter schools are schools of choice, in most cases open to all students, and in all cases tuition free. They are largely operated with public funds, typically based on the number of pupils choosing to enroll. Their founding charter is a legal agreement between the school's governing body and the authorizer, which describes the school's goals, organization, funding, and autonomy.

Charter schools differ from traditional district schools in their independence from the school district, as defined by their charter. Charter schools are a creature of state law, and schools' levels of autonomy vary by state and even by authorizer.

Charter schools are founded for very different reasons by diverse groups and individuals. A charter school's leaders may include parents, teachers, and former district administrators; school management organizations; local nonprofit organizations; private school operators who wish to operate a public school; or operators of existing charter schools. Charter schools can be formed as nonprofits, for-profits, or a combination of the two (such as when a nonprofit charter employs a for-profit entity to manage the school) (Henig, Holyoke, Brown, & Lacireno-Paquet, 2005).

What Is Chartering Under NCLB?

The majority of charter schools in the United States are entirely new schools, formed by a group of parents, teachers, or community members who start the school from scratch. In contrast, the chartering option under the NCLB Act allows an existing school to reopen as a charter school. The district closes the district school and reopens it with a "clean slate" under a charter agreement.

The chartering option under NCLB legislation should be distinguished from a similar restructuring strategy under which schools are closed and reopened in restructured form but do not operate under a charter. Several districts have closed large high schools, for example, and reopened multiple new, separate high schools in the same buildings. These new schools may or may not have a greater degree of autonomy from the district or educational practices that differ from other district schools. This type of restructuring resembles chartering in many ways but lacks the new legal relationship between an independent entity and the district that defines a charter school.

The chartering option under the NCLB Act should further be distinguished from contracting, which refers to an agreement under which an outside organization delivers comprehensive educational and management services to a school. Contracting is similar conceptually to chartering but differs in the legal relationship between the district and the entity that governs the school. In a contracting relationship, an external entity provides educational and management services to a school according to the terms of a contract with the district. The governing board of a charter school, on the other hand, receives a charter—enabled and often partly defined by state law—from the district, and it may or may not choose to contract with an external provider for educational and management services.

What Is the Experience Base With Chartering?

The number of charter schools has grown rapidly since the first charter school legislation was passed in 1991. In the fall of 2005, there were approximately 3,600 charter schools serving over one million students (Center for Education Reform, 2005). Although 40 states and the District of Columbia have legislation authorizing charter schools, they have not caught on with equal force across the country, as 42 percent of charter schools are concentrated in Arizona, California, and Florida. The average number of charter schools per state has increased steadily each year, from 25 in 1995 to nearly 90 today. On average, over 250 charter schools have been added each year for the past 12 years (Vanourek, 2005). Nationally, charter schools serve a larger proportion of minority and low-income students than is found in traditional public schools: Over half (58 percent) of charter school students belong to a minority racial or ethnic group. This is due in part to the disproportionate number of charter schools in urban areas. Charter schools are three times as likely to be located in big-city districts as are traditional public schools (Lake & Hill, 2005).

Because of the diversity of charter schools, it is difficult to generalize about how they are performing on measures of student academic achievement (Lake & Hill, 2005). Snapshots of performance at a point of time often find that charter-school students lag behind their peers on average on assessments such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). By contrast, analyses of change over time tend to show charter schools and charter students making faster progress on average (Hassel, 2005). These average comparisons mask more than they reveal. Some charter schools appear to be performing at high levels while others are low performing academically and/or have been cited (and even closed) for fiscal and governance violations (Center for Education Reform, 2004).

The majority of new charter schools are start-up charters. Fewer charter schools are conversion charters, that is, schools that emerge under a charter after a traditional district school is sanctioned for low performance. Conversion charters come in two forms. This first is voluntary—when a traditional school initiates conversion itself due to the flexibility afforded by a charter. These schools often are already performing well, and thus their experience is not highly relevant to schools that are chronically low performing. The second form of conversion charter is what we call starting fresh—when a school is converted by the district or state due to low performance, and the school is expected to be significantly different from the school it replaces. The experience of these schools is directly relevant to schools becoming charter schools under NCLB. The discussion that follows focuses on the few cases of such start-fresh charter conversions.

Significant start-fresh conversions have been or are being undertaken under state law in California, Colorado, Louisiana, and Florida, and under federal law in two California districts.

- **California**

  San Diego. The San Diego School District required eight schools to restructure under the provisions of NCLB in 2004. Working groups of parents, staff, and community members at King Elementary, Gompers High School, and Keiller Middle School elected to break away from district management and reopen as charter schools in 2005. Students at these schools were one to three years below grade level in reading, writing, and math. In most

grades, the percentage of students who were proficient in core subjects reached only single digits or teens. Parents and community members recognized that change was necessary and went door to door gathering signatures for the charter petitions. Because of their success, each school now controls its own budget and personnel and is led by a governing board comprising parents, community members, teachers, and a university partner. The schools must achieve measurable improvements in student achievement in the next five years in order to have their charters renewed (B. Bennett, personal communication, September 9, 2005; Gao, 2005).

Sacramento. Historically, Sacramento High School had low student achievement and had experienced a further drop in test scores in the years preceding its controversial conversion in 2002. Facing state sanctions, the school board elected to shut down the school and reopen it as six autonomous charter academies in the same facility. Although 80 percent of the original student body returned to Sacramento High, nearly everything they found there was new: Employees, curriculum, rules, uniforms, and classes were all revised to offer a better educational opportunity. The conversion proceeded under a partnership with St. Hope Corporation, a nonprofit run by NBA star and Sacramento High alumnus Kevin Johnson (M. Fortune, personal communication, September 29, 2005; Rosenhall, 2005). Since 2002, the school's test score index has risen 20 points, and 87 percent of graduating seniors go on to higher education (California Department of Education, 2005).

Oakland. Cox and Hawthorne Elementary were among the first schools in the country to restructure under NCLB guidelines, after failing to make AYP for seven consecutive years. The Oakland district is run by an appointed state administrator who chose to reopen two elementary schools as charter schools in 2005–06, in part because of private grants available to support the transition (Asimov, 2005).

