Charter School Boards: Independence or Isolation?

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Abstract
Strong, stable charter school boards are critical to charter school success. The education of over two million students is entrusted to charter school boards and education reformers have an obligation to assure that these boards are properly supported, trained and informed. The purpose of this article is to underscore the importance of strong, competent charter school boards and to highlight the need for board support and training. The article describes the concept of charter schools, the functions of charter boards, problems encountered by charter boards, and recommendations for improving effectiveness.

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Charter School Boards: Independence or Isolation?

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Abstract

Strong, stable charter school boards are critical to charter school success. The education of over two million students is entrusted to charter school boards and education reformers have an obligation to assure that these boards are properly supported, trained and informed. The purpose of this article is to underscore the importance of strong, competent charter school boards and to highlight the need for board support and training. The article describes the concept of charter schools, the functions of charter boards, problems encountered by charter boards, and recommendations for improving effectiveness.

Keywords: charter school boards, governance, oversight

Strong, stable charter school boards are critical to charter school success. In early December 2011, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) announced there were approximately 5,600 public charter schools in the United States with an enrollment of over two million students. NAPCS also reported that, in the 2011-2012 school year, approximately 500 new public charter school opened to serve over 200,000 students. In the same year, California, Florida, Texas and Ohio led the states in number of new students in charter schools. On the other side of the equation, approximately 150 (or 2.7%) of all charter schools were closed in 2011-2012.

Generally speaking, in states with strong charter legislation and student performance oversight, charter schools succeed in improving student performance. In states with loose oversight, charter school success is much less predictable. However, the current focus of federal dollars for charter schools is on opening new charter schools, not strengthening current charters (Thomas & Wingert, 2010).

Considering that the education of over two million students is entrusted to charter school boards, there is an obligation to assure that charter boards are properly supported, trained and informed. Three years prior to the 2011 NAPCS press release, Catherine Gewertz (2008) wrote, “We’re 17 years into the charter school movement and we still don’t have a good descriptive analysis of those boards…without that, it is hard to get real specific prescriptions for improving effectiveness” (p. S11). In her 2005 article, Renzulli states that charter schools are not only the fastest growing educational innovation occurring today, but they are also the only choice option that can be created by groups of ordinary people.

Formation by “ordinary people” is not the typical process for the development of public schools. Most new schools are developed within school districts by credentialed and experienced educators. New schools go through a lengthy development process with stakeholder input. However, little is known on the formation of charter schools, the development of missions, operations and governance. One of the reasons for a lack of information is that autonomy is one of the key values behind the formation of charters (Renzulli, 2005). Without support, autonomy can lead to isolation. Farland (2011) further
illustrates this point by stating that charter schools create their own governance. Yet, despite the independent nature of charter boards, they are responsible for following state and federal laws, enforcing policy, demonstrating effective financial management, ensuring parent access, and avoiding conflicts of interest.

**Purpose and Background**

The purpose of this article is to underscore the importance of strong, competent charter school boards and to highlight the need for board support and training in governance and oversight. As the number of charter schools increases, so does the range of accountability requirements for charter boards. It is critical that charter boards are prepared and organized to guide schools in an increasingly complex and exacting environment (Sparks, 2009). The article that follows describes the concept of charter schools, the functions of charter boards, the problems encountered by charter boards, and recommendations for improving effectiveness.

The concept of charter schools began in Minnesota in 1991 to promote innovation and improvement in public schools. Charter schools were intended to embrace different philosophies and espouse goals different from traditional public schools. Today, charter schools are often free from detailed regulations and requirements that govern other public schools. As a trade-off for this freedom, charter schools can also be shut down for poor academic performance, low enrollment or mismanagement (Vanderhoff, 2008). Planning, professional development, community relations, and financial management are all pieces of the charter school patchwork that occur in isolation. This makes managing a charter’s mission much more difficult (Frumkin, Manno, & Edgington, 2011). Furthermore, little research can be found on the development of charter schools within a strategic framework. Sparks (2009) states that improvements in the quality of charter boards will continue to be cobbled together and based on anecdotal experiences until more research is conducted.

The lack of a strategic approach to charter school development can present that their boards do not provide feedback or involve themselves in strategic planning activities (Campbell, 2010). The report also states that 71% of charter school leaders plan to leave in five years. This turnover rate makes charter school boards very vulnerable. Yet, charter board members report they spend little time thinking about succession planning. In a survey of charter school board members in western New York State, 11% of respondents expected to serve only for 1-2 years, and 28% expected to serve for 2-4 years (Hertrick, Cianca, & Robinson, 2011). Thus, more than one third of survey participants planned to leave the governance role within 4 years.

