The Role of Charter School Boards in a Complex Accountability Environment
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During the past two decades, the charter school has evolved from a theoretical concept into an educational model that is now being implemented in thousands of schools across the country. As of September 2004, nearly one million students were enrolled in more than 3,300 charter schools in 40 states and in Washington, D.C. (Lake & Hill, 2005). While the national percentage of public school students attending charter schools still remains small (approximately 2%), estimates are that the number of charter schools and the number of students attending charter schools will continue to grow steadily during the next 20 years. (Lake & Hill, 2005) With chartering as a remedial option for consistently failing schools under No Child Left Behind, we can also expect an increased focus on the efficacy and sustainability of charter schools as a school reform model in the years ahead. Given the atmosphere of increasing educational accountability from all levels of government, it is important to consider how charter schools manage the pressures and expectations placed upon them to demonstrate success.

In most states where charter schools are growing in number, state charter laws require the establishment of a Board of Directors for each charter school before approving their charter. On paper, these Boards are the primary management apparatus and overseer of a charter school’s financial and academic success. Like other non-profit boards and boards of trustees for independent K-12 schools, colleges, and universities, charter boards are expected to hold great responsibility and exercise authority in guiding the direction of the school, choosing and supervising charter school principals or other leaders, and ensuring that schools meet the goals set forth in the charter. However, while charter boards are granted great responsibility on paper, there is reason to believe that there is great variation in the roles that they play in different charter schools. As many charter schools now reach a critical post-startup stage, where initial community energy may be fading, where original founders may be leaving, or where increased competition from fellow charter schools and education policies may be placing increased pressure on schools to demonstrate success, it is important to learn more about charter school boards and the roles they are playing within charter schools.

Problem Statement

Charter school boards are typically entrusted with ensuring that their schools are meeting increasing demands for accountability and student achievement. Charter school boards are responsible for choosing, retaining, and firing school leaders and school partners, as well as interfacing with the local community and with charter authorizing and monitoring agencies. Yet, state and local guidelines for the make-up and role of charter school boards are typically sparse, as is the case with many other forms of educational and nonprofit governing boards.

To some extent as a result of this lack of formal guidance from states and localities, there is evidence (Hill et al, 2002; Ascher, 2003; Miron and Horn, 2003) to indicate that many charter school boards conduct their work unclear of the roles that they are expected to play. As Finn et al (2000) observe,

Some school operators appear to have little awareness of how successful governing boards work. Seeking to reverse what they see as autocratic rule by “experts” in a typical school system, some charter school boards are too democratic (deferring to every parent in the school, for example), resulting in a leadership vacuum or factionalism. Others wind up themselves being heavy-handed and autocratic in their quest for efficiency and accountability or because they don’t trust others to sustain the founders’ education vision. (p. 110)

There is also evidence, albeit primarily anecdotal, that there exists great variation in the manner that charter school boards conduct their work, that this variability is not necessarily tied to differences in school missions or goals, and that board confusion or dissonance around school goals can negatively impact school effectiveness. As all charter school boards are still “young” organizations (most less than 10 years old), it is also likely that many charter school boards are in a state of flux as their organizations move through transitional stages towards increased maturity. Given the heightened emphasis, in recent years, on
school accountability and the growing accountability of charter schools to state and federal measures, as a result of No Child Left Behind, the need for clarity of roles and responsibilities and “mission focus” appears to be growing for charter schools.

Rationale for the Study

If charter schools, individually, and the charter school movement, as a whole, are going to succeed in the long-term, they will need to become self-sustaining and self-guided institutions. Those in charge of charter schools will also need to successfully navigate their way through an increasingly complicated accountability environment. In addition to assuring that schools meet the goals outlined in their charters, continue to enroll sufficient numbers of students, hire and retain adequate teachers, and generate sufficient income to appropriately house and educate students, charter schools must now meet more stringent state and federal achievement results, such as Annual Yearly Progress under No Child Left Behind. It is difficult to imagine that one person, the school head, would be able to accomplish all of these various goals alone. This, combined with the fact that charter school boards are legally entrusted with the governance and oversight of schools, seems to place a great deal of responsibility for charter school success on the shoulders of the charter school board.

Unfortunately, we know very little about charter school boards and the roles that they play in governing and managing charter schools. What we do know is mostly drawn from anecdotal evidence and from a small number of evaluations that have not focused primarily on the role of charter school boards. In addition, the empirical research that does exist on charter school boards (see Hill et al, 2002; Ascher, 2003; Miron and Horn, 2003; Graham, 2004) typically concerns charter schools during the initial, start-up years, when the role of the charter school board may differ greatly from later years.

While the existing research on charter school boards is thin, research on governing boards of organizations that share some similarities to charter schools (e.g. independent schools, local public school boards, nonprofits, etc.) does exist. While charter schools are unique institutions and differ, in certain ways, from each of these other organizational forms, there are also similarities and commonalities among them. By applying models, theories, and research from these other organizations, we can test their applicability to the charter school board model and draw conclusions and potentially develop new models or theories from these tests. From this we will, hopefully, learn more about the nature of charter school boards and their role within charter schools.

Research Design

This research project is in the piloting phase. A two-phased research approach will be employed to learn as much as possible about the role of charter school board members in Philadelphia charter schools. The first phase of the research will consist of a survey administered to the principal educational leader (principal or CEO) of each charter school in the city of Philadelphia. The second, follow-up, phase will be a case study of 6-8 schools that will delve more deeply into board dynamics and roles at these schools. The expected completion date of this research project is Spring 2008.

References