- **Colorado.** In 2002, Cole Middle School in Denver made mixed progress in raising student achievement, with a new principal and a parent-sponsored reform plan. In 2004, however, passing rates at the school were still extremely low, ranging from 2 percent to 14 percent, depending on the grade and subject tested. As a result, Cole stayed on the state's list of underperforming schools, and in 2005, it became the first school to be taken over by the state and converted into a charter. The charter conversion and the selection of an education provider were controversial, but the state board ultimately selected the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) from among three applicants in 2004. KIPP will close Cole for a year to allow time for planning and the selection and training of the school's new leader. It plans to reopen the school as a charter school in the fall of 2006 (Gottlieb, 2005).

- **Louisiana.** In 2003, the Louisiana legislature authorized the state board of education to take over schools that failed to make adequate progress under the local accountability program. Twenty-six schools across the state were placed in a special state district, the Recovery School District, after failing for four years to leave the state's "academically unacceptable" list. Capdau Middle School was the first to start fresh as a charter school in 2004 and achieved significant increases in test scores in its first year. In 2004, the state also advertised Phillips Academy, Green and Wright Middle Schools, and Medard Nelson Elementary School as eligible for takeover by qualified nonprofit organizations.

Four nonprofits were awarded five-year contracts to operate the schools, which were slated to reopen as charter schools in the fall of 2005, prior to Hurricane Katrina's devastation (LeGardeur, 2005). At least one of these Louisiana charter schools opened a facility in Houston to serve relocated students (Spencer, 2005). Louisiana's governor signed legislation in December 2005 authorizing the state to take over most of New Orleans' schools ("Orleans School Takeover," 2005).

- **Florida.** Seth McKeel Middle School, a traditional district school in Polk County, voluntarily converted to a school of choice in 1996 when it became clear that the school would not meet the evaluation criteria under Florida's new accountability system. The school reopened with Grades 6–9 and added a grade each year to become a 6–12 middle/high school. In 1998, the school voluntarily converted to charter status and changed its name to McKeel Academy of Technology to reflect its new educational focus. After its conversion to a choice school, and since becoming a charter school, McKeel has consistently earned A's on the state's grading system. In 2004–05, it was recognized as the top-performing middle/high school in the county (Crouse, 2005; C. Finch, personal communication, September 26, 2005).

Several other school districts across the country have instituted similar restructuring efforts that involve closing and reopening schools to address low performance, though not under charter status. These change efforts may offer useful lessons for school districts seeking to reopen traditional schools as charter schools.

- **Chicago.** Nine years after taking control of the Chicago Public Schools, the mayor has implemented a plan to close down the city's most troubled elementary and high schools and create 100 new schools in neighborhoods across the city through 2010. Low-enrollment and low-performing schools will be converted into new district schools, two thirds of which will be run by outside partners. The goals of this Renaissance 2010 program are to provide new educational options to underserved communities and relieve school overcrowding in communities experiencing rapid growth (Chicago Public Schools, 2005).

- **New York.** In the late 1980s, Julia Richmond High School in New York City had a student body of 2,600, only 66 percent of whom were in attendance on any given day. And, only one third of the school's freshmen moved on to graduation. Educators initiated a transformation by phasing out the school one grade at a time and replacing it with six autonomous schools. Each school now has control over its own budget, curriculum, and teaching methods. All six have demonstrated success, with more than 85 percent of graduating students going on to higher education. The city has had similar success dividing up other large high schools into smaller learning communities (Schoales, 2005).

- **Colorado.** After a year of strategic planning, the Mapleton School District in suburban Denver is in the process of phasing out its high schools and replacing them with a total of six to eight small schools. Each school will have a different educational focus, but all are guided by the expectation that all seniors apply to college. Teachers in the district have supported the measure by adopting a new contract that allows flexible working hours and conditions and gives schools latitude with respect to hiring. The district hopes to

permanently replace the former high schools with the redesigned system by 2007 (Schoales, 2005).

When Have Conversions of Low Performing Schools to Charter Status Been Successful?

Dozens of studies have assessed the effectiveness of start-up charter schools in the decade since the first charter school was opened. Charter conversions in response to low performance are a much more recent development, with most undertaken since 2004. Though many leaders involved in conversions believe that their schools are on the right path, in most cases it is far too early to judge whether converted schools will be successful in their new form. The information that follows is based on still-preliminary results in a few schools that have operated for multiple years after converting to charter status.

The most successful conversions to charter status are marked by dramatic, speedy improvements in student achievement. Often these improvements are supported by a major change in the school's culture and a new mission that gives the school community a sense of shared purpose. In successful conversions, new administrators guide change at the school based on an educational philosophy, and they focus the students, faculty, and curriculum on clear goals and objectives (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). For example, when McKeel reopened in Florida, it focused on technology and creating a clear connection between the students' learning and the workplace (C. Finch, personal communication, September 26, 2005). King Chavez opened in San Diego with a similar reform: Students in the Arts Academy may make three-dimensional shapes to reinforce their learning in geometry, and students in the Athletics Academy study baseball batting averages as part of a lesson on fractions (Gao, 2005).

These improvements in school culture foster an environment that can lead to extraordinary progress in student learning. In Florida, California, and New Orleans, where conversion charters have been in operation for at least one year, the change has resulted in improved test scores at some schools. Seth McKeel Middle School in Polk County, Florida, for example, ranked as one of the lowest-achieving schools in the state before its conversion. In 2005, McKeel Academy of Technology earned praise from the governor as Polk County's top-performing middle/high school, with 89 percent of its students meeting state standards in writing, 72 percent performing at or above grade level in math, and 56 percent at or above grade level in reading (Crouse, 2005). Since its conversion in 2002, Sacramento High School's score on the California Academic Performance Index has risen more than 30 points, a significantly greater increase than the average for the district and the state. Approximately 87 percent of graduating seniors go on to higher education (California Department of Education, 2005).

In some start-fresh conversions, learning advances, while laudable, still leave significant room for improvement. Capdau Middle School in New Orleans also suffered from chronically low test scores before its conversion, with 13 percent of eighth-grade students achieving at the Basic level and only 1 percent at Mastery level in math and science in 2003. In 2004–05, the school saw an overall increase in test scores, though still only 19 percent of eighth graders achieved at the Basic level in math, and 12 percent in science (Louisiana Department of Education, 2005).

What Do We Know From These Reform Experiences?
Key Success Factors and Key Challenges

An examination of the experience with chartering points to several factors that influence the success or failure of implementing this option: governance structure, both at the district and the school level; "environmental" issues, such as the timeline for conversion and community and parent involvement; selection of a strong leader; and "organizational" factors, including the design of the converted school and training of new staff.

