



## Working Smarter: *How Charter School Leaders Can Get The Help They Need*

### OVERVIEW OF THE ISSUES:

#### School leadership without a safety net

Charter school leaders face an expanded 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. How well are charter school leaders prepared for this expanded job? In two recent reports we find that today’s charter school leaders, though deeply committed, often lack confidence and are ill-prepared to take on these added responsibilities. (See *Working Without a Safety Net: How Charter School Leaders Can Best Survive on the High Wire* and *Closing the Skill Gap: New Options for Charter School Leadership Development*.)

### RESEARCH AND FINDINGS:

Through our survey of charter school leaders (over 400 leaders from CA, HI, TX, NC, RI, and AZ), we find that the charter school leader faces more demands than a traditional public school principal, especially when it comes to managing and funding the school. Rather than getting more targeted training in these challenging areas, we find the training of charter school leaders is quite similar to their traditional public school peers: most charter school leaders come to the job from prior work in traditional public schools and with traditional training from colleges of education. 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 new-

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR:

- ✓ Current and future charter school leaders
- ✓ Charter management organizations
- ✓ Governing boards

### 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.
- 48% say their schools have no plans in place for leadership succession.

ness to school leadership puts these charter school leaders at a disadvantage when it comes to the expanded demands of the job.

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

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. Despite these issues, one-third of directors say they handle financial or organizational management—or both—on their own.

### **Experience, training and support help**

Not surprisingly, leaders who have already been principals at any kind of school express greater confidence all around and report fewer organization problems. Charter school leaders who are new to school leadership are the least confident and report a high incidence of organizational problems in their schools. Strategic training and experience can help. Leaders trained at colleges of education express confidence in instructional leadership, though not with administrative leadership. Charter school leaders with prior experience in financial management are significantly more confident in school financial issues. Finally, many directors report that they get valuable support from other directors through formal and informal networks.

### **Few schools are prepared for inevitable leadership turnover**

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. Planning for smooth leadership transitions is an important action for the health of charter schools; however, almost half of charter school leaders reported that their schools have no plan for leadership succession.

### **GUIDELINES AND RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Given these findings about who charter school leaders are and what they struggle with on the job, it is clear that more needs to be done to support current leaders and prepare future leaders for the job. Below we offer suggestions to current and future charter school leaders, governing boards, and management organizations to strengthen school leadership.

### **Seek out targeted training**

The responses from hundreds of charter school leaders highlighted the importance of more tailored coursework and training. For the majority of charter school leaders who lack background in business and finance, attending summer institutes or weekend courses will offer quick returns. Local colleges and universities likely have executive programs in business and nonprofit management. Charter-specific leadership training is offered by dozens of programs across the country—in California, the Charter School Development Center offers a Chief Business Officers training specifically to go deep in this area. For charter school leaders who are new to education, again, local colleges and universities and charter-specific programs have regular offerings

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to learn more about how to raise student achievement and guide an instructional program. (See *Closing The Skill Gap: New Options for Charter School Leadership Development*.)

### Make meaningful connections with other directors for support

Charter school leaders in the survey said that making connections with other leaders—new leaders, mentor leaders, and leaders of schools similar to theirs—was the most useful and supportive source of help around, more so than national conferences or state resource centers. Today, with the ease of internet social networking, charter school leaders in remote places or who lead atypical schools can create or join a virtual world of support through sites like LinkedIn, Ning, and school leadership or local education blogs.

### Schedule time for strategic planning

Charter school leaders bemoaned the fact that they could carve out so little time (9% of their week) for the important task of strategic planning—developing a school improvement plan, vision, and goals. Together with their governing boards, charter school leaders need to make this a priority by setting annual goals and regular benchmarks. There are online options, consultants, and local volunteer retired executives who can help make this happen.

### Distribute or out-source more duties

Distributing parts of administration, fundraising, and curriculum development could lessen the burden on charter school leaders. Some charter schools do this by sharing leadership within the school. Other charter school leaders rely on management organizations or management consortia to help with the business side so they can focus on instructional leadership. These

strategies may well open up more time for strategic planning and preparing for leadership transition. They may also build management capacity and encourage others to become principals. (For example, charter management organizations such as Aspire Schools, Edison, etc., and programs like Accelerated Schools move schools toward a shared governance structure with broad teacher participation.)

### Plan for leadership transition

Taking care of strategic planning and giving more staff a role in school leadership will go a long way toward preparing for leadership change. In addition, developing and supporting strong staff through leadership preparation programs and mentorship will help to “grow your own” new leaders and position them for success.

#### 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).

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## INSIDE CHARTER SCHOOLS from research to practice

### ABOUT THE STUDY:

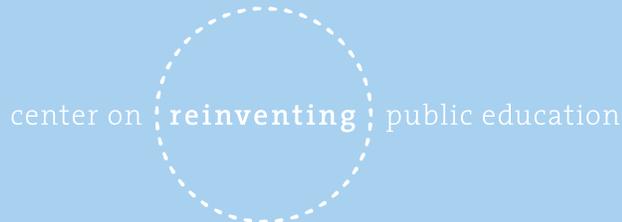
Inside Charter Schools is one of the first systematic studies to focus on the strategies that charter schools are pursuing to establish coherent educational programs supported by high-quality teachers and leaders. It is supported by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Charter School Research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