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Leadership To Date, Leadership Tomorrow: *A Review of Data on Charter School Directors*

Betheny Gross and Kirsten Martens Pochop

ncsrp working paper # 2007-2

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Inside Charter Schools

An initiative of the National Charter School Research Project

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The National Charter School Research Project (NCSR) brings rigor, evidence, and balance to the national charter school debate.

NCSR seeks to facilitate the fair assessment of the value-added effects of U.S. charter schools and to provide the charter school and broader public education communities with research and information for ongoing improvement.

NCSR:

- Identifies high-priority research questions.
- Conducts and commissions original research to fill gaps in current knowledge or to illuminate existing debates.
- Helps policymakers and the general public interpret charter school research.

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Introduction

The importance of leadership for a school's success has long been an undisputed fact in education. Many believe the pivotal role of leadership is only intensified in the context of charter schools because these organizations are inspired—often from the ground up—by individuals or a small group of leaders. Once operational, charter schools and those leading them have a great deal of autonomy over the organization and operation of their schools. Their autonomy expands the need for decisionmaking and also makes their decisions more consequential than in the less autonomous environments of traditional public schools.

As the charter school movement matures and grows in scale, the leadership of charter schools must expand to include not only founding leaders but also those who can take over established schools, solidify operational systems, manage school growth, and guide school improvement initiatives. In this report, we review the available data to describe the current corps of leaders in charter schools: how they are prepared, how they experience their work, and the institutional strategies in place to sustain and transition leadership. Each of these issues can inform how to direct future development resources. We found three areas in which charter school leaders would be well served by improved training and mentorship, including financial development and management, parent relations, and strategic planning. In addition, these data suggest that future training programs should consider approaches that involve local networks and in-the-field mentorship, especially for newer school directors.

The Highly Skilled Leader: A Framework for Discussing Leadership

A framework of effective school leadership, drawn from decades of research, guided our investigation of leadership in charter schools. This expansive literature consistently identifies four key attributes of effective leaders:

- The ability to create, communicate, and inspire a common vision for the school
- The ability to establish a climate of trust among administration, teachers, students, and parents
- The ability to distribute leadership responsibility throughout the school
- The ability to strategically deploy resources to support teachers' efforts to meet the common vision

Even though most of this research was conducted in the context of traditional public schools, many agree that the basic principles of leadership can be extended to charter school leaders as well. Moreover, we argue that the autonomy of charter schools, which often operate with no bureaucratic support or much smaller support structures than most traditional public schools, only intensifies the importance of these skills. As we describe the background, work, strengths, weaknesses, and challenges of charter school leaders, we consider the extent to which their training prepares them with these skills, how they display these skills on the job, and how much the job allows them to display these skills. We also look at current school plans for replacing leadership, and the extent to which planning for the future increases the chance that future leaders will have the necessary skills.

Data in This Report

In this report, we draw from a nationally representative survey administered by the National Center for Education Statistics in 2003-2004. We draw also from an original survey of charter school directors in three Midwest states (Illinois, Ohio, and Wisconsin). That original survey, administered jointly by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools and the National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) in the winter of 2007, explored four primary questions:

- Who are charter school directors today?
- What is their background?
- What is the job?
- What, if anything, is being done to prepare for leadership transitions?

Basic information on survey respondents' and their schools is given in **tables 1** and **2**.

Table 1. Schools in the Midwest Survey

State Representation	Percent
Illinois	12% (16 schools)
Ohio	43% (58 schools)
Wisconsin	43% (58 schools)
Age of Schools	
10 or more years	6%
5–9 years	45%
Less than 5 years	49%
Authorizer Representation	
Local board	49%
State organizations	32%
Other organizations	17%

Table 2. Directors in the Midwest Survey

Race	Percent
White	75.8%
Black	19.7%
Other or not given	4.5%
Gender	
Male	37.9%
Female	59.8%
Age (range = 24–67; mean = 48; median = 51)	
30 or younger	6.1%
31 to 40	22.0%
41 to 50	20.5%
51 to 60	40.9%
61 and older	8.3%

This survey provides a unique view of leadership, with several items designed to capture charter-specific issues (such as relationships with authorizers and management organizations), as well as more general school leadership concerns like the use of school directors' time. While this survey provides one of the first systematic efforts to query directors about their work, these data should be viewed with a measure of caution for two reasons. First, the results of the Midwest survey, to some extent, reflect the local context of these states and do not necessarily reflect the issues and circumstances of other regions. Second, only about 30 percent of school directors in these states responded to our survey, leaving us with a relatively low response rate.

