

# WHAT WORKS: INSIDE MODEL CHARTER SCHOOLS

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## Summary

This paper examines the research on high performance at individual charter schools and lays out principles and practices used at these schools which can be followed by charter school practitioners.

## Abstract

Charter schools are not just different from regular public schools, but are different from each other. Therefore, to understand the performance of charter schools, it is necessary to discover what practices are used at individual successful charters. According to recent school-site research, there are key principles and practices present at charters that improve student achievement. Such schools have good management practices, such as stable leadership, cost efficiency, and fiscal accountability. These schools emphasize academic rather than non-academic goals and have high expectations and standards-based curricula. Many have extended and creative schedules and use test data as diagnostic tools to spot student weaknesses and prevent grade inflation. Teachers are hired based on subject-matter knowledge and are rigorously evaluated; grade-level teams of teachers analyze data to improve student and teacher performance; research-based teaching methods are used; and principals frequently visit classrooms. Finally, students are expected to behave in a manner conducive to learning.

## Introduction

Much of the research evaluating charter schools compares the performance of charter schools as a group versus traditional public schools. Typical of this research is a 2005 study by the California education policy-analysis organization EdSource that matched nearly a hundred well-established California charter schools against a large group of comparable non-charter public schools. The EdSource study found that state test scores of the charter schools generally improved more than the scores of the non-charter schools. While such a finding may hearten supporters of charter schools, it does not inform parents, policymakers, and the public about the practices that are going on in the principal's office and the classrooms of a successful charter school.

Indeed, there have been relatively few studies that actually go into individual charter schools to discover what is working and what is not. Yet, this type of research is extremely important because charter schools are, by definition, not just different from regular public schools, but also from each other.

Charter school pioneer Ted Kolderie points out that “the charter school is not a kind of school; not a learning program or method” (Bulkley & Fisler, 2002, p. 1). Kolderie

observes: “The opportunity the [charter-school] law provides is an empty physical structure. Students learn from what the organizers put into it” (Ibid. ). Thus, according to a University of Pennsylvania review of charter school research (Bulkley & Fisler, 2002), “in comparing schools operating under the charter school laws with those directly operated by public school districts, it is necessary to consider the substantial variation under the charter school umbrella” (p. 1).

What this paper seeks to do, therefore, is to examine the research that has been produced on the practices used at individual successful charter schools plus research on successful management models for charter schools. Special attention will be paid to those practices, such as curriculum choice, use of testing data, and teacher quality, that directly impact student achievement. While “success” can be defined in a number of ways, in this era of high-stakes accountability, increased student achievement must be viewed as the most important indicator of success. This paper will be of interest to parents and the public, who will gain information about what to look for when choosing or evaluating charter schools, and will be of special value to charter school operators and authorizers as they decide upon which charter models will most likely result in better student performance.

### *Why Some Charter Schools Succeed*

According to Bulkley and Fisler (2002), “We know far less about what happens inside charter school classrooms than we know about how charter schools are organized and governed” (p. 4). This lack of knowledge is troubling since policymakers should be aiming not just to create more charter schools, but to create high quality charter schools. As the EdSource study notes: “Before state and local policymakers advocate the use of public tax dollars to convert low performing public schools to charter status, they should closely examine the types of charter schools that are succeeding, for what kinds of students, under what conditions” ([http://www.edsource.org/pub\\_edfct\\_charter\\_summary.cfm](http://www.edsource.org/pub_edfct_charter_summary.cfm)).

While the research literature on school-site practices at charter schools may be less extensive than other areas of charter investigation, it is not non-existent. For example, in 2001, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation issued a study (Triant, 2001) on how principals at eight Massachusetts charter schools use their freedom and autonomy to implement innovative practices at their schools. Of the eight charters in the Fordham study, five had state test scores that were higher than the scores of surrounding regular public schools.

In 2004, the U.S. Department of Education released a study entitled Successful Charter Schools (USDOE, 2004) that examined the practices at eight high quality charter schools from around the country. The schools were selected from 250 nominated and were chosen not only for their high performance (they met their NCLB adequate yearly progress goals for three straight years and demonstrated three years of student achievement growth on

state standardized tests), but because they represented various types of charter schools. The study's authors visited the schools and conducted extensive interviews with principals, teachers, parents, and others, plus observed classroom practices.

In 2005, San Francisco-based Pacific Research Institute released the book *Free to Learn: Lessons from Model Charter Schools* (Izumi & Yan, 2005) that examined the practices at seven highly improving charter schools in California. These schools exceeded their state-calculated test score improvement targets for three straight years. This collection of case studies used both a survey instrument sent to each principal plus in-depth school-site interviews and classroom observations to determine the reasons behind the student achievement increases at these schools. For comparison purposes, the authors also examined the practices at several poorly performing charter schools.