System-Level Governance. One important factor is leadership and management of the entire chartering effort within a whole district, with the district acting as the process organizer and authorizer of reopened schools. Research suggests that a strong governance structure is needed within a district to oversee the process of restructuring via chartering, and that dedicated resources within the district office are necessary to give the authorizing and oversight processes sufficient attention. How should the chartering process be designed? How should charter operators be selected? How should ongoing oversight and accountability for charter schools be managed?

Environmental Factors. In additional to governance, many factors outside the control of an individual school's leader and staff affect the success of a charter school. How much autonomy should new charter schools have? How should they be held accountable? How much time should be provided for the restructuring process? What additional support should be provided by the district to chartered schools?

School-Level Governance. While the district is providing the oversight and governance for all chartered schools in a district, another group— typically a board of trustees—must set major policies and oversee the leader of each individual school. This structure is common to all nonprofits and many for-profit organizations, not just charter schools. The charter operator and/or board, authorized by the district, will have the ultimate responsibility to ensure that improvements within the school lead to improved student outcomes. What are the characteristics of strong school-level governance?

Leadership Factors. Research suggests that the individual leader of a school can be one of the largest factors determining a school's success. Selecting and supporting the right leader for a charter school either directly or in conjunction with a charter operator is an essential part of the chartering process. What are the characteristics to look for in the leader of a chartered school? How do these differ from characteristics of a traditional school leader? How should a potential school leader's capabilities be assessed? How can the district authorizer determine whether the entity governing a school will choose the right kind of leader?

Organizational Factors. Even though successful schools differ, there are common factors among most schools that perform well and among charter schools that perform well. How should the new charter school be designed? How should new staff be trained and managed? While the district authorizer will have little control over these factors after a charter provider is selected, these factors may be incorporated into the selection process.

The following sections offer tentative answers to these questions in light of the emerging research and experience base on chartering and similar reforms.

System-Level Governance

The major governance functions of a district using chartering to restructure schools under NCLB guidelines are organizing and implementing the charter-authorizing process. Experience with authorizers reopening existing, previously low-performing schools is limited, but there is a wealth of experience and research on best practices in the charter-authorizing world at large. This experience and research base indicates that a strong authorizing function must exist if the restructuring-through-chartering effort is to succeed.

Qualities of Effective Authorizing

With the maturation of the charter movement over the last decade, experience and research have advanced the understanding of what is needed from the authorizing function. There have been several recent studies of traits needed for a strong authorizer (Chau, Daley, & Gill, 2003; Palmer & Gau, 2003; Smith & Herdman, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2004), and several traits have surfaced as being important to successful authorizing:

- **Rigorous Selection Process in Place.** Charter restructuring requires creating a process by which applicants will be selected to operate new charter schools. The goal of the district is to attract and choose a school provider that will achieve success as quickly as possible with students who have not succeeded in the district schools being closed. Meeting that goal requires setting high standards for the approval of a charter application, and then implementing a process to ensure that only applicants meeting the standards obtain approval.

  The selection process is an increasingly well-traveled road thanks to a decade of experience nationally with charter-school authorizing. Over this time, districts and other authorizers have developed the elements needed to make such a process successful. While little research exists directly tying selection-process characteristics to school quality, the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) conducted extensive consultation with authorizers nationwide to identify elements of an effective process, generating *Principles and Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing* (NACSA, 2004). This document delineates the key processes that authorizers need to master in developing a sound application process, including the following:

  - **Fair Procedures.** Communicate chartering opportunities, processes, and decisions openly to the public; establish a submission process with realistic and clear timelines, requirements, and expectations for content and format; explain how each stage of the application process will be evaluated; and clearly define how the requirements of the application are met.

  - **Rigorous Criteria.** Require the applicant to provide a clear and compelling mission, a quality educational program, a solid business plan, effective governance and management structures, and evidence of the applicant's capacity to carry out its plan.

The authorizer should also be open to considering innovative educational philosophies and approaches.

- **Charter Decisions.** Conduct a thorough evaluation of the applications using reviewers with educational, organizational, legal, and financial expertise; document the factors that determined its decision about each application; grant charters only to applicants that have met the established criteria; and provide prompt notification of decisions and inform applicants of their rights and responsibilities (NASCA, 2005, p. 7).

Some experts have concluded that in an ideal situation, multiple applicants meet the selection criteria (Hassel & Hassel, 2005). This enables the district to focus on how well each charter applicant's offerings fit with the targeted schools' student populations. Generating such a pool of strong operators, however, is often one of the hardest challenges that authorizers face (Ziebarth, 2004). Possible sources of "supply" include the following:

- Existing high-quality single-site schools seeking to replicate

- Entrepreneurial teachers and school leaders with the vision and capability to open new schools

- The emerging ranks of charter management organizations, education management organizations, and other networks seeking to operate numerous public schools, which may be operated as for-profit or nonprofit organizations

- Institutions of higher education such as local colleges or universities

- Community-based and cultural organizations with a track record of providing top-notch services and a desire to extend their work to K–12 education. (Hassel & Steiner, 2004)

- **Adequately Resourced.** The necessary work of setting expectations, gathering school data, and making merit-based decisions is labor intensive. Research has shown that charter authorizers with adequate resources are more likely to perform these tasks successfully (Hassel & Batdorff, 2004; Palmer & Gau, 2003). An evaluation of the Public Charter Schools Program, a federal grant program that provides charter-school funding to individual states, found that only 36 percent of authorizers have a charter school office or staff. Even among authorizers with a charter office, these offices have very limited staff capacity. On average, state offices had three full-time staff members, although the most common response was one. Even in states with a large number of charter schools, these offices were often quite small. For example, Arizona had 287 charter schools but only two positions dedicated to charter work in 2001–02 (SRI International, 2004). In a case study examining Texas's charter-school experience, researchers found that the division of charter schools was "woefully understaffed" (Fusarelli, 2001, p. 161). Survey results show that charter school authorizers themselves are not satisfied with their current level of resources. In only 8 out of 24 states surveyed did authorizers say they are receiving adequate funding to support essential staff and activities (Palmer & Gau, 2003).