Given the constraints on the Midwest survey, we also draw in data from a national random sample of charter schools represented in the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS). Every four years the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) administers a survey of district and

school policy and school climate to a stratified random sample of teachers, principals, schools, and districts throughout the country. NCES first included charter schools in the 1999–2000 survey. This report uses data from the most recent SASS, administered in 2003–2004. The survey included a nationally representative random sample of 238 charter schools and a sample of their teachers, thus providing a national picture of charter schools.

Who Is Leading Charter Schools?

Nationally, charter school directors appear to be highly educated, be advanced in their careers, and reflect a diversity of ethnic and racial backgrounds.

Educational Background of Directors

The cohort of directors represented in the 2003–2004 SASS was highly educated, with 78 percent holding a master’s degree or more. Among the Midwest directors, who showed similar rates of advanced degrees, nearly 80 percent of the directors responding held their highest degree in education (see **table 3**). While most were certified as principals in their state, a large share—nearly 40 percent—were never certified as a school administrator. The directors who were relatively new to their very first administrative position were much less likely to hold traditional certification or have advanced degrees, which suggests that alternative training could be well received by up-and-coming directors.

As will be explored in more detail below, the Midwest directors also brought a broad range of training and experience to their positions, particularly in the areas of organizational management, curriculum and instruction, and the local community and its politics.

Table 3. Educational Background of Charter School Directors in the Midwest Survey

Highest Degree	
BA	19.7%
MA	26.5%
MA + 30 credits	37.1%
EdD/Phd	15.9%
Field	
Education	80.3%
Social Science	6.8%
Science	2.3%
Humanities	3.0%
Business	4.5%
Other	3.0%
Certification	
Currently certified	59.1%
Never been certified	39.4%

Experience in Education Administration

Although charter school directors in the 2003–2004 SASS were, on average, 51 years old, these charter school directors were relatively new to school administration, with 29 percent in their first or second school administrative position and 55 percent having fewer than four years of experience as administrators. Likely due to the more recent inception of charter schools across the country, charter school directors have, on average, held school administrative positions for significantly shorter periods than has the average traditional public school principal (see **table 4**).

**Table 4. Administrative Experience Levels
(Data from 2003–2004 SASS and Midwest Survey)**

Experience Level	Midwest Survey	SASS Survey	SASS Survey
	Charter Directors	Charter Directors	Traditional Public School Principals
% with less than 2 years of experience	31%	29%	16%
% with 2–3 years of experience	24%	24%	18%
% with 4 or more years of experience	46%	48%	66%

Racial and Ethnic Diversity

Charter schools play a potentially important role in educating the diverse student populations in urban areas as well as Native American and Native Island populations. It is important for this diversity to be reflected in the leadership. As **table 5** shows, the 2003–2004 SASS reflects a population of charter school directors that is racially diverse, with the ethnic diversity roughly comparable to that of traditional public school directors.

Table 5. Race of Charter School Directors (2003–2004 SASS)

Race/Ethnicity	Percent
White	75%
African American	21%
Hispanic	8%
Asian	<1%
Hawaiian/PI	<1%
Native American	4%

Directors' Pre-Service and In-Service Training and Experience

Experience Brought to the Job

The training charter school directors might need depends in part on what experiences they bring to the job. Although, as explained earlier, many charter school directors are relatively new to educational administration, the Midwest survey suggests that directors come with a broad range of useful professional experiences. **Table 6** shows that most of the directors in the Midwest survey had experience in many of the skill areas needed for school administration, such as financial and organizational management and curriculum and instruction. In addition, they had experience in activities thought to be more relevant to charter school leaders, for example fundraising and local politics.

Table 6. Prior Experience and How It Helps (Midwest Survey)

Prior experience or training in this area helps me do my job:	No prior experience/ training	Level of agreement among those who had some prior training or experience		
	%	Disagree or strongly disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Financial management	10.6%	11.4%	52.6%	36.0%
Organization management	3.8%	4.9%	34.1%	61.0%
Curriculum and instruction	6.1%	10.8%	31.7%	57.5%
Nonprofit fundraising	27.3%	48.4%	39.6%	12.1%
Local politics and community organizations	11.4%	14.3%	58.9%	26.8%
Living in this school's community	16.7%	16.3%	36.5%	47.1%

In addition, a large majority of directors with these professional experiences agreed or strongly agreed that their experiences helped them in their current positions, with nonprofit fundraising being the only exception. Notably, 48 percent of directors who had experience in nonprofit fundraising stated that their experience did not help them in their current position. Not surprisingly, a full quarter of the survey respondents reported that raising funds and managing finances was a major problem, and an additional 44 percent reported that it was a minor problem. For 27 percent of Midwest survey respondents, fundraising and managing finances was their biggest problem (see **table 14**).

