



YOU'RE LEAVING? Succession and Sustainability in Charter Schools

OVERVIEW

Seventy-one percent of charter school leaders surveyed for a new study say they expect to leave their schools within five years. For the nation's 5,000 charter schools, this raises important questions. Who will be ready to take over? How will the school maintain its instructional program and culture from leader to leader? How does a school survive founder transitions? Where will new leaders come from and how can they be ready to lead existing schools?

Researchers at the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) spent four years studying charter school teachers and leaders. CRPE's survey of 400 charter school leader respondents and fieldwork in 24 charter schools in California, Hawaii, and Texas has yielded important insights into these questions and the future of maturing charter schools.

CRPE's research finds that many charter schools are unprepared when it comes to leadership turnover. Only half of the charter school leaders surveyed for this study reported having succession plans in place, and many of those plans are weak. Though most schools leaders affiliated with charter management organizations (CMOs) reported that their schools had a succession plan, there was some confusion as to who would

make final decisions—school leaders or CMO leaders. For the few schools with strong plans, two elements were common: the school leaders (all with prior business experience) had taken charge of future plans, and these schools were not in the midst of crisis.

This policy brief summarizes findings and recommendations from the study's report, *You're Leaving? Succession and Sustainability in Charter Schools*.¹

FINDINGS

The rate of leadership turnover in charter schools is similar to or less than traditional public schools, but charter schools are particularly vulnerable during a leadership transition.² As detailed in *Working Without A Safety Net*,³ charter school leaders have to do the difficult job that all principals face today, but also need expertise in governance and management, public relations, and regulatory issues, while serving as the keepers and promoters of a unique mission.⁴ Where traditional schools are often assigned a principal from a

1. Christine Campbell, *You're Leaving? Succession and Sustainability in Charter Schools* (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2010).
2. See for example Susan M. Gates, *The Careers of Public School Administrators*, RAND Education, Research Brief, RB-9054-EDU 2004.
3. Christine Campbell and Betheny Gross, *Working Without A Safety Net* (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2008).
4. Brett Lane, *A Profile of the Leadership Needs of Charter School Founders* (Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Education Lab, 1998).

pool of candidates determined by a central office, charter schools choose a leader that “fits” the school. However, because charter schools are often independent, they are unable to tap into a pool of ready candidates.

Founder transitions present a unique challenge

There are a host of issues that schools face when considering a new leader, but they are heightened when a founder is leaving because the school has never been through a transition before and the school’s identity is often so closely linked to the founder. When founders leave, it is common to learn that school values and finances hinge on the departing founder’s vision and connections, and that organizational weaknesses have long gone unnoticed or unattended.

Many charter schools are in denial when it comes to leadership turnover

Many have no transition plan.

When asked in the survey about strategic preparation, current charter school leaders said they spend little time on strategic planning or thinking about the future.⁵ In particular, the survey shows that only about half (53 percent) of the charter schools are preparing for leadership transitions with succession plans, while 35 percent have no plans in place, and 12 percent are unaware of whether there is a plan (see figure 1). However, charter school leaders affiliated with charter management organizations (CMOs) were more likely to report that their school has a plan for leadership succession, with 74 percent of leaders in CMO-managed schools saying there were plans in place for leadership transition.

5. In the survey, charter leaders reported spending an average of only 9 percent of their time on strategic planning, defined as developing a school improvement plan, vision, mission, and goals.

Figure 1. Succession Plans Are Not Common in Charter Schools



Source: 2007–08 six-state survey of charter school leaders conducted by the National Charter School Research Project at the Center on Reinventing Public Education.

Plans are often incomplete.

Fewer than half of the schools visited for this study (10 out of 24) reported having some kind of succession plan in place. Upon further questioning, however, it became evident that only five of those plans had any depth to them. Incompleteness and uncertainty resulting from poor communication were hallmarks of these weaker plans. For example, four of the schools in this study were run by very small and relatively new CMOs, and staff at each of these schools reported confusion as to who would make decisions about future leaders.

Strong plans make a difference

There were two common elements present in schools with strong plans:

- The schools had leaders who personally put planning on the agenda—and, in rare cases, had boards that chose to do this. None of these leaders were educators; each came from a business or legal background.
- None of the schools were in crisis on other fronts. It is hard to say whether a school needs to be running smoothly to get strategic planning on the agenda, or whether a leader who can find time for strategic planning and succession is also able to address crises in other areas. However, none of the schools that were struggling to stay open had any kind of future plan beyond the next day or week.

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What gets in the way of good planning?

School leaders often do not make time for planning.

One reason that few charter schools have succession plans is that school leaders are pulled in many directions and have trouble putting “future planning” on their daily to-do list. Principals in traditional public schools can probably cite the same interruption, but they count on their superintendents to take care of replacement strategies for them.

Governing boards have abdicated responsibility.

According to school leaders surveyed, a surprising number of charter school boards do not appear to be involved in what might be considered central functions for a governing board: one-third of school leaders reported that their boards do not provide critical feedback, and—relevant to succession planning—one-third reported that their governing boards do not involve themselves in strategic planning activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Charter schools should learn from nonprofits

Individual charter schools have a lot in common with nonprofit organizations when it comes to preparing for turnover and hiring a new leader. Nonprofits tend to be small, with few leadership positions, and have a similar rate of turnover among their leaders (75 percent plan to leave within five years).⁶ While very little has been written about succession planning in charter schools, the nonprofit sector has been much more studied and offers a variety of approaches, from immediate emergency succession planning, to more long-term strategic leader development, to helping founders prepare to leave.

6. Jeanne Bell, Richard Moyers, and Timothy Wolfred, *Daring to Lead 2006: A National Study of Nonprofit Executive Leadership*, A Joint Project of CompassPoint Nonprofit Services and The Meyer Foundation, 2006. Available at <http://www.compasspoint.org/content/index.php?pid=19#Dlead>.

Governing boards need to step up

One of the most important duties of the board is to recruit and select the school leader. The school leader and other staff can support the board and make headway on action items related to strategic planning, but thinking about leadership succession needs to start with the board.

Authorizers need to expect more organizational preparation from charter schools

Authorizers must accept that leadership turnover will happen at every school, and after an emergency plan is made, they should ask for a more detailed leadership succession plan. Few authorizers consider this.

School leaders need to make time to mentor

With so many of the surveyed school leaders and fieldwork schools citing their plans to replace from within,⁷ it is important that the leader does more than acknowledge an heir apparent. These next-in-line leaders need opportunities to shadow, learn, and be tested. In addition, sharing more leadership opportunities with staff brings a host of benefits to the school.⁸ Teachers report greater satisfaction and empowerment, staff are more content as they experience chances to grow, and school leaders feel less burdened and exhausted.

7. Of the 24 schools visited, half were grooming or considering current staff as possible leaders.

8. Sarah Yatsko, *Distributed Leadership in Charter Schools* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, forthcoming 2010).

To: Charter School Governing Boards
Re: Steps to Create a Succession Plan

1. Start by creating an emergency replacement plan that answers questions about who is in charge of the organization, who can make decisions about finances, hiring, and facilities, and who reports to the board and parents
2. Review (or create) the school's strategic plan; consider challenges facing the school and prepare for the inevitable
3. Set a timeline for the recruitment and selection process of a new leader, including getting the perspective of students, parents, and teachers
4. Use the planning as an opportunity to build staff capacity
5. Communicate the plan across the school

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.

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?

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.

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The Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington Bothell engages in research and analysis aimed at developing focused, effective, and accountable schools and the systems that support them. The Center, established in 1993, seeks to inform community leaders, policymakers, school and school system leaders, and the research community.