- **Engaged With the Community.** Nationally, the charter movement has been controversial. Unions, school boards, and communities may react negatively to restructuring efforts merely because they are accompanied by the term *charter*. Schools that are most successful at conversion are able to withstand opposition when necessary, but also engage and educate parents and community leaders to help them embrace necessary changes. No matter the political environment in the district, community engagement is a critical component of the charter conversion process.

  Contrasting case examples illustrate this point. San Diego and Chicago have had success involving community members in their restructuring efforts by convening local community boards to take part in the decision-making process. In San Diego, local working groups composed of 12 to 18 parents, teachers, and community members, and led by the principal of the school, examine options for restructuring at the school and present their recommendations to the school board (B. Bennett, personal communication, September 9, 2005). In Chicago's Renaissance 2010 initiative, the district seeks partnerships with grassroots organizations who can help parents understand why reform is necessary in their children's schools. In addition, the project includes the development of Transition Advisory Councils at each school, groups of community members who guide the selection of schools that will best respond to the needs of the community at each site (Chicago Public Schools, 2005). By contrast, observers (i.e., interviewees wishing to remain anonymous) expressed some concern about Colorado's engagement of various stakeholders in the process of converting Cole Middle School to charter status.

- **Able to Create a Good Working Environment for Charter Schools.** Strong authorizers also create a working environment for charter schools with appropriate freedom of action, accountability for results, and adequate support. (These factors are described in the Environmental Factors section.)

Building or Finding Capacity

Empirical research suggests that districts are likely to face greater challenges as authorizers, as they may be able to devote only minimal staff and resources to the authorizing function. Local districts also appear to be the most vulnerable to political pressures regarding charter schools (Bulkley, 1999; Hassel & Batdorff, 2004; Palmer & Gau, 2003). Capacity issues may be especially severe for school districts with very small central offices, such as rural and suburban districts with just a few schools.

Districts concerned about their ability to serve as strong authorizers might consider a pair of options:

- **District Acts as Authorizer.** Those that wish to serve as authorizers themselves should focus on their own capacity, ensuring that they are adequately resourced and able to make autonomous decisions. Districts in San Diego, New York City, and Chicago have successfully chosen this route and built the capacity to be effective charter authorizers internally.

- **District Outsources Authorizing.** Districts may also consider outsourcing the job to another entity that already possesses the capacity to serve as a strong authorizer. Two major national studies of charter authorizing have found that authorizers with a wider geographic scope than a single district, such as statewide authorizers, are capable of high-volume authorizing, which is tied to higher quality processes. State-level authorizers are also one step removed from political pressure (Hassel & Batdorff, 2004; Palmer & Gau, 2003). A specialized chartering body, such as the District of Columbia Public Charter School Board, may therefore minimize the impact of political and bureaucratic forces.

Environmental Factors

Several factors outside of a charter school's control can affect its success. Establishing the right relationship between the district and the new charter operators is critical to the success of a restructured charter school. Experience and research tell us that both autonomy and accountability are key elements in this relationship. The transition timeframe and district support given to the charter school are additional environmental factors that can affect a charter school's success.

- **Freedom to Act.** To date, the school providers who have achieved the best success with previously low-performing students use very different approaches to instruction, staffing, scheduling of the school day and year, parent relationships, discipline techniques, budget allocation and the like (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Many successful school reform leaders have found, for example, that longer school days or weeks are essential to improving student learning. Requiring charter schools to follow the district's schedule in such a case could limit success for students who need more time at school to learn. Districts that limit the autonomy of a chartered school with regard to scheduling and similar practices that work for low-performing students may compromise the school's success (Hassel & Hassel, 2005).

  It is an often-held misconception that all charter schools are fully autonomous. Many charter schools do not automatically get waivers from district regulations. A national evaluation of the Public Charter Schools Program in the U.S. Department of Education found that only one third of charter schools automatically receive waivers from state policies and regulations, but many schools receive waivers on a case-by-case basis. The majority of states in 2001–02 reported that charter schools were exempt from requirements about the length of the school day or year (68 percent), staff hiring and firing policies (65 percent), and other teacher policies, such as teacher contract year and tenure requirements (61 percent) (SRI International, 2004).

  In a retrospective review of New American Schools' efforts at "break-the-mold" schools, RAND authors note that change "calls for significant school autonomy over budget, staffing, curriculum, instruction, and assessments" (Berends, Bodilly, & Nataraj Kirby, 2002, p. 147). This research is echoed in the private sector. Christensen (1997), a Harvard Business School professor who studies innovation and change, found that when major changes emerge in an industry, it is typically because new organizations enter the field using approaches that are not constrained by past practices. The most successful charter schools are afforded similar flexibility to use new approaches in areas such as scheduling,

hiring, and allocation of resources. In successful charter schools, structure is at the service of function (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

- **Accountability.** If it is going to hold schools and their new leadership teams accountable for academic results, the oversight body needs to establish a system for monitoring and evaluating outcomes. As observers of charter school authorizing have noted, this role presents technical challenges (Hassel & Vergari, 1999).

  - *Clear Expectations.* It is critical that school faculty, parents, and students understand what the school needs to do in order to have its charter renewed. When charter school laws were initially passed, many charter authorizers developed an application process quickly (Bulkley, 1999). This early rush may explain why studies of charter-school contracts, especially in the early years of chartering, found that authorizers had a mixed record of including explicit performance objectives in their contracts with schools (Hassel & Vergari, 1999; SRI International, 1997). More recent surveys of charter-school authorizers across the nation found that 91 percent of charter schools had measurable goals in the area of student achievement (SRI International, 2004).

  - *Ongoing Assessment.* Many authorizers continue to struggle with establishing fair and workable systems of monitoring schools and evaluating their results (Bulkley, 1999; Smith & Herdman, 2004; SRI International, 2004). In all types of schools, accountability requires addressing challenging issues such as measurement of progress and achievement, how much weight to place on standardized tests versus other measures of success, treatment of students entering a school midstream in the year or in the grade sequence, and accounting for students who start far behind others. In assessing charter schools, these challenges are compounded by the other issues inherent in starting a new organization—even the highest performing new organizations take time to get up to speed. Distinguishing growing pains from more fundamental performance problems is difficult (Hassel & Hassel, 2005).