In-Service Training

Training and development does not end once directors accept the job. A variety of formal and informal development occurs throughout the director's career. Nationally, we know that charter directors engaged in many of the same professional development activities as traditional public school principals (see **table 7**).

Table 7. Directors' Professional Development (2003-2004 SASS)

In the past 12 months, have you participated in the following kinds of professional development?	Respondents Answering Yes			
	Charter School Director		Traditional Public School Principal	
	High Exp	Low Exp	High Exp	Low Exp
University course(s) related to your role as principal*	34%	41%	31%	42%
Visits to other schools designed to improve your own work as principal	66%	64%	64%	65%
Mentoring and/or peer observation and coaching of principals, as part of a formal arrangement that is recognized and supported by the school or district+	38%	30%	39%	46%
Participating in a principal network+	65%	49%	62%	65%
Workshops, conferences, or training in which you were or were not a presenter+	98%	85%	97%	96%

*Significant difference within school sectors (charter school and traditional public school), but no significant differences across school sectors

+Significant difference within school sectors; significant difference across school sectors in the **low** experience level, but not the **high** experience level

Among our Midwest respondents, 42 percent of directors received training specific to their school's educational programs. The school's authorizer and the EMO or CMO most often conducted the training (see **table 8** for more details). More than half of the directors (57.6 percent) received no training in their school's educational programs.

Table 8. Training in the School's Programs (Midwest Survey)

Have you ever received PRINCIPAL training specific to this school's educational programs?	Percent
Yes	42.4%
By EMO or CMO	9.8%
By national/regional network	6.1%
By school authorizer	12.1%
By nonprofit partner/community-based organization	0.8%
By university program	5.3%
Other or not described	8.3%
No	57.6%

Not only do charter school directors receive formal training in school programs, they also get valuable advice and insight from charter school associations and networks of similar schools. **Table 9** details these networks and the impact they had on school directors. Over one third of directors found that meetings with authorizers were very helpful, and 25 percent found informal meetings with other charter school leaders helpful. State or national networks were considerably less valuable to directors.

**Table 9. Networks of Information for Directors
(Midwest Survey)**

How important do you find the following sources in providing advice/assistance in helping you in your job?	Not applicable (no such source available)	Level of importance among those who have these sources available		
		Somewhat or very unimportant	Important	Very important
	%	%	%	%
Informal meetings with other charter school directors	3.8%	27.8%	46.0%	26.2%
State charter association events/networks	3.0%	43.3%	37.0%	19.7%
Resource center/technical assistance providers in my state	7.6%	40.8%	38.3%	20.8%
Formal networks of similar schools	15.2%	45.0%	31.5%	23.4%
Meeting with my school's authorizer/oversight agency	0.8%	20.2%	45.0%	34.9%
National charter school conference	12.1%	55.2%	31.0%	13.8%

Curiously, national data suggest that the newest charter school directors, who most likely need the greatest level of support, may be the least connected to other directors. The 2003-2004 SASS responses in **table 7** show that charter school directors with three or fewer years of experience were significantly less likely to participate in networks of principals or directors and less likely to be engaged in formal mentoring programs than their more senior charter school counterparts. Moreover, the less-experienced charter school directors were engaged in these networking and mentoring opportunities less often than similarly experienced principals in traditional public schools. Considering the importance of on-the-job development of directors, facilitating these networks for new directors would be a big step forward.

The Job of the School Director

An important question raised by those considering how to best prepare educators to become charter school leaders is: What exactly do these leaders need to be prepared to do? The job of the school principal has been explored at great length, with researchers finding that school leadership involves a complex array of responsibilities, ranging from very specific exchanges about the details of bus and class schedules to more global concerns about school policy, teaching and learning, and political relationships with school boards and communities. Many argue that charter school leaders, with fewer built-in support structures for budgeting, hiring, curriculum policy, or school policy, face a greater range of responsibilities.