If the New York survey (Hertrick et al., 2011) is indicative of charter board members in other parts of the country, the turnover in governance and leadership in the near future could be a notable concern. Such gaps are an operational challenge because the responsibilities of charter boards and school leaders include enrollment, recruitment, school services, instructional progress, student and staff performance, and facility and policy issues (Robelen, 2008a). The potential governance and leadership gaps could put school continuity at risk for current and future students and families.
Features and Functions of Charter School Boards

A charter is an agreement that grants public funds to an independent group for the operation of a school. The chartering authority, in funding a different kind of education, allows exemptions from some of the regulations and restrictions of traditional public education. In return for the financing, a charter school agrees to certain education goals and benchmarks. Unlike independent schools, charters cannot charge tuition, as state funding is at the heart of the charter (O’Brien & Dervarics, 2010). And unlike independent schools, charters must admit students in a transparent lottery system, thus providing equal enrollment opportunities for all segments of the community.

Charter schools can be conceptualized as hybrid entities, constituted to capture the attractive qualities of private education while enjoying financial support from public sources. Under New York State law, charter schools are defined as “independent and autonomous public schools” and are legally organized as not-for-profit educational corporations (The Center for Education Reform, n.d.). Moreover, while subject to all laws and regulations regarding safety, health, civil rights and other fundamentals, they “otherwise have a blanket waiver from all state and local rules, regulations, and laws applicable to public or private schools…” (The Center for Education Reform, n.d.). Like independent schools, their own self-selecting boards of trustees govern charter schools (The Center for Education Reform, n.d.).

Charter boards are close in size to local school boards and are typically smaller than nonprofit boards. The size of the board is somewhat connected to the unique characteristics of the school, school needs, and board member backgrounds. Board members usually do not have high-level business experience or the prestige that nonprofit board members may have. Also, because they serve a smaller community of students, charter board members are less likely to be under scrutiny and are often less political than local school boards (Sparks, 2009). The background and experience of board members surveyed in Western NY was noteworthy. While 19% of respondents had a background in P-12 education, 25% had a background in higher education, and 24% in for-profit business. Other board members in the survey represented health and human services, the military, and other professional categories (Hertrick et al., 2011).

While charter boards may be subject to fewer regulations, and may be very concerned about parent wishes and the needs of the larger community, their first priority is to satisfy the criteria required by state chartering authorities. In order to continue as a chartered entity, charter boards must meet specific student achievement outcomes, particularly in states with strong charter laws. Charter boards are under direct pressure to meet student achievement targets, often with limited timelines (Sparks, 2009).

Problems Encountered by Charter Boards

Although charters were conceived with the intention to reform and decentralize public education, the advantages are countered with some problem areas. One problem with charter boards is that there is very little information on the tens of thousands of board members currently running charter schools in the United States (Gewertz, 2008). Board members are often selected because of an association with a school’s founder, or for their involvement in the charter school movement. In addition, the features and functions of charter school boards vary, depending on uniqueness of school mission and the background and experience of

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board members. In a survey of regional charter schools referred to earlier, “Charter Schools: Governance by Paradox” (Hertrick et al., 2011), thirty charter schools in the Rochester, Buffalo, and Syracuse areas shared information. In selecting how to characterize themselves, respondents promoted their longer school day (20%), longer school year (20%) and afterschool programs (10%). Additionally, several of the charters described their special and distinctive partnerships with community organizations, including a college, a health and hospital system, a museum, and a neighborhood advocacy group (Hertrick et al., 2011). Without additional research and information, knowledge on the make-up and characteristics of charter boards in the United States will continue to be limited.

A second problem encountered by charter boards is that members can have difficulty making the transition from generating initial support for the school’s mission to implementing actions that forward the mission. At times, charter board members give up too much authority to the school leader because of their initial loyalty and inexperience in areas of comprehensive governance (Gewertz, 2008). Consider, for example, the precarious nature of the position of charter school principal. A survey by Campbell and Gross (2008) found the vast majority of charter school leaders had previous experience in education. However, almost 30% had only one or two years of leadership experience, mostly as a new principal. The lack of experience can be very destabilizing since, in the charter world, the principal interacts with the public, the board, the students and staff in much more comprehensive ways than the typical principal. Where a public school principal manages his or her school within a larger system of supports, a charter school principal manages instructional and operational issues without an overarching district infrastructure. Robelen (2008b) warns that charter boards should avoid a “superman” structure where one school leader handles all the leadership demands.

A third problem that affects charter school boards is the lack of information on needs for training and support across various states. Again, limited research has been conducted in this area. While most boards participate in some training, there is variance in the frequency, content and method of training (Sparks, 2009). When charter boards in Western New York were asked about training needs, the highest priority was the topic of understanding academic accountability and student results. Other training priorities identified were meeting charter school renewal requirements, addressing legal issues, developing and monitoring the budget, and awareness of ethics and confidentiality in leadership. Board members were also very interested in succession planning for trustees and for school leadership, and ninety percent of respondents ranked this area a high or moderate need (Hertrick et al, 2011).