*Our School* (Jacobs, 2005), by a former education columnist for the *San Jose Mercury News*, described the academic rise of Downtown College Prep charter high school in San Jose, California. The average student started ninth grade at the school with fifth-grade math and English skills, but because of the rigorous academic program the school boasts one of the highest passage rates in the city on the state's high school exit exam, and all students go on to higher education.

There have been several analyses of the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) charter schools that have been started in a number of states. The KIPP schools have become famous for their ability to raise the achievement of low-income minority students in urban areas.

Finally, the Annie E. Casey Foundation issued a study (Frumkin, 2003) that recommended successful strategic management practices for charter schools. While not based on the experiences at particular charter schools, this study, nevertheless, is aimed at informing charter school practitioners of proven successful management practices.

It should also be noted that an important new study, *Examining Differences in Teaching and Learning in Low- and High-Performing Charter Schools* (Loveless, 2007), is to be presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association in Chicago in 2007. It will be instructive to compare the results and conclusions of this study with the principles outlined in this paper.

Because few studies in this research area use gold-standard research methods such as randomized field trials or case-control longitudinal studies, some judgment was employed in choosing the cited books, studies, and reports. Despite this caveat, these publications focus on linking certain practices to increased student performance. It is therefore possible to assemble a list of key elements used at charter schools to improve the achievement of their students. Where possible, the experiences of individual principals and others at successful charter schools are cited. While many of these elements of success can be applied to and would likely improve regular public schools,

this paper discusses the reasons why implementation of these elements is easier, and sometimes only practically feasible, at charter schools.

## Key Principles

**Maintain good management and consistent stable leadership focusing on student achievement, cost efficiency, and fiscal accountability.**

Poor performing charter schools often have high turnover rates among principals. Jorge Lopez, principal at Oakland Charter Academy in Oakland, California, notes that prior to his arrival his school had four principals in one year. Izumi and Yan (2005) found that at highly improving charter schools in California, principals had been in their jobs for five years or more.

Lack of management skills in the principal's office and among the founders of a charter school is bound to result in poor results. Lisa Blair, principal at Reems charter school in Oakland, California, observes: "What I find is that a lot of people who come into the charter movement come in with a passion to teach but don't make that transition to administration" (Izumi & Yan, 2005, p. 65). Because charters are very much like an entrepreneurial endeavor, it is important for principals and charter leaders to have some good business skills in order to make the best use of the freedom and flexibility they are given.

Howard Lappin, the acclaimed principal at College Ready Academy in Los Angeles, says that if charter leaders do not have the ability to "pull off" the charter enterprise, it is because they "don't have one of two expertises, either business or education." He says that failed charter leaders usually have one but not the other, "Generally, what happens is that an educator has no business sense" (Izumi & Yan, 2005). Izumi and Yan (2005) found that principals in highly improving charters had either some business background or had highly developed entrepreneurial skills.

Frumkin (2003) notes, "All charter schools must be able to go beyond the enunciation of educational principles and actually organize themselves to carry out activities and deliver services" (p. 22). He sets up a three-prong test for all significant actions at a charter school: 1) the action must be valuable, 2) the action must be operationally feasible or do-able, and 3) it must be supportable or authorizable. He also observes that "the most successful charter school entrepreneurs are those who are able to mobilize substantial amounts of capacity outside the school and deploy it strategically to fulfill the mission" (p. 22).

At American Indian Public Charter School, the highest performing middle school in Oakland, California, principal Ben Chavis spends little of the school's money on administrative overhead. He says that his federal Title I funds go to only two things – books and teacher salaries. Indeed, although his school gets less money than regular Oakland public schools, Chavis pays his teachers more

than teachers in the Oakland school district. By using his charter flexibility to pay his teachers more, he has attracted high-quality teachers who have raised the achievement of the school's students. Chavis declares, "We don't need more money, we need administrators who can manage money" (Izumi & Yan, 2005, p. 21).

The chief end of good management should be improving student achievement. At Fenton Avenue Elementary charter school, one of a cluster of highly improving charter schools in Pacoima, California, principal Joe Lucente says that money saved on maintenance and other business-related areas has been plowed back into the classroom to purchase nearly 1,000 computers for students, to lengthen the school day and year, and to pay for better teachers such as grade-level lead teachers who ensure that the state standards are being implemented in every classroom.