In this section, we explore the job of the director using the four dimensions of high-quality school leadership described above to frame the discussion. We begin with an overview of the director's time, which gives a sense of the array of responsibilities and tasks performed. We then focus on the successes and challenges of the surveyed directors in (1) securing the school's

vision, (2) creating trusting environments, (3) distribution of leadership, and (4) strategic organization and planning.

The Director’s Time

How directors use their time and *wish* they could use their time can be extremely informative in understanding the difficult trade-offs they are forced to make. Midwest directors were asked to identify what share of their time is spent on a variety of activities and whether they feel their current distribution of time is appropriate. Through this line of questioning, we learned that Midwest charter school directors, who work on average 60 hours per week, devoted the bulk of their time to management and instructional concerns, which consumed on average 29 percent and 20 percent of their time, respectively (see **table 10**). While most (69 percent) felt that their time spent on management was appropriate, 58 percent felt they should be spending *more* time on instructional leadership.

**Table 10. Directors’ Use of Time
(Midwest Survey)**

Activity	Average % of time	Percent of directors who think they <i>should</i> spend:		
		Less time	Same time	More time
Instructional leadership	20.0	2.3	39.5	58.1
Promoting school culture	14.0	2.3	50.0	47.7
Financial management	12.1	15.6	68.8	15.6
Organizational management	28.5	27.0	61.1	11.9
Human resources	8.9	13.5	71.4	15.1
Strategic planning	10.5	1.6	40.5	57.9
Public relations	9.9	2.4	48.8	48.8
Staff/student/family politics	15.5	22.4	58.4	19.2

Midwest directors spent the least amount of time on public relations, strategic planning, and human resources. While the vast majority were satisfied with the time they spent on human resources, most felt they should spend more time on strategic planning, and almost half felt they should spend more time on public relations. The need for more attention on strategic planning is a theme that recurs throughout the data. Strategic management and planning are repeatedly revealed as weaknesses and challenges in the Midwest survey and, to a lesser extent, in the national data. To the extent that public relations correspond with relationships schools have with their students’ parents, we also see this issue surface again in the Midwest and national data.

Securing the Vision

Charter schools are fundamentally mission-driven organizations. Upon inception, these schools are required to articulate a clear mission and vision for their school. In many cases the mission is the driving force behind the motivation and staffing of the school. In our Midwest survey we learned that the mission was the fundamental reason most responding directors took the job they currently hold. The school’s mission was important to them, and most directors felt very confident in expressing that vision and motivating their staffs to act in service of the school’s mission.

The strength of the mission in charter schools is apparent nationally as well. Teachers overwhelmingly felt that their director effectively *communicated the expectations* she or he had for them and effectively *communicated their vision* for the school. In fact, 63 percent of charter teachers strongly agreed and another 27 percent agreed that their principal knew what the school should be and effectively communicated that vision to the staff. An overwhelming majority of teachers also felt that the school's vision was shared across the staff.

Creating Trust and Sharing Responsibility

Trusting relationships and shared responsibility go hand-in-hand. Without a sincere sense of trust between administrators and teachers there is little chance that they will share responsibility for key functions in the school. Without trust extending between the school and its students and parents, home and school partnerships will not thrive. Therefore, we discuss the relationships within the school and between the school and its key constituents (students and parents) in terms of one important way in which trust is displayed; that is, shared responsibility.

Internal Environments. By and large, the data we have on trust and shared responsibility show that the internal environments of charter schools are typically quite strong. In national data, 56 percent of charter school teachers strongly agreed that their school directors supported and encouraged them, while another 30 percent agreed with this statement. Importantly, the trusting environment echoed across charter school teachers as well, where 78 percent agreed or strongly agreed that they shared a strong sense of cooperation with their fellow teachers. Among relationships with governing bodies, few Midwest directors reported problems with their board of trustees or authorizers.

The extent to which this trust is translated into shared responsibility is a somewhat mixed picture. While charter school directors reported high levels of shared responsibility in core areas such as curriculum and instruction, directors and their teachers did not always view the distribution of responsibility the same way. For example, 70 percent of directors nationwide reported that teachers were a major influence over curriculum in their schools, while just 35 percent of teachers reported having “a great deal of influence” over curriculum and only an additional 30 percent felt they had a moderate influence. Moreover, when Midwest directors were asked which school players had “primary” responsibility over various school functions, including curriculum, budgets, human resources, or strategic planning, few reported other actors as having primary responsibility for those functions, as detailed in **table 11**. (The survey provided directors with the opportunity to identify multiple actors as having primary responsibility.) While the phrasing of the question to ask for “primary” responsibility possibly led directors to a default response of listing themselves as primarily responsible, it is nonetheless telling that directors rarely listed teachers as having primary responsibility for curriculum and instruction decisions or strategic planning alongside themselves.

