



## Building The Pipeline:

*How Charter School Authorizers and Technical Assistance Providers Can Help Develop Strong Leaders*

### OVERVIEW OF THE ISSUES:

School leadership without a safety net

Charter school leaders face an extremely complex job compared to their traditional public school peers. They rarely have the “back office” support of a district central office so it is up to them to find and manage facilities, recruit students and teachers, raise and budget funds, as well as coordinate curriculum and instruction for the school. This research brief describes the ways in which charter school leaders struggle with this complex job, and it makes recommendations about how state and local technical assistance providers and authorizers can ease those struggles.

### RESEARCH AND FINDINGS:

Through our survey of charter school leaders (over 400 leaders from CA, HI, TX, NC, RI, and AZ), we find that today’s charter school leaders, though deeply committed, often lack confidence and are ill-prepared to take on the added responsibilities of charter schools. Rather than getting more targeted training in these challenging areas, however, we find that most charter school leaders attend the same training programs as their traditional public school peers. In addition, charter school leaders tend to be younger and many have only a few years of experience in school administration. Their traditional preparation and relative newness to school leadership puts these charter school leaders at a disadvantage when it comes to the expanded demands of the job.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR:

- ✓ Charter school authorizers
- ✓ State and local technical assistance providers

### QUICK FACTS:

#### How they were trained:

- 74% of charter school leaders received traditional training from colleges of education.

#### Age and experience:

- Charter schools have slightly more leaders under 40, and over 60, than traditional public schools.
- Almost one-third of charter school leaders have less than two years’ experience leading schools.

#### Why they take the job:

- 86% of charter school leaders said that passion for the school’s mission was a very important factor; 13% said that pay and benefits were a very important factor.

#### Plans for the future:

- 71% of charter school leaders expect to leave their job within 5 years.
- Of those leaving, 33% are retiring, and almost 20% plan to work in state or district education administration.
- Only 9% plan to lead another charter school.

### **Under-prepared for the business side of the job**

In general, charter school leaders are more confident in the instructional side of the job and less confident in their ability to secure facilities, manage finances, hire qualified teachers, and lead strategic planning—some of the most important issues for charter schools and ones not often faced by traditional public school principals. These organizational issues often manifest as real problems in schools: finding and managing facilities and managing finances are the most common problems cited by charter school directors.

### **Few plan to stay more than five years**

Though charter school leaders are overwhelmingly drawn to the job by their passion for the school's mission and students, most report they will not be there in five years. Over 70 percent of today's charter school leaders expect to leave their current jobs in the next five years, with only a handful expecting to take on a principal position in a different charter school. Less than half of the leaders surveyed report having a plan for succession.

### **Experience, training, and support matter**

Not surprisingly, charter school leaders who are new to school leadership are the least confident and report a high incidence of organizational problems in their schools. Many directors report that they get valuable support from other directors through formal and informal networks.

### **GUIDELINES AND RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Given what we learned from our survey, current leaders need more support and future leaders need better preparation for the job. Charter school authorizers and state and local technical assistance providers can help by seeking out and developing high-caliber leaders to lead local charter schools.

#### **Create effective networking/mentoring resources**

Charter school leaders in the survey say that making connections with other leaders—new leaders, mentor leaders, and leaders of schools similar to theirs—is the most useful source of help, much more so than national conferences or state resource centers. At the most basic level, authorizers or regional assistance providers can connect all the state's directors to each other, taking advantage of video conferencing to ensure that directors in even the most remote locations can participate. More intensive efforts would establish a formal mentoring relationship between the state's experienced directors and new school directors.

#### **Develop more appropriate training opportunities**

Authorizers and assistance providers can promote targeted leadership training in the areas we identified in our survey. Sending out quarterly online surveys to school leaders to find out what they need more help with will keep authorizers on top of the most pressing training needs, which are constantly evolving. Charter school authorizers can connect with current charter school leader preparation programs and local universities and colleges to collaborate on workshops and classes to shore up leadership skills. (For a list of programs, see *Closing the Skill Gap: New*

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*Options for Charter School Leadership Development.* See also *Targeted Training: How to Prepare Charter School Leaders for the Job.*)

#### Help schools develop new leaders and plan for leadership transitions

Rather than waiting to see who applies to open a new charter school or fill a director opening, assistance providers and some authorizers can take the initiative to get to know some of the promising staff in their current charter schools, encouraging them to seek leadership training and to take on leadership roles in their schools. “Finder’s fees” or thanks to people who recommend promising candidates might help uncover strong, diverse candidates. Authorizers can also connect with existing leadership development organizations to identify and recruit new leaders who have been trained in well-regarded programs and who will benefit from ongoing support from the leadership programs. Finally, authorizers should also require schools to provide a general leadership transition plan with details as to who would take over in the interim. Unorganized leadership transition can set schools back and cause the loss of valuable staff.

#### Work to improve the pay and benefits associated with the job of charter school leader

Anecdotes from authorizers suggest they have a hard time attracting strong, experienced candidates to the job when it means leaving behind good benefits and salaries. Even though many leaders are drawn to the job because of their passion for the students, they do not tend to stay very long. Working with the legislature, districts and schools who come up with better

health plans, matched retirement investments, roll-over benefits from local district jobs, and increased pay would make the job more attractive to seasoned principals who love the idea of trying something new and challenging but are loathe to lose the security or comprehensive coverage they currently have. District authorizers can work with central office services to make sure that they include charter school leaders in their support services (something that is often overlooked), and also allow charter school leaders to buy back services if they choose.

#### LEARN MORE ABOUT THE ISSUES:

- *Working Without a Safety Net: How Charter School Leaders Can Best Survive on the High Wire*, Christine Campbell, Betheny Gross, National Charter School Research Project, Center on Reinventing Public Education, September 2008. Download at [www.ncsrp.org](http://www.ncsrp.org).
- *Closing the Skill Gap: New Options for Charter School Leadership Development*, Christine Campbell, Brock J. Grubb, National Charter School Research Project, Center on Reinventing Public Education, June 2008. Download at [www.ncsrp.org](http://www.ncsrp.org).
- A summary of this research appears in *Education Week's* annual “Leading for Learning” report, September 8, 2008. See “The High-Wire Job of Charter School Leadership,” Christine Campbell, Betheny Gross, Robin Lake; [www.edweek.org](http://www.edweek.org).

*The contents of this report were developed in part under a grant from the Department of Education (#U282N060007). However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal government.*

## INSIDE CHARTER SCHOOLS from research to practice

### ABOUT THE STUDY:

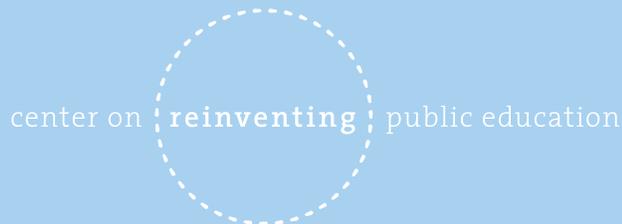
Inside Charter Schools is one of the first systematic studies to focus on the strategies that charter schools are pursuing to establish coherent educational programs supported by high-quality teachers and leaders. It is supported by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) consortium of funders.

NCSRP brings rigor, evidence, and balance to the national charter school debate. For information and research on charter schools, please visit the NCSRP website at [www.ncsrp.org](http://www.ncsrp.org).

The Inside Charter Schools study seeks to answer three major research questions:

- What are the academic programs offered in charter schools?
- Who is teaching and leading charter school programs?
- How do charter schools build a coherent staff, manage growth, and plan for staff and leadership changes?

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