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### **Consider splitting business/management and academic responsibilities between school leaders.**

Most charter school leaders, if they have spent all their careers in education, have received very little management instruction. Jorge Lopez of Oakland Charter Academy says: "I went through my whole master's program and nobody ever talked about the fiscal issues. What about how we are going to manage the money? Oh, don't worry about that, we first have to remember how this poor child has to overcome 'the man'" (Izumi & Yan, 2005, p. 141).

According to Frumkin (2003), one way to address the lack of business and management skills among charter school leaders is to "divide the leadership of the school so that one person is almost exclusively devoted to managing operations while another focuses on learning...This sort of divided leadership," he observes, "may take the form of pairing a principal with a chief of operations or an executive director with an academic director" (p. 25).

This divided leadership model has been used at Fenton Avenue Elementary charter school where executive director Joe Lucente focuses on business and management issues, while instructional and curriculum director Irene Sumida oversees teachers and the learning process. A longtime educator, Lucente has a degree in business administration and has managed a number of businesses. Izumi and Yan (2005) note: "Fenton's co-leadership solves the problem that numerous charter schools have; that is, a principal who is more skilled in academic matters than management, or vice versa" (p. 72).

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### **Emphasize academic rather than non-academic goals, plus high expectations for students and staff.**

Successful charter schools focus on academic goals, which could range from meeting certain targets on state tests to ensuring student proficiency in core subjects based

on state academic content standards to setting academic improvement benchmarks for students. These academic goals are distinct from non-academic goals, which might include, for example, a focus on cultural heritage issues.

American Indian Public Charter School's Ben Chavis emphasizes: "You have to have goals. When I came here, we were the worst school in the city. My goal was to improve the first year. After that, I said that we were going to be the best middle school. Every year you have to have a goal" (Izumi & Yan, 2005, p. 13).

At Sixth Street Prep charter school, a highly improving charter in Victorville, California, principal Linda Mikels says that when she arrived at the school, she and her teachers examined student test data and decided to focus on one problem at a time. Because her school is made up of mostly English language learners, improving math achievement became the school's first goal. Mikels explained that she wanted students "to see immediate success, and you can see success in an English language learner in the area of math" (Izumi & Yan, 2005, p. 28).

At Montague Charter School in Pacoima, California, a highly improving conversion charter, principal Diane Pritchard's first goal was to adopt a rigorous curriculum proven to raise student achievement. She sent teams of teachers to curriculum conferences across the nation before finally adopting the Core Knowledge curriculum. She says that even now teachers and staff are "always talking about curriculum and what we're going to do for the kids" (Izumi & Yan, 2005, p. 44).

A charter school's academic goals should be based on high expectations for students and staff. Lisa Blair of Oakland's Reems charter school says that "wherever you place the bar, that's where the student is going." For poor children, if socioeconomic background sets the bar, "then the student is not going anywhere." However, she says, "if you raise the bar, then the student is going to jump that hurdle." Staff must be made to believe that all children can achieve at high levels: "I tell my teachers that our students must learn because they are capable. Everyone is capable" (Izumi & Yan, 2005, p. 65).

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### **Implement rigorous standards-based curricula.**

State academic content standards and the state standardized tests aligned to those standards form the basis of state school accountability systems. Thus, while it may be innovative, the curriculum used at charter schools should be aligned with the state standards so that students are receiving the knowledge, concepts, and skills at each grade level that the state has determined to be essential.

At California's KIPP San Francisco Bay Academy, principal Lydia Glassie says that the school bases its entire curriculum around the state academic content standards. Not only are students expected to master all areas of the standards, the school expects to accelerate learning so that



the mastery of the standards is achieved at the faster pace necessary for students to be ready for high school honors and Advanced Placement programs. Students not meeting the state standards receive tutoring twice a week.

At Fenton Avenue Elementary, grade-level teams of teachers plan lessons centered on the state standards. After planning the lesson, one teacher is chosen to implement the lesson. Subsequently, the teachers come back together and get debriefed on the success (or lack of success) of the lesson.

At Vaughn Next Century Learning Center in Pacoima, California, a nationally acclaimed charter school, principal Yvonne Chan says that the curriculum at Vaughn weaves three rigorous types of standards into the classroom objectives. First, like other regular and charter schools, Vaughn uses the state academic content standards. In addition, the school uses the American Diploma Project's benchmarks that include specific content and skills in English and math that students should master by the time they leave high school. These benchmarks were developed by Achieve, Inc. in partnership with the Education Trust and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. Finally, Vaughn uses theme standards that are developed in-house. For example, in grades 9 through 12, the theme is international relations. Thus, besides their core classes, students must also study U.S. relations with China and the Middle East, plus other global issues. Chan says, "I have 82 teachers, and the kids have different learning styles so we're open to teacher style, but we're not open in terms of the standards and parameters of your style – the basic principles do not change" (Izumi & Yan, 2005, p. 100).