- **Timetable.** The timeline for the restructuring options under No Child Left Behind is somewhat dictated by the terms of the law. Experience has shown that a fast timeline for planning dramatic school restructuring can lead to difficulty. Research on school reconstitution makes clear that districts who have closed down schools in June and reopened them under new management in August have often struggled with chaos and poor results (Malen, Croniger, Muncey, & Redmond-Jones, 2002). One study of states' implementation of the restructuring options under NCLB found that few chose the chartering option, in part because the timetable does not align with their charter application process or hiring and firing decisions (DiBiase, 2005). Chartering that has been implemented under state law has followed various timelines. In New Orleans, the state identified four district schools to be converted to charter status in October 2004 and awarded contracts to local nonprofit organizations in April; the schools were slated to open in September 2005 (LeGardeur, 2005). San Diego followed a much longer timeline, with the convening of a working group in March 2004 to discuss its restructuring approach, the issuance of a request for proposal in July, submission of applications in January 2005, and schools reopening in September. Several leaders involved in the conversions wished for longer planning periods but felt confident that more time was not

critical for success (B. Bennett, personal communication, September 9, 2005). Particularly in districts where the charter school model is politically charged, more time to plan the restructuring strategy also allows more time for people to become frightened of the change; more time increases the chances of a local election that will replace charter supporters with charter opponents. In every district, too much time can erode a very necessary sense of urgency. Nonetheless, the best planning processes are as strategic as possible based on local timetables.

Several approaches to address this logistical challenge have been tried by districts and schools. These are the emerging approaches:

- Let the school be shuttered for a year while renovations take place and the new provider plans. Cole Middle School in Denver has taken this approach, closing down to allow time for selection and training of the school's new leader. This requires finding interim slots in other schools for students.

- Open the restructured school in the earliest grade only (e.g., Grade 9 in a high school) and let it expand year by year. Some charter operators often insist on this approach in their charters. This requires addressing the needs of current students.

- Grant the charter to a provider early (e.g., November), providing adequate time to plan. This requires making early assumptions about a school's fifth-year AYP performance.

- Open a small number of charter schools within the district as several traditional schools approach sanctions for low performance. In a couple of years, these charter schools will be ready to integrate students from district schools if their parents choose to move them.

Even with the use of these mitigating approaches, experience has shown that it is a challenge to meet the needs of current students, as well as future students who will benefit from restructured schools (Hassel & Hassel, 2005).

- **Additional Support.** Undertaking this option under NCLB is often time consuming and costly to implement successfully. A significant amount of management and oversight are required by the charter authorizer for the closing and reopening to work. The authorizer staff must work with the school community, select the charter operator, negotiate the charter, oversee the implementation of the new charter, and monitor the school's performance, and hold its operators accountable. Over and above this effort lies the question of what additional support the district should provide to the charter school. As Ziebarth (2004) notes, the basic question is this: Will a school receive less funding and support by going "charter" than it did as a traditional public school? He identified several questions that districts face:
  - Will the new school get the same amount of operating dollars as it did before?
  - Will it receive resources to cover facility costs?
  - Will it get access to bond levies as a charter school?
  - Will it receive the same amount of federal, state, and local dollars as before?

- If there are any gaps between what the school received as a traditional school and what it will receive as a charter school, will the state and/or district make up the difference? (Ziebarth, 2004)

Answering any or all of these questions is difficult, but research has taught us several things about the underlying issues:

- *Funding.* In most states, charter schools are funded at lower levels than district-run public schools, by amounts that range from $1,000 to nearly $5,000 per pupil (Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2005). Much of what charter schools receive in public funds depends on the relationship between each charter school and the district, the political savvy of the charter directors, and district-level policies about what the charter schools deserve (Wells, n.d.).

- *Training.* Training is important for the leaders and board running a new school, but it does not necessarily have to come directly from the district. There are approximately 34 state charter school associations, 20 charter school resource centers, and 10 other state organizations supporting charter schools, plus at least six major national charter groups (Vanourek, 2005). Many of these groups offer training and support to nascent charter schools.

- *Technical Assistance.* As with training, the district does not need to be the only source of technical assistance for a new charter school. Studies have shown that 87 percent of charter schools receive technical assistance from their state education agency (or its Web site), and 59 percent receive technical assistance from a national or regional education agency (Vanourek, 2005).

- *Facilities.* District authorizers ultimately decide what facilities will be made available to new charter operators, whether and how renovations to those facilities will be funded, and how much money will be transferred to the new providers for operating costs. In some states, the charter laws dictate these arrangements, but in others it can be a point of negotiation with prospective charter operators (U.S. Department of Education, 2005).

School-Level Governance

School-level governance can take several forms. In almost all cases, charter schools are governed by a board of trustees. The charter authorizer grants a charter to this board, and the board is accountable for the school's performance. In Arizona alone, a charter may be held directly by a school operator, such as an education management organization, without an intermediating board; however, such an arrangement is rare. The discussion here focuses on the standard case of a charter school with a board.

Whether the charter ultimately goes to an established organization or a community group that ultimately becomes the charter board (as happened in San Diego's 2005 restructurings), the group's capacity to support and monitor the school is a critical criterion for the district to consider as authorizer. Research and case studies have coalesced around a core set of optimal board characteristics:

- Passionate belief in the charter school's mission and core values

- A firm understanding of the goals of the charter and a clear, consistent method of measuring them

- A clear, collective vision about where the school is and where it wants to be in the future

- Focus on results

- Clarity of roles and responsibilities of the full board, individual trustees, and committees

- Appropriate structure in terms of board size, composition, committees, and officers

- Board meetings that focus on strategic issues, not just reporting

- Appreciation for the difference between governance and management

- Selection of a school leader who has the time to assist in the creation of effective governance

- A strong partnership between the board and the school leader, which is built on mutual trust and respect (Cornell-Feist, 2005)

A governance approach often unique to chartering, partnering with a third-party organization, has been shown to have a positive impact on charter school results (Wohlstetter, Malloy, Smith, & Hentschke, 2004). A charter school can partner with universities, other existing charters, foundations, a charter-management/educational-management organization, or other community organizations. These partners can provide a wide variety of resources and expertise to a charter school. Implemented properly, these alliances serve to enhance the capacity of organizations by providing access to otherwise unavailable assets that are critical for their continued functioning. These resources can include human and financial resources, new knowledge, increased flexibility, and enhanced legitimacy in the community (Wohlstetter et al., 2004).