Although not a group that was well represented in the Hertrick, et al. survey (2011), there is also a need to support charter school boards run by for-profit management companies. At times, based on their actions, for-profit management companies appear to value their semi-independence with more muscle than entitled. As an example of misinformed governance, a few years ago in Ohio, the legislature enacted a law to allow management companies to fire charter school boards and replace members with friendlier individuals (Richmond, 2010). At the time, one management company official mistakenly claimed “It is our school, our money and our risk” (Richmond, 2010, p. 40.) Of course, this is not the case. Charters operate with public money and are a public entity. They are not owned by management companies. With more support or established channels for accurate guidance, for-profit charter boards would have better sources of information and governance.

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Recommendations

Given the fledgling nature of charter schools and charter school boards, it is critical that more attention be paid to training and support for charter school board members. An editorial from Bloomberg (2012) states that rising enrollments in charter schools signal the need for more oversight. Bloomberg editors point out the high level of autonomy, general inconsistency in requirements, lack of transparency and limited evidence on their overall success when compared to traditional public schools.

Recent surveys and anecdotal information reveal that board members are eager for information. Yet, providing more information to charter boards is not an easy task. Due to the voluntary nature of charter boards, and limited options available to provide training, practical solutions are needed at the local and state levels.

Recommendation 1: Collaboration between Institutions of Higher Education and charters

The first recommendation is for states to provide incentives and structures for institutions of higher education and charter schools to collaborate on providing expertise to board members and school leaders. When asked about training needs, the highest priority for charter school board members in western New York was the topic of understanding academic accountability and student results. Furthermore, 88% ranked principles of governance, oversight and fiduciary responsibilities as high or moderate needs (Hertrick et al., 2011). Charter school boards across the country deserve to have opportunities for training that support stronger and more stable boards.

Institutions of higher education, with some monetary support, could develop resources to support newly developed and established charter schools in areas of instructional accountability and governance. States like Ohio and Connecticut have explored ways to ensure that authorizing agencies provide support to new schools. Ohio has improved the quality of its charter school authorizers by allowing universities to sponsor and support charter schools (Dillon, 2010.)

Authorizing agencies could work directly with colleges and universities to enlist help from schools of education and schools of business. Institutions of higher education have a wide range of faculty members with expertise in the areas that board members most identify as needs. In the Hertrick et al. (2011) survey, board members revealed that the school leader often serves as an important resource in matters related to school policy, instructional programming and governance. Assigning this function to the school leader can be problematic in that school leaders are often no more experienced in governance than board members. Structured training activities involving experienced leaders from education and the university level can address this deficit.

Recommendation 2: Required Training

The second recommendation is for authorizing agencies to require training for charter boards to contribute to quality governance and oversight. Authorizing agencies might arrange to certify qualified individuals or entities to offer training in areas that are needed by charter schools of a given region. For example, Brent and Finnegan (2009) stated that one of the

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primary reasons for charter school sanctions is financial mismanagement. If states established training requirements or offered training on a more systematic basis, board member needs in finance could be addressed. Requirements could include a specified number of training hours for charter board members on critical topics such as budgeting and fiduciary responsibilities. Consistent with Recommendation 1 of this article, institutions of higher education can provide the certification.

**Recommendation 3: More Research on Charter Boards**

States need to encourage more research in the areas of charter board governance and oversight. Although the concept of charter schools began to take shape in the 1990s (Vanderhoff, 2008), research on the needs and interests of charter school board members is limited. Unlike traditional school boards, charter board members are not elected officials and they often have a much lower profile than nonprofit board members or other public school board members. More needs to be known about the individuals that are responsible for over two million students, and practices that lead to successful governance in an alternative educational model.

**Summary**

At a time when charter schools continue to multiply in many areas across the United States, it is time to pay more attention to their governance and level of success. There is currently very little information on charter school boards. Moreover, the boards that govern charter schools are very different from typical school boards and do not have the networking or infrastructure available to address their needs for training and support. Many charter school board members are ordinary people whose intentions are to serve their communities.

Board members also have difficulty transitioning from founding a school to running and managing a school. This creates problems when inexperienced board members rely on inexperienced school leaders who already have a myriad of responsibilities. Finally, there is a lack of information on common charter board needs for training and support across states.

The parents of children in charter schools, who often represent underserved populations, deserve to have strong boards whose members are qualified and experienced in their governance roles (Cavanaugh, 2012). While it is understood that charter schools are formed as a more independent choice in public education, the idea of operating in isolation was not the original intent of the charter movement. Local experts and professionals can provide valuable assistance to boards in their role of governance and oversight.
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