While it is possible for regular public schools to focus on implementing rigorous standards-based curricula, and some certainly do, their task is made more difficult because of school district policies and decisions that often hamper such implementation. Indeed, the American Civil Liberties Union's recent successful class action lawsuit, *Williams v. California*, included shocking evidence of students having no textbooks, inadequate school supplies, and no homework because of the paucity of these materials. The lack of these materials is often due not just to lack of funding, but also to decisions by the district as to where to spend its funds.

Because charter schools have budgetary autonomy, they are able, like American Indian Public Charter School, to funnel their limited dollars into purchasing standards-aligned textbooks, whereas surrounding regular public schools must make due with outdated non-aligned textbooks or no textbooks at all. Lisa Blair of Reems charter school says that charter status gives her the freedom to make important budget decisions: "If we want to purchase books, we make the decisions about the books. If we want to go on field trips, we make those decisions. So everything is done right here. It's like a small business" (Izumi & Yan, 2005, p. 69).

## Consider using a longer school day and year.

As has been pointed out by many, the regular school day and year are artificial constructs that have little connection with the true amount of time needed to impart required knowledge to students. Researchers have found positive effects stemming from greater time on learning (Walberg, 2006). It is not surprising, then, that USDOE's (2004) profile of successful charter schools notes, "Because many charter schools have an extremely ambitious mission, they provide a longer school day than their local counterparts" (p. 10). The report points out that the Arts and Technology Academy Charter School in Washington, DC uses an extended seven-and-a-half-hour a day schedule, plus after-school tutoring and homework assistance for students who need extra help. Also, instead of the usual 180-day school year, the charter school uses a 200-day year.

While a few KIPP charter schools have struggled, many, if not most, have experienced success, due to their specific schooling model that includes extended time in school for students. At the KIPP Academy Houston, the school day runs from 7:25 AM to 5:00 PM. In addition, the school's schedule includes two mandatory Saturdays each month. There is a three-week summer session in June, with school starting in August. The summer session for incoming fifth graders focuses on the school's culture, including instruction on the school's strict code of conduct. For students in grades six through eight, the summer sessions are focused on academic learning. KIPP has been able to operate a longer day because the district has granted waivers to its traditional scheduling policies under the charter school law.

Similarly, Vaughn Next Century Learning Center was able to use California's charter law to get the Los Angeles school district to allow Vaughn to add 20 extra days to its schedule, which its principal says contributes greatly to the higher performance of the school's students.

These examples indicate not only the potentially positive impact of a longer calendar, but also that charters have a better opportunity to implement such a schedule than regular public schools that are tied up by state and district rules.

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## Hire smart teachers based on top academic records and/or subject-field-related experience, not simple possession of a regular teaching credential.

Frumkin (2003) points out that the most important operational management decision charter leaders face is the hiring of teachers and key staff. "Building the teaching capacity of a school," he says, "will have a profound effect on the ability of the school to execute its mission" (p. 23). He concludes, "Only when a charter school has located, secured, motivated, and retained qualified personnel at

all levels can the school claim that it has the capacity to deliver on its mission” (Ibid. ).

Triant (2001) reports that one of the Massachusetts principals interviewed for his study noted that only 25 percent of her teachers were certified, which allowed her to hire teachers with advanced degrees in subjects besides education to meet the school’s primary objective of academic rigor. Another principal states: “[Certification] doesn’t mean they can teach. It just means that they have taken and passed – possibly with D’s – certain courses and been through some student teaching, but I have no idea of the quality of the mentor teacher. What I need to see is people who are highly intelligent, prestigious college background, articulate, they like kids” (p. 11 ).

At Oakland’s American Indian Public Charter School, principal Ben Chavis says that he hires teachers based solely on their academic records, regardless of whether they have a regular teaching credential or not. He has Ivy Leaguers and a Georgetown-trained lawyer on his faculty. He does not use regular avenues for hiring teachers, but uses Craigslist.com, a website featuring free classified advertisements and is favored by young professionals. Most important, he is able to pay his teachers substantially more than the district’s union-negotiated salary because he does not spend money on a lot of administrative overhead, and the school is not part of the restrictive teacher union contract with the district. He says, “My [federal] Title I funds go to two things: books and teacher salaries” (Izumi & Yan, 2005, p. 19). The higher salaries attract better teachers. Chavis’s ability to focus his funding, which is less than at regular public schools in his city of Oakland, demonstrates a key benefit of being a charter: charter schools can reward good teachers based on performance because they either negotiate waivers with the district and the teachers union, or they are liberated from district rules and collective bargaining agreements by the state charter law.