School Leadership

The evidence is strong that a school's leader makes a big difference in student learning. However, understanding of the characteristics that distinguish high-performing school leaders from the rest is very limited. In addition, no research yet describes how the characteristics of high-performing leaders differ in emerging school contexts such as start-up schools and turnaround schools. Research outside of education addresses some of these distinctions more clearly, and we draw on that here to provide some guidance about what districts should seek in charter-school leaders.

Research indicates that school leader differences explain about 25 percent of differences in student learning accounted for by school, on average (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). Meta-analysis of 51 cross-industry studies of high-complexity jobs found that people whose performance is one standard deviation above the mean achieve measurable results an average of 48 percent higher than average performers (Hunter, Schmidt, & Judiesch, 1990). In industry, where results have long been measured quantitatively, leaders who demonstrate certain behaviors achieve significantly better financial results (Collins, 2001; Goleman, 2001a; Goleman, 2001b). In short, the potential for

leader impact is large in any setting, including schools. Thus, a key aspect of the district's governance role is finding and managing schools' day-to-day leaders.

A large body of research and theoretical writing explores school leadership in general, and some of this may apply to aspects of charter school leadership. However, no school leader research yet provides a model of school leadership that is:

- Validated, or proven to accurately describe what distinguishes high performers from the rest, eliminating items that are appealing but inconsequential and including items that may not be intuitive from limited observations.

- Limited to characteristics that describe the person not the job.

- Detailed enough on those characteristics that districts may use it for accurate selection of high-performing leaders.

Two recent reviews summarize the state of school leader research. Leithwood, et al. (2004) reviewed studies of school leadership and discussion of philosophical debates about matters such as distributed leadership (e.g., Elmore, 2000) and change theory (e.g., Fullan, 2001). The Leithwood team offers a hypothesized model of school leadership, which includes three broad categories: setting directions, developing people, and redesigning the organization. However, the authors' final conclusion after reviewing existing research is: "There is much yet to be learned about who provides educational leadership" (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 17). Waters et al. (2003) conducted a meta-analysis of 30 years of leadership studies, both published and unpublished. They define 21 leader responsibilities, combining behavior characteristics and specific, prescribed leader actions, to implement effective-schools research (see next paragraph). Applying these 21 responsibilities mathematically to a hypothetical school at the 50th percentile in student achievement, they found a 10-percentile-point increase in student achievement for a one standard deviation across-the-board (all 21 characteristics) increase in leader capability. This percentile point increase translates roughly into a 20-percent increase in measured results for a one standard deviation increase in leader capability. They also hypothesize a model for defining when leadership will have a *positive* effect on student learning, including focus on effective school practices and adjustment of leadership to the magnitude of change. While helpful, this existing school leadership research explains neither the bulk of the performance difference between high-performing leaders and the rest, nor the characteristics districts should seek in candidates for school leadership positions.

One point on which many experts agree is that leaders in any school context must know the common findings about what works in high-performing schools, also called the effective-schools research (Elmore, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2004; Waters et al., 2003). Thus, we include that content knowledge in the leader-selection list at the end of this section and in the Organizational Factors section.

To the extent that the existing school leader research is useful for understanding high-performing school leaders in general, it lacks any studies that describe the distinguishing characteristics of school leaders who are very successful in a *start-up* situation specifically. The Leithwood team (2004) expresses hope that great school leaders can be flexible to achieve results in a variety of settings. However, experts who have studied thousands of managers, even when finding common

leader characteristics, also have found differences in leaders who perform very well in differing settings (e.g., Boyatzis, 1982; Goleman, 2001b; Spencer & Spencer, 1993). Studies from other sectors comparing high and average performers have found that some leaders, with certain behavioral tendencies, consistently perform better in certain types of leadership roles. Very successful leaders in a classic middle manager role, like that of the traditional principal, exhibit behavior patterns different from start-up leaders (Collins, 2001; Spencer & Spencer, 1993). Districts considering chartering as a restructuring strategy will be well served to understand what is known about leaders who perform very well in the start-up role.

Here we focus on critical leader issues very specific to the charter situation, which invariably involves the start-up of a new organization under a new leader. First, we address the fundamental, distinguishing qualities of leaders, often called entrepreneurs, who are very successful in start-ups. Second, we address ways that districts can choose chartering organizations likely to select such leaders for their schools.

School Leadership Capacity. No published research yet documents the characteristics that distinguish excellent from average or low-performing charter school leaders. Fortunately, high-quality, cross-industry research has found strikingly similar characteristics among leaders in successful start-up organizations in numerous industries and cultures. In carefully constructed comparison studies, these similarities distinguish highly successful entrepreneurs—the top 10 percent as measured using commonly accepted outcome variables—from average ones. Start-up leaders who achieve the best results exhibit these characteristics more frequently and at higher levels of skill than those leaders who achieve average results (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). These characteristics are termed *competencies* and are defined as measurable actions, or what people do, say, think, and feel. This is distinct from content or subject-matter knowledge (Boyatzis, 1982; Goleman, 2001b; Spencer & Spencer, 1993).

Anecdotally, leaders of the most successful charter schools produce positive learning results very quickly. Were a study to be conducted, this would be the ultimate measure of start-up school leader output. Improving achievement among students who have come from a chronically low-performing school requires the school leader to exert great influence over the attitudes and daily behaviors of students, parents, and teachers—all in short order. Applying Spencer and Spencer's (1993) research about common characteristics of highly successful start-up leaders to schools, Hassel and Hassel (2005) conclude that leaders of start-fresh conversion charters must exhibit the following competencies:

- **Driving for Results.** Start-up leaders set high goals, take initiative, and are relentlessly persistent. They are able to make decisions even when unpopular or different from approaches taken by others (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). In a school context, behaviors using this competency might include setting a very high bar for the number of students who should make grade level and planning ahead to make it happen. When results fall short, these school leaders would not give up on the original high goals and would likely to raise the goals once met.

- **Solving Problems.** Leaders in successful start-ups gather and use data, think through problems, and follow up with targeted action. They use a hands-on approach to problem solving to ensure that everyone can follow the plan (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). In a

school context, behaviors using this competency might include researching what has worked in similar schools, closely monitoring and announcing progress, making decisions based on student progress data, and constantly evaluating their approach toward meeting the school's goals.

- **Showing Confidence.** Successful start-up leaders exhibit confidence that the organization's goals can be reached. Instead of treating challenges as excuses for failure, they use them as a starting point for problem solving to meet common goals (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). In a school context, behaviors using this competency might include continually stating that problems will be solved successfully and not excusing any student from learning based on a student's family, ethnicity, or background.