**Table 11. Distribution of Leadership in the School
(Midwest Survey)**

Who has primary responsibility for?	Self	Other in-school administrator	Teachers	Board	School district/others
	%	%	%	%	%
Instructional leadership	60.5%	27.9%	11.6%	0.0%	0.0%
Promoting school culture	61.7%	21.9%	14.8%	1.6%	0.0%
Organizational management	75.2%	17.8%	1.6%	3.1%	2.3%
Human resources	73.6%	18.4%	0.8%	2.4%	4.8%
Strategic planning	61.4%	15.7%	6.3%	11.8%	4.7%
Public relations	67.7%	11.8%	7.9%	7.9%	4.7%
Staff/student/family politics	61.2%	28.7%	8.5%	0.8%	0.8%

External Participants. Not surprisingly, data on trust between directors, teachers, students, and parents are relatively limited. The limited data we have do suggest some room for growth within the charter school community in the parent-school relationships area. The Midwest survey found that engaging parents was one of the greatest challenges for directors, with 29 percent indicating that engaging parents was a major problem and another 43 percent indicating it as a minor problem. Moreover, 10 percent of directors felt “unconfident” in engaging parents, with nearly 23 percent of new administrators admitting that they did not feel confident engaging parents. This trend appears to be nationwide, as charter directors nationally reported somewhat lower levels of parental involvement than did traditional public school principals.

The relationships between students and the school, however, appear stronger than the relationships with parents. In the Midwest survey, 84 percent of directors felt very confident in fostering a safe, student-centered learning environment. In national data, we can extrapolate an impression of the trust between students and the school from data on student discipline. In urban environments nationwide, we found that charter school directors reported significantly fewer incidences of crime, violence, and disruption than did traditional public school principals, suggesting that charter schools provide an improved climate for students relative to the traditional public school. It should be noted, however, that this assessment does not control for school size, as it is difficult to find traditional public schools of comparable size to charter schools within urban districts.

Strategic Planning and Operations

Strategic planning for the school is perhaps the most significant challenge for charter school directors. Almost 12 percent of directors in the Midwest survey felt unconfident in developing and implementing a long-range strategic plan, and only 47 percent felt very confident in these endeavors. Nearly 20 percent of the directors felt unconfident in leading a school-wide reading or math initiative. As might be expected, more of the newest directors lacked confidence in developing and monitoring a strategic plan, although the newest directors were not more likely to report a lack of confidence in leading school-wide instructional initiatives. Heightening the concern over strategic planning in charter schools is the fact that nearly 32 percent of directors in

the Midwest survey reported that their governing boards did not conduct strategic planning for the school, which effectively leaves planning in the hands of the directors.

Nationally, about 70 percent of charter schools report developing school improvement plans (compared to 90 percent of traditional public schools). Of those charter schools that developed plans, only 69 percent used performance data, only 60 percent used parent or student surveys, and only 22 percent used student portfolios in planning, which suggests that many charter school directors could still use guidance in how to use data to direct their planning.

Data from the Midwest survey combined with the data from the national survey suggest that a concentrated effort to not only train directors but also mentor them in the development and implementation of long-range, school-wide initiatives is warranted. Moreover, some thought should also be given to the training of governing boards in assisting or participating in the planning process.

Summarizing Strengths, Weaknesses, and Challenges

The discussion above lays out the strengths and weaknesses of directors as they relate to the four dimensions of leadership. Here we look across many functions of the school to map out and provide more detail on the directors' strengths, weaknesses, and challenges, and how these challenges rank among the many issues directors face. More than any currently available national data, the Midwest survey explores the challenges of leading a charter school and how directors feel about their responsibilities.

Perhaps the most striking finding from the survey is the broad confidence that the Midwest directors conveyed. As seen in **table 12**, a large majority of directors expressed confidence in their abilities across a wide array of issues. However, the ideal situation would be for *all* directors to approach the issues at hand with confidence and backed by solid skills.