Thus, while administrators at both regular public schools and charter schools may realize the importance of basing teacher hiring decisions on the subject-field expertise of candidates, only charter schools have the freedom to implement fully this hiring criteria.

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### **Create grade-level teams of teachers to analyze student data, plan for interventions, and design instruction.**

The USDOE (2004) study observes that at successful charter schools, administrators “have created program schedules to support teacher collaboration” (p. 10). This collaboration concludes, “Shared meeting time for teams of teachers during the school day gives them opportunity to plan, develop curriculum, discuss student issues, and conference with families” (Ibid.). Similarly, Izumi and Yan (2005) found that teachers at highly improving California charter schools meet regularly to analyze student data, plan for interventions, and design curriculum. Further,

“To best improve teacher performance, teachers at a school must get together to discuss what is working and what is not in their classrooms” (p. 157).

At Roxbury Preparatory Charter School in Boston, Massachusetts, grade-level teams of teachers meet every Friday to share best practices and analyze student work to focus instruction. The staff also meets during the summer to create Curriculum Alignment Templates that ensure that the curriculum aligns with the school’s own standards, state standards, plus measurable benchmarks, learning activities, and assessments for each unit.

At Sixth Street Prep in Victorville, California, grade-level teams of teachers meet twice a week to score student writing and other student assessments, plan for interventions, and design instruction. The principal and the staff spend one day a month doing vertical articulation to ensure that the educational activities of one grade fit with the activities in other grades.

At the BASIS school in Tucson, Arizona, teachers meet one afternoon a week to share teaching strategies and information on struggling students. Faculty and staff also attend a two-day retreat to review student-testing data, with course syllabi prepared based on test results.

At Montague Charter School in Pacoima, California, grade-level teams of teachers are given decision-making authority for each grade level on issues involving the curriculum and teacher practice. Teachers not only meet to analyze student performance, but individual teachers will go into the classrooms of other teachers to observe and make reports on what works and what does not. Principal Diane Pritchard says that the grade-level team meetings are her best teacher quality tools.

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### **Test students often and use results as diagnostic tools to spot student weaknesses.**

The principals at successful charter schools view tests and test results not as enemies of the education process, but as critical tools to improve the learning of students. These schools assess students often and use the results to identify student weaknesses, inform interventions, and help mold instruction.

At Sixth Street Prep, principal Linda Mikels says: “We begin by taking a look [at the state test scores] and seeing where the deficiencies are with the kids. We design instruction [around the scores], deciding where we might do interventions, after-school programs, and other things to address those gaps.” In addition, she says, “we do our school plan from that; all the programs we adopt are based on something we saw in the data” (Izumi and Yan, 2005, p. 36 ).

The Community of Peace Academy in St. Paul, Minnesota uses an evaluator consultant to analyze assessment data. The results are presented to the school staff. Staff work groups review the data and findings and work throughout the year to develop student improvement strategies. This

process has resulted in the school adopting a stronger and more comprehensive reading program that includes after-school reading support using university students. Also, by individual student test data, English-as-a-second-language teachers create an individualized learning plan for students. This plan includes two to three learning goals for each student, the level of intervention needed, and areas for teacher focus.

At Roxbury Prep, faculty and administrative staff meet four times a year to review assessment outcomes and to develop responsive strategies. They use outcomes from curriculum-based assessments to identify student weaknesses. These students are then tracked to determine the type of intervention they need, whether it is special education, tutoring, or homework assistance. Results from the SAT 9 are also used to identify problem areas for individual students and to modify the curriculum.

At Tucson's BASIS school, students must pass annual comprehensive tests in core subjects in order to be promoted to the next grade level. Prior to taking the tests, students are administered a "pre-test" in each subject, which acts, among other things, as a diagnostic tool that informs teachers, students, parents, and school officials as to whether the student needs tutoring or some other form of intervention or support.

At Montague Charter School, state standardized tests are supplemented by an early literacy test by Renaissance Learning that is administered at the beginning, middle, and end of each school year. Curriculum tests are discussed at team teacher meetings. The school has a color coding system for each individual student to designate whether he or she is performing above (green) or below (red) the desired benchmark. This system allows teachers to visualize their classrooms, so if there are lots of red, but few greens, then instruction can be modified accordingly to address the problem.