- **Influencing Others.** Goals are reached in successful start-ups in large part because of the leaders' use of relationships. These leaders focus less on developing staff skills over time (though this is eventually necessary) and more on using influence to foster immediate action toward the organization's short-term needs (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). In a school context, behaviors using this competency might include using strong interpersonal skills to motivate teachers, parents, and students around the new school's mission and personally addressing staff, students, or parents who need to alter school-related conduct. Though these leaders have extraordinarily strong interpersonal skills, they will sacrifice a long-term relationship if it is necessary to achieve immediate learning results.

Successful leaders in organizations that are already high performing tend to focus on delegation of core responsibilities, incremental staff development, and long-term relationships. In contrast, successful start-up leaders by necessity thrive on immediate results. The characteristics and daily actions of successful start-up leaders differ from leader actions in already-successful organizations. It is possible, therefore, that even highly successful district principals may not have the right profile to be successful in restructured charter schools (Hassel & Hassel, 2005).

However, three factors may make the characteristics needed by successful charter school leaders different from other start-up leaders. First, and most generally, studies comparing very-high-performing principals in traditional schools to high-performing middle managers across industries found overall strong similarities. But researchers also found that the best principals display more conceptual thinking, team leadership, and organizational commitment than average performers (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). These differences also may exist for high-performing charter leaders compared to successful start-up leaders in other industries. Thus, we add three more competencies from Spencer and Spencer's studies to the model:

- **Conceptual thinking:** The ability to identify patterns and connections between situations and to identify key issues in complex situations. In the school context, a leader displaying this competency might identify how to connect learning standards and activities across grade levels and subjects, or understand and articulate for staff how the curriculum and classroom activities should connect to the school mission.

- **Team leadership:** The ability and willingness to assume the role as leader of a team or group. At basic levels, this includes keeping the team informed; explaining decisions; treating all team members fairly; promoting team effectiveness by removing incapable members and assigning interesting, developmental tasks to all; and ensuring adequate

resources for the team's work. At highest levels, team leadership includes ensuring that the work of the team gets done and communicating a compelling vision that, in fact, motivates the team to perform.

- **Organizational commitment:** The ability and willingness to align one's own behavior with the needs and goals of the organization. This includes working toward the organization's goals even when in conflict with one's own preferences, making personal sacrifices to achieve the goals, standing by controversial decisions that benefit the organization, and asking others to make personal sacrifices to meet organizational goals.

As the most successful charter-management organizations scale up into larger, more complex organizations, the schools they manage may present a leadership challenge different from the pure entrepreneurial situation, calling for more of a hybrid leader. Research has documented that it is increasingly difficult for individual managers and subgroups to deviate from standardized practices in successful, large organizations (Christensen, 1997). Leader research has shown that the larger and more complex the managing organization, the greater the complex influence skills leaders need (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). Such complex influence skills may be critical for school leaders who want to build long-term relationships within the charter-management organization. These relationships may become critical for future access to resources and flexibility from increasingly standard practices, when needed to achieve student learning in individual schools. The combination of entrepreneurial and complex influence skills most likely is rarer than either set of qualities alone.

When a charter school is past the start-up phase, the leadership needs may change. This is true regardless of whether it is a stand-alone school or one within a larger charter organization. The actions needed to establish a new school and move a large group of new teachers, parents, students, and other stakeholders in the same direction amidst the great uncertainty inherent in all new situations are likely different from the incremental improvements needed once a school is high performing. This difference in work required by the school leader in the start-up phase and maintenance-improvement phase mirrors differences in work done by successful start-up leaders and successful managers in existing organizations. When the core work differs, the characteristics of those who are successful leaders likely differ as well (Collins, 2001; Spencer & Spencer, 1993).

Should charter-school leaders be limited to former teachers or school leaders? The cluster of behaviors that most distinguish successful start-up leaders across a variety of sectors includes goal setting, problem solving, and perseverance (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). Some former educators will possess these qualities, but many—even those who have been successful teachers and leaders in already-high-performing schools—may not.

Conversely, some noneducators will possess the right competencies but lack education-specific knowledge. No easily observed differences have emerged to distinguish successful leaders in the public sector in general from those in the private sector (Joyce, 2004). Nonetheless, would a new school leader benefit from an education background? Some leaders can achieve school success without it, but limited research indicates that new managers across industries may be most likely to focus early efforts on familiar disciplines (Gabarro, 1985). Thus, a start-up leader with an education background may be the ideal. However, this type of leader may not always be

available. When this is the case, district authorizers may want to see evidence that the chartering group will provide intensive education training, a "chief academic officer" for the school, or a team of experienced educators working with the leader (Hassel & Hassel, 2005).

In sum, district leaders should look first and foremost to the core start-up leader competencies for guidance, knowing that this is merely a "necessary but not sufficient" list of characteristics and that the leadership needs of even highly successful charter schools will mature over time. Meanwhile, significantly better research is needed to understand fully what characteristics distinguish high-performing leaders in both start-up and maintenance school settings.

Selecting the Right Leader. A track record is generally the best indicator of a leader's potential success. Often, however, a district will be forced to decide whether to grant a charter to a founding board or a management organization that has not yet identified a specific person to lead the school. If this is the case, according to Hassel and Hassel (2005), the district should look for a school provider that can demonstrate:

- A track record of managing different types of new schools—charter, private, or public—with successful leaders.

- Experience with recruitment and management of leaders in nonschool contexts, such as day-care centers, social-service organizations, or small nonprofits.

- A proven process for recruiting, training, and providing ongoing support to successful start-up leaders.

- That it has a pool of potential start-up leaders from which it can readily draw.

- Criteria for selecting leaders of new schools that:
  o Are aligned with research about successful start-up leaders in other sectors.
  o Include understanding of effective schools research (addressed briefly the Organizational Factors section).

Organizational Factors

Charter schools are operated in many different ways, shapes, and forms, and research has yet to prove that there is one right way to run a charter school. However, research and experience have shown that there are several characteristics common to all high-performing schools and common to schools populated by previously low-performing students. One characteristic is having a strong mission. Effective charter schools begin with a mission and stay mission driven: Everyone associated with the school knows what it stands for and believes in its vision (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

Two additional organizational factors worth examining in more depth are personnel and school design. The approach taken to each can determine the success of the restructured school.