**Table 12. Strengths and Weaknesses of Directors
(Midwest Survey)**

How confident do you feel in your ability to perform the following tasks effectively?	Not at all confident	Somewhat unconfident	Somewhat confident	Very confident
	%	%	%	%
<i>Cultural development</i>				
Engage staff to work toward a common vision	0.0%	0.8%	17.7%	81.5%
Engage parents and community to work toward a common vision	1.6%	8.5%	51.2%	38.8%
Establish high expectations for students	0.0%	2.4%	17.5%	80.2%
Foster a safe, student-centered learning environment	0.0%	1.6%	14.1%	84.4%
<i>Professional development of staff</i>				
Develop a talented faculty	0.8%	2.4%	29.6%	67.2%
Develop leadership within the school	0.8%	1.6%	26.8%	70.9%
<i>Organizational and strategic management</i>				
Delegate or share responsibility	1.6%	4.6%	30.8%	63.8%
Develop/monitor a strategic plan	1.6%	10.2%	41.4%	46.9%
Lead school-wide math or literacy initiatives	0.0%	17.3%	37.8%	43.3%
Motivate and facilitate staff in the implementation of whole-school improvement	1.6%	7.0%	29.7%	63.3%
Manage school operations effectively	0.0%	3.9%	29.9%	66.1%
Manage budget, aligning resources with instructional improvement	0.0%	10.2%	35.9%	52.3%
Attract and retain talented teachers	0.8%	2.4%	39.2%	57.6%
Seek critical feedback from peers	0.0%	6.2%	33.2%	60.5%

As detailed in **table 12**, directors expressed the greatest confidence with *cultural elements* of the school, including engaging staff around a common vision, establishing high expectations for students, and fostering a safe and student-centered environment. A somewhat smaller share of directors felt very confident in *developing their staff*, either into leaders or into effective teachers. However, directors' confidence began to fall off somewhat when it came to *organizational and strategic management* responsibilities, including attracting and retaining teachers, delegating responsibility, leading and motivating staff around school-wide initiatives and strategic plans, managing operations, and seeking critical feedback.

As might be expected, in most areas, confidence grew with experience. **Table 13** looks again at directors' confidence levels, but as they relate to their time in the position. New administrators displayed the strongest confidence in seeking feedback, certainly a valuable tool for learning and developing their own skills.¹ These new directors were also relatively confident in school-wide instructional initiatives and strategies to manage the budget and align resources around instructional objectives—two critical elements of management.

1. Interestingly, their confidence in seeking feedback seems to conflict somewhat with the earlier finding that younger charter school directors were less likely than more experienced directors to be connected to other directors through principal networks or formal mentorship arrangements.

**Table 13. Directors' Confidence in Tasks by Experience
(Midwest Survey)**

Confidence in doing tasks (ordered from least to most confident, where 4 = "very confident." Lowest averages are bold)	Novice^a	New director with experience^b	Long-time director with experience	Average Score
<i>Cultural development</i>				
Engage staff to work toward a common vision	3.69	3.83	3.88	3.81
Engage parents and community to work toward a common vision	3.09	3.38	3.29	3.27
Establish high expectations for students	3.73	3.83	3.76	3.78
Foster a safe, student-centered learning environment	3.71	3.82	3.93	3.83
<i>Professional development of staff</i>				
Develop a talented faculty	3.59	3.61	3.70	3.63
Develop leadership within the school	3.54	3.83	3.60	3.68
<i>Organizational and strategic management</i>				
Delegate or share responsibility	3.54	3.62	3.56	3.58
Develop/monitor a strategic plan	3.32	3.33	3.35	3.34
Lead school-wide math or literacy initiatives	3.34	3.12	3.28	3.23
Motivate and facilitate staff in the implementation of whole-school improvement	3.47	3.54	3.67	3.56
Manage school operations effectively	3.47	3.61	3.76	3.62
Manage budget, aligning resources with instructional improvement	3.32	3.29	3.56	3.39
Attract and retain talented teachers	3.53	3.54	3.54	3.54
Seek critical feedback from peers	3.57	3.58	3.48	3.54

^aNovice directors have fewer than four years of experience directing schools. Most are in their first administrative position.

^bNew directors with experience are relatively new to their current position but have more than four years of experience in administration.

Many of the themes mentioned above—strong cultural leadership, solid (with room for improvement) in staff development, and some needs in strategic management and planning—re-appear in directors' own assessments of their challenges. In a second series of questions, the Midwest directors identified which common school issues challenged them. **Table 14** shows that the most common challenge identified was engaging parents, with 29 percent of directors identifying it as a major problem and only 28 percent saying it was not a problem at all. Given the strong confidence in the cultural development of the school, this result is somewhat surprising. Not surprising, however, is that dealing with the financial realities of charter schools was the second most common challenge identified, with 24 percent of directors identifying raising or managing finances as a major problem, and only 32 percent reporting that it was not a problem.