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### **Prevent grade inflation by comparing grades with test scores.**

Charter schools, like regular public schools, sometimes engage in grade inflation in order to mask the real achievement level of students and to cover up school deficiencies. To ensure that classroom grades are reflective of students' true knowledge and skill levels, principals should compare student grades with student scores on standardized tests.

When Lisa Blair took over as principal at Reems charter school, she had all the students tested. She found that none of the report cards reflected the actual state student knowledge on the oral and written assessments. The grading procedure had been a farce, and students were poorly prepared for the next grade level.

Diane Pritchard of Montague Charter School requires that grades are backed up by testing data. She spends hours examining each teacher's report cards and compares the

grades to student test results. If there is a conflict, she discusses it with the teacher.

While regular public schools can use test scores as a check against grade inflation, there is often little incentive for them to do so since, in most cases, there are few, if any, negative consequences for disparities between the two. However, since state charter laws usually require charters to be re-approved every few years by authorizing bodies based on the performance of charters, the charters have incentive to ensure that grades given by teachers roughly match the scores of students on tests.

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### **Use teaching methods that are empirically proven to improve student performance.**

Empirical research shows that some teaching methods are better than others when it comes to increasing student performance. In order to achieve the school's academic goals, it is critical that teaching methods be effective. If teachers are given flexibility to choose teaching methods, then their choice must be tied to the requirement that it lead to higher achievement.

Izumi and Yan (2005) found that a large majority of the highly improving charter schools they profiled used some type of direct instruction teaching method. Direct instruction is usually characterized by: 1) setting clear goals for students and making sure students understand the goals, 2) presenting a sequence of well-organized assignments, 3) giving students clear, concise explanations and illustrations of the subject matter, 4) asking frequent questions to see if students understand the material, and 5) giving students frequent opportunities to practice what they have learned. Many of the principals in their study were outspoken proponents of the method.

Linda Mikels of Sixth Street Prep said that her school adopted the direct instruction method because research had supported its effectiveness in raising student achievement, a fact corroborated by Izumi and Yan (2005) who note that "a wide range of studies by the federal government and university and independent researchers have found that direct instruction teaching methods are effective in improving student achievement" (pp. 31-32).

Although its profiles of successful charter schools do not explicitly touch on the teaching methodology issue, the USDOE (2004) study does mention that a number of the schools use direct instruction curricula. For example, in 2002 Oglethorpe Charter School in Savannah, Georgia implemented SRA's Direct Instruction Corrective Reading program for the one-third of its students that were reading below grade level. After little over a year, nearly 70 percent of sixth graders and nearly 80 percent of seventh and eighth graders were reading at grade level.

Izumi and Yan (2005) note that in dealing with English language learners, many of the charter schools they profile use English immersion teaching methods as opposed to bilingual instructional methods. However, even in schools



like Sacramento, California's Bowling Green Charter Elementary, where the decision was made to continue bilingual education using subject-matter instruction in ELL students' primary language coupled with English language instruction, the bottom line was that there had to be improvement in student test scores.

By using the flexibility contained in state charter laws, charters can adopt curricula outside the district-adopted curricula. This ability is critical if the district has adopted ineffective curricula, which handcuff regular public schools. For example, Montague Charter School emphasizes direct instruction teaching methods and was able to use its charter freedom to adopt the direct instruction-oriented Open Court curriculum years before the Los Angeles school district eventually adopted the curriculum. Thus, the curriculum flexibility charters enjoy serves to enhance their ability to use their preferred teaching methods.

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### **Ensure classroom accountability through frequent classroom visits by the principal.**

A school may have a good academic plan, curricula, and high expectations, but all these things may be undercut by poor execution in the classroom. Principals must know what is going on in their classrooms and should therefore make frequent classroom visits to ensure that deficiencies are quickly corrected.

At Montague, Diane Pritchard visits every classroom once a week armed with a curriculum guide, such as the Open Court reading manual for a particular grade, and compares what the teacher is doing to what he or she should be doing. She makes notes and discusses them with teachers. Also, she has teaching coaches for reading and math/social studies who have set up a reciprocal teaching arrangement where the coach teaches in the classroom while the teacher watches, with the situation reversed the next day.

At Washington DC's Arts and Technology Academy Public Charter School, the assistant principal makes weekly classroom observations and coaches teachers. The teachers also have a weekly meeting with the assistant principal to discuss classroom practices. In addition, the school has program coordinators for grades pre-K-2, grades 3-6, and arts and technology who regularly coach teachers. School officials credit this structure and support with teachers' high performance.