Personnel. Nearly all practitioners and researchers interviewed for this paper agreed that a school restructuring via chartering would have a greater chance of success if it did not guarantee existing staff members spots in the new school. Instead, they argued, the restructured charter school should comprise mainly new staff mixed in with a few previous teachers and staff

members who fully support the new school's mission (B. Bennett, personal communication, September 9, 2005; D. Cobb, personal communication, October 6, 2005; C. Finch, personal communication, September 26, 2005; M. Fortune, personal communication, September 29, 2005). Successfully integrating new staff into the existing school, community, and students (and any remaining staff or administration from the school's previous incarnation) is a challenge for all restructured charter schools. Selecting and socializing the staff to support the school mission is important, as is supporting staff members once they are part of the school. Many teachers say that collegiality with their teammates, partnerships with parents, a climate of support from administrators and board members, and the opportunity to serve on their school board provide a boost in morale (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

Whether the personnel at the chartered school are brand new or retained from the previous school, they must buy in to the school's specific mission, ideally focused around a clear academic core that is tied directly to the school's goals. Research has shown that providing new and old personnel with the opportunity to work side by side may also ease the transition for both into a new environment (Bulkley & Hicks, 2003).

Many successful charter-school operators also identify professional development as critical to the success of a restructured charter school. While there are many possible approaches to professional development, school operators that manage multiple charters schools may have an inherent edge if they spread the knowledge and learning across their schools. For example, KIPP holds annual Content Area Retreats, at which all similar subject-area teachers from the more than 40 KIPP schools gather to share best practices and learn from one another (D. Cobb, personal communication, October 6, 2005).

School Design. Districts need a clear set of criteria to assess the proposed school designs, to be as certain as possible that it will work. Multiple teams of researchers over several decades have studied the elements of schools that have achieved extraordinary learning results compared to other schools. This research suggests a set of effective characteristics that a new school design should incorporate in some way. Based on the effective-schools literature, common distinguishing characteristics of the best schools include:

- A clear mission that guides daily decisions at the school.

- High expectations that all students will learn.

- Frequent monitoring of students' progress and responsive approaches for those students who are falling behind.

- Staying up to date on instructional research about what works.

- Allotting quality periods of uninterrupted instructional time on core subjects.

- A safe and orderly environment that encourages students to focus on learning.

- Establishing a strong connection between home and school so that parents can and will support their children's learning.

- Using leadership approaches that maximize the effectiveness of instruction. (Hassel & Hassel, 2005; Marzano, 2003; Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993)

These same factors feature prominently in studies of effective charter schools. WestEd's national analysis of successful charter schools, for example, identified the following characteristics of high-performing charters:

- A mission that drives each element of the school program

- Mission-responsive curriculum and pedagogy

- A flexible structure and operations that allow the school to carry out its mission

- Staff and teachers who are committed to the school's mission and offer skills and expertise that support the school's goals

- An environment in which teachers care for each student, and feel supported themselves

- Strong internal accountability programs

- Relationships with parents and the surrounding community based on investment and frequent communication (U.S. Department of Education, 2004)

Potential school providers should be familiar with these principles and have a clear plan for implementing them in the converted charter school.

What Further Research Is Needed to Understand Chartering?

This paper serves as much to reveal gaps in our knowledge about chartering as it does to review what we know. In many respects, information is limited because chartering as a restructuring strategy is new and has been used so rarely. But as more schools enter into the restructuring phase under NCLB guidelines, we offer three suggestions to guide further research. These are necessary to fill gaps in our knowledge about successfully converting to charter status.

First, future studies should look closely at very-high-performing charter schools and compare them to both traditional public schools and charter schools that are performing on an average level, and to high-performing traditional public schools. This research should account as much as possible for differences between the schools being compared, such as whether a conversion charter produces average test scores with populations of children historically associated with low scores, or if schools to which districts feel confident granting charters already have stronger leadership or some record of success. Controlling for these factors as much as possible will help establish more consistent indicators of success when schools reopen as charter schools. Comparing average-performing schools to those with stellar student performance will help distinguish the characteristics that set these schools apart.

Second, future chartering efforts will benefit greatly from more information about what works regarding charter authorizing and ongoing oversight. Our reports here about successful authorizing and strong accountability programs are drawn from a small base of research. Future studies should seek to broaden knowledge by focusing on the effect of the authorizing process and the charter-school environment upon educational quality. For example, how important is school autonomy to the success of charter schools? What kinds of autonomy are most important?

Finally, more research is needed to understand specifically what kinds of leaders are successful in charter schools that replace schools of previously low-performing students. This research should attempt to differentiate between leaders of stand-alone charter schools and charters operating within larger, multisite charter providers. Stand-alone school leaders have jobs more akin to classic entrepreneurs or start-up leaders. School leaders working within larger charter organizations must combine the actions of start-up leaders with those of leaders operating within larger organizations (much like classic principals). In addition, the leadership needed for the start-up phase may be different from the leadership needed after a school is established. A unique combination of characteristics may distinguish the most successful performers in these differing contexts. An understanding of these characteristics would help charter boards and larger charter providers choose leaders more accurately and help districts evaluate charter-provider leader recruiting more effectively.

Conclusion

District officials choosing to restructure low-performing schools by converting them to charter status must acknowledge that it is a challenging but not impossible task. If other kinds of organizations are any indicator, starting fresh in schools through chartering may be the only way to produce speedy, positive results for some children who are not learning in traditional schools. Although recent research has advanced the body of knowledge around starting new charter schools, the understanding of chartering is still nascent. The chartering option is a difficult one, with many possible pitfalls throughout the process. Charter status is only a shell into which new instructional and management programs may be introduced. A charter status typically comes with many freedoms that can support positive reforms, but it is not a solution in itself, and there certainly are many examples of charter schools that have failed to improve their students' chronically low academic performance. The understanding of what makes a strong charter authorizer has advanced significantly over the past several years, and research and experience make it clear that if done properly, a start-fresh conversion can dramatically improve students' academic performance.

Ultimately, however, the school's success depends on the quality of the changes that accompany its conversion to charter status and the commitment with which they are implemented—not on a new name or legal status. As more and more districts and schools choose the charter option for restructuring under NCLB guidelines, greater knowledge will be built about the elements of success in the years to come.

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