Table 14. Challenges and Issues for Directors

To what extent do you think each of the following is a problem for your school?	Not a problem	Minor problem	Major problem	Average ranking (1 = biggest problem)
	%	%	%	
Attracting students	61.4%	27.3%	11.4%	5.22
Attracting qualified teachers	47.3%	38.2%	14.5%	4.72
Conflict with your board of trustees	84.0%	13.0%	3.1%	6.10
Acquiring or managing facilities	45.0%	40.5%	14.5%	4.25
Raising funds or managing finances	31.8%	43.9%	24.2%	3.61
Maintaining the focus of the school's mission	71.9%	28.1%	0.0%	5.35
Engaging parents	28.2%	42.7%	29.0%	3.95
Negotiating with district and traditional public schools	36.4%	43.2%	20.5%	4.70
Complying/reporting on state or federal laws/requirements	67.4%	29.5%	3.0%	5.72

Cultural and governance issues were not significant challenges to directors. No directors reported that maintaining the focus on the school's mission was a major challenge, and the vast majority of directors felt it was not a problem at all. Similarly, 84 percent of directors reported that conflict with their board of trustees was not a problem, with only 3 percent of directors reporting it as a major problem. Of notable interest considering the broad reporting responsibilities of schools generally and charter schools in particular, most directors (67 percent) did not find compliance and reporting requirements a problem, and only 3 percent found it a major problem.

What Does the Job Offer: Recruitment, Compensation, and Career

The discussion above describes the current corps of directors, their job, their strengths, and their weaknesses. To think about developing the pipeline of charter school directors, we also need to know what brings directors into their jobs, their terms of employment, and, perhaps most importantly, what are the current plans for replacing out-going directors—an inevitable circumstance that can create tremendous uncertainty within an organization.

The Midwest survey, as shown in **table 15**, illustrates the power of the mission-driven school in locating leaders. The majority of directors were drawn to three major characteristics of the schools: school mission, type of students served, and the desire to take a challenging position. Only about 7 percent of the directors were motivated by the pay and benefits, a condition that was reinforced by the fact that over 22 percent of Midwest respondents accepted lower pay to work at their current charter school (see **table 16**). In addition, charter school directors earned relatively modest salaries. Nationally, charter school directors earned on average \$64,023, which is more than \$10,000 less than the average salary of \$75,792 earned by traditional public school principals. This difference cannot be attributed entirely to the different experience levels between traditional and charter school directors. For example, charter school directors with three or fewer

years' experience earned on average \$57,837, which is over \$14,000 less than their comparably experienced public school counterparts (see **table 17**).

**Table 15. What Attracted Directors to Their Schools?
(Midwest Survey)**

What attracted you to be director of this school?	Total
School mission	56.8%
Wanted to lead a charter school	22.0%
Type of students served	51.5%
Pay and benefits	6.8%
Location	15.2%
Career advancement within the school	13.6%
Seeking a challenge	51.5%

**Table 16. Compensation for Directors Relative to Prior Position
(Midwest Survey)**

Current salary/benefits compared to last job	%
20%+ higher	17.8%
10–20% higher	14.0%
5–10% higher	11.6%
The same	34.1%
5–10% lower	7.0%
10–20% lower	5.4%
20%+ lower	10.1%

**Table 17. Average Salaries by Experience Level
(2003–2004 SASS)**

Average salary	Charter school directors	Traditional public school principals
Average salary for those with 0–3 years of experience	\$57,837	\$72,074
Average salary for those with 4 or more years of experience	\$70,821	\$77,728

Most of the Midwest respondents learned about their position through personal connections, especially among directors authorized by state-level organizations. School staff, directors, or community members contacted over 40 percent of the applicants about openings. Over 8 percent of the directors worked at the school when the opening became available and another 32 percent founded the school. This informal recruitment network has two possible implications. While the

reliance on personal contacts likely increases the board’s confidence that new leaders match the school’s mission and vision, it also means that schools have not developed a systematic, nationwide recruitment process. **Table 18** provides more detail.