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### **Promote high quality teaching through rigorous teacher evaluations, with tough consequences for poor performance.**

In order for teachers to perform at their best, it is critical that they receive proper evaluations that point out their strengths and weaknesses and ways in which they must improve. Charter schools have the advantage over regular public schools of being better able to reward good teacher

performance and to remove poor teachers from the classroom.

Under director of instruction Irene Sumida, Fenton Avenue Elementary charter school has developed a comprehensive in-depth teacher evaluation program. Sumida conducts the evaluations based on two formal observations a year using noted teaching expert Charlotte Danielson's work on good teacher practices. Danielson posits four domains of good teaching: 1) planning and preparation, 2) classroom environment, 3) professional responsibilities, and 4) instruction.

Sumida writes up formal evaluations based on the four domains, looking at Danielson's rubrics, and discusses with teachers how they stack up. Her system uses distinguished, proficient, satisfactory, and unsatisfactory grades. For a teacher to pass the evaluation, he or she cannot rate unsatisfactory in any of the domains. The evaluation is usually five to six pages long. Sumida explains: "I determine where they fall on the rubric and I write a summary of where I think their real strengths are. After I've written about the four domains, I write a summary overall about what I think they need to work on, their strengths, and what I'd like to see them doing in the future" (Izumi & Yan, 2005, 81).

Sumida points out that with any evaluation plan, there must be a bottom line. She can make suggestions for change, but teachers have to realize that there are consequences for failure to improve. At Fenton, there is a peer assistance and review procedure that has real teeth. Sumida identifies those domains where the teacher needs help. Faltering teachers receive assistance from lead teachers plus Sumida herself and her assistant directors.

In the first year peer assistance and review, Sumida identifies what a teacher will have to do in order to improve. At the end of the year, she determines if there has been improvement. If the teacher has improved, he or she has another year to continue to improve until he or she receives satisfactory marks in each domain. However, if a teacher fails to improve at all in the first year, he or she is terminated. Number of years of experience is not a mitigating factor. If a teacher improves the first year, but makes no improvement the second year, he or she is also terminated.

The ability to conduct true and effective evaluations of teachers separates charters from most regular public schools. While most districts have some type of teacher evaluation process, they are usually pro form and uninformative, with few consequences attached for poor performance. Sumida, for instance, observes that the Los Angeles school district's teacher evaluation system was farcical with poor performing teachers getting the same marks as effective ones. With teachers of widely varied teaching performances getting the same evaluation scores, best practices were never identified, and no one was expected to improve. In contrast, charter administrators like Sumida have the freedom to conduct truly meaningful evaluations focused on improved performance.

## Expect students to behave in a manner conducive to learning.

Successful charter schools not only expect more from adults employed at the schools, they also offer and expect more from the students who attend. Students are expected to behave in a manner conducive to learning, and this behavior is reinforced through behavior modification and character education, incentives, and sanctions.

At Reems charter school, student misbehavior was so bad that upon her arrival principal Lisa Blair had to address this problem before she could tackle the school's academic deficiencies. She instituted a program based on harm-reduction therapy, which is designed to monitor and manage addiction while one is moving out of it. Blair observed: "It just made sense to me that if you have a bad habit, it's the same thing as an addiction or it may become an addiction later in life. So if they were using those principles with adults then they should be able to use those same principles with kids" (Izumi & Yan, 2005, p. 60). Two psychotherapists from the local harm-reduction center come to the school to work with parents and students, plus the school counselor is trained in the therapy.

At Sixth Street Prep, good behavior is reinforced by the school's character education program. All students in the third through the sixth grades carry a so-called "premier agenda," a booklet that contains their homework assignments and a character insert that includes 36 character qualities. Every Monday morning, students attend a 30-minute assembly focused on one or a group of the character traits. At the assembly, a teacher does a PowerPoint presentation on the trait of the week. Teachers then watch for students exhibiting the trait that week and give citizenship awards to those students.

In order to ensure that students attend class, American Indian Public Charter School offers cash incentives. For one year of perfect attendance, a sixth grader receives \$50, a seventh grader receives \$75, and an eighth grader receives \$100. Three years without missing a day gets the student a \$150 bonus. Unsurprisingly, the school has nearly 100-percent attendance. Principal Ben Chavis observes: "I'm teaching [these kids] to be capitalists. These [bad] guys in their neighborhoods say, 'Hey man, if you fill this bag of weed, I'll give you \$5.' The kids say, 'If I go to school every day I'm going to get \$50 or \$100'" (Izumi & Yan, 2005, p. 21).

When students fail to abide by the rules, however, it is necessary that penalties be swift and sure in order to deter misbehavior by other students. At Fenton Avenue Elementary, children who have behavior or attitude problems that result in too many negative marks are expelled. Director of instruction Irene Sumida says that tough discipline is necessary to teach students about the work world they will face in the future: "We're holding them to high behavior standards because you've got to get to work every day, you've got to work hard, you have to have a good attitude . . . I don't want to just see you get the job, you've got to

keep the job" (Izumi & Yan, 2005, p. 87).

Similarly, at Downtown College Prep in San Jose, school leaders expel many students who fail to modify their behavior to comport with the school's expectations. They enforce the rules consistently and without favoritism, which means they even expel students that many of them really enjoy but who cannot straighten out.

The greater ability of charter schools to discipline students compared to regular public schools, which are often hamstrung by district policies that tend to discourage expulsion, is one of the key differences between the two types of schools. Both critics and supporters of charters argue about whether this difference is good or bad, but it should not be forgotten, as the examples of Reems and Sixth Street Prep show, that charters use various innovative methods, not just tough discipline and expulsion, to get students to behave so they can learn.

## Implement innovative school schedules/ student groupings.

In addition to lengthening the school day, a number of charter schools attribute part of their success to other innovative classroom scheduling or student grouping devices. One favorite is the concept of "looping" where the same group of students stays with a particular teacher for several consecutive years.

American Indian Public Charter School uses a "self-contained-classroom" or "looping" model. Teachers at this charter middle school teach all subjects and move with their students from one grade to the next. A teacher, thus, will begin with a class of sixth graders, stay with them until they graduate in the eighth grade, and will then start all over again with a new sixth-grade class. Because students will be with the same teacher throughout their middle-school careers, it is obvious why principal Ben Chavis emphasizes the need to have a high-quality teacher in every classroom.

Chavis says that much of his teacher professional development is based on his scheduling model. "What we do," he says, "is when you're teaching the sixth grade and move up to the seventh, the new sixth-grade teacher is coming in, you're going to train him or her, and the teacher in the seventh grade is going to train you" (Izumi & Yan, 2005, p. 16). He observes that this type of collaborative professional development has worked well at the school: "If you taught in the sixth grade, they're going to say this is part of the book you really need to focus on, or I found this difficult for the kids. So they're training the teachers" (Ibid.).

The self-contained-classroom/looping model also saves schools money since fewer staff persons and facilities are needed, plus facilities are not worn out as fast as under a rotation model. More important than saving dollars, however, is the effect on students. The model builds an esprit de corps among students. Chavis notes that the classes of students become like little clans and part of one family.

A much different type of student grouping model is used at Ralph A. Gates Elementary charter school in Lake Forest, California. Students are re-grouped every four to five weeks into homogenous skill groups. This so-called Joplin plan, which suspends the notion of “one teacher-one classroom,” groups students across grade levels, with students in grades four through six grouped together by skill level (students in grades two and three are grouped within their grade levels). This regrouping model allows teachers to work together, collaborate, and meet the individual needs of students. Every group works on the same academic standards, but assignments vary in depth, and group sizes are smaller for students who need extra help. Special education students are included in these groups, and a resource special education teacher is part of the teaching team.

These innovative scheduling and staffing programs would not be possible at most regular public schools, which are bound by district and union contractual rules and policies.

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## Conclusion

Charter schools have now been in existence long enough that it is time that charter school organizers and operators, plus public education officials, lawmakers, and the public learn and understand the principles and practices behind the success of individual charter schools. Given the continuing political pressures on charter schools, and the fact that charters, like regular public schools, must operate in an environment that increasingly stresses accountability, it is no longer enough simply to start a charter. Rather, the goal must be the establishment and operation of high quality charters that will be effective in improving student performance. The recommendations laid out in this paper should be helpful in achieving this important objective.

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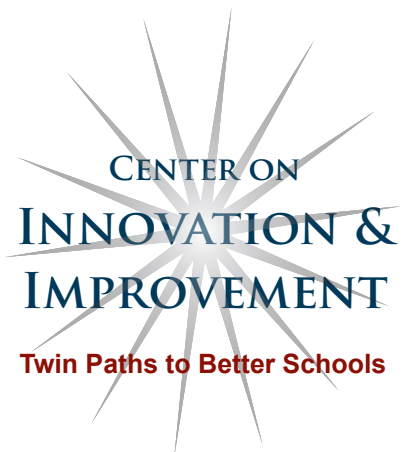
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