**Table 18. Where Are Positions Advertised?
(Midwest Survey)**

How did you find out about your current position?	Total	Authorizer		
		Local school board	State-level organization	Other
Contacted by recruiter	3.8%	3.1%	4.8%	4.5%
Read classified advertisement	9.1%	10.8%	9.5%	4.5%
Worked in school when position became available	8.3%	6.2%	4.8%	13.6%
Personally contacted by board or former director	32.6%	29.2%	40.5%	27.3%
Personally contacted by other charter school staff	6.1%	4.6%	7.1%	9.1%
Personally contacted by community members	5.3%	6.2%	4.8%	4.5%
Founded school	31.8%	41.5%	14.3%	40.9%

Planning for Leadership Change

Planning for change is of the utmost importance to schools. While the leader corps in charter schools is relatively young compared to traditional public schools, and though current directors are relatively confident that their organizations’ finances, curriculum, staff, and mission will remain stable (see **table 19**), young organizations can rarely afford to stumble through a leadership transition.

**Table 19. Expectations for Change in Leadership
(Midwest Survey)**

To what extent do you agree/disagree with these statements about what will happen after you leave?	Disagree or strongly disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
	%	%	%
Basic mission and principles will be maintained	9.2%	53.4%	37.4%
Curriculum will be maintained	6.2%	50.8%	43.1%
Finances will be stable	16.5%	56.7%	26.8%
Staff will be stable	26.2%	53.2%	20.6%

Despite the importance of leadership transitions for organizational longevity, planning for change is not widespread among the Midwest charter schools. As seen in **table 20**, under half of the Midwest respondents have a known plan for succession. Over 62 percent of respondents

reported that there was no plan or they were unaware of a plan for succession. One piece of good news is that, of those with a plan, the most common plan is to recruit from within, which means that their future leaders are already in their buildings and able to be trained and nurtured to meet the school’s precise needs. While “grooming someone to take over” is the most common plan, it is by no means a *common* approach across the Midwest sample, as it only accounts for 16 percent of the total sample (32 percent of those with a plan). Interestingly, of those with a plan for succession, almost a third expect to take a district placement. However, it is unclear how a district placement will influence local control over the hiring process.

**Table 20: Plans for Change in Leadership
(Midwest Survey)**

Is there a plan for succession of leadership?	%
Yes	46.97%
There is someone on staff who is being groomed to take over	33.9%
The board will conduct a national search	8.1%
The management organization recruits and trains leaders for this school	16.1%
The school district will assign a principal	32.3%
Unsure or other	9.7%
No	24.24%
Unsure	28.77%

Conclusions

The data presented here reflects on the spectrum of responsibilities and issues for charter school directors and potentially reveals a handful of recurring themes to consider in discussions about future training. Next, we summarize the leaders’ needs and strategies for meeting these needs.

Future Leaders’ Needs

The survey of Midwest directors and the national SASS reveal that school leaders, especially within the context of charter schools, accept a great deal of responsibility over a wide array of activities. No doubt, future directors will be well served by training that targets cultural, instructional, and organizational aspects of schooling. However, the following issues are among the most challenging for current directors.

Strategic planning and school-wide initiatives. Training and mentorship for strategic planning and engagement in school-wide initiatives should receive priority attention. This training should include information not only about need assessments and plan development but also delegating responsibilities for the plan and monitoring its progress. Moreover, this training should target governing board members and emphasize strategic planning for leadership transitions as well as

more common issues, such as school growth, curriculum development, or organizational development.

Fundraising and financial management. The financial demands of charter schools are well documented and it is not surprising to learn that Midwest directors struggle with fundraising and financial management. While the stress over financial issues appeared to abate in more mature schools, financial concerns are still paramount.

Engaging parents. In school choice settings, parents show their acceptance of the school by sending their children to it. This acceptance, however, may not necessarily translate into parent engagement. Learning how to foster school and home relationships has been difficult for many charter school directors. Relevant conversations about parent engagement, its limits, its benefits, and how to build it would serve future charter directors well.

Meeting Leaders' Needs

Meeting the needs of future directors may require that we think of new methods and sources for reaching them.

Reconsider the approach to training. Directors are well educated, with advanced degrees, and have training in many important elements of organizational leadership. However, this training and experience at times does not translate into the field. It is possible that field-based approaches, such as on-going mentorship or internships, would be more appropriate for the complex and context-relevant issues like fundraising and parental engagement.

Reconsider the sources of training. Related to the previous point regarding field-based training, those considering the development of charter school leaders may want to make deliberate and wider use of local director networks. Great Lakes directors value local networks over national or state programs for learning, but national data suggest that younger directors remain relatively disconnected to existing formal and informal director networks. Connecting new directors to the existing community of directors, with their invaluable knowledge and experience, may be one of the most efficient strategies for providing valuable on-going development.

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