

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHARTER SCHOOLS IN COLORADO



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THE COLORADO FOUNDATION FOR FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

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- Promote promising practices through training and technical assistance
- Improve the delivery of services by developing partnerships among funders, organizations and communities
- Inform public policy development through research, evaluation, and information dissemination

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE IMPORTANCE OF CHARTER SCHOOLS IN COLORADO 2

THE NATIONAL CONTEXT FOR CHARTER SCHOOLS 2

START-UP CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES 3

PHASE 1: DEVELOPMENT 3

INITIAL FINANCING OBSTACLES 4

CLEAR EDUCATIONAL VISION 4

SUFFICIENT PLANNING TIME 5

FACILITIES 5

STAFFING 6

STUDENT ENROLLMENT 6

PHASE 2: FIRST YEAR ISSUES 7

ACCESS TO FINANCES 7

TITLE 1 7

INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES EDUCATIONAL ACT (I.D.E.A.) PART B 8

NATIONAL AND COLORADO BARRIERS IN ACCESSING FEDERAL FUNDS 8

UNEVEN FUNDING 9

PER PUPIL REVENUE 9

BUY BACK SERVICES 10

STRAINED RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE DISTRICT 10

STUDENT ISSUES 10

ACHIEVEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY 11

PHASE 3: SECOND GENERATION ISSUES 11

STAFF BURN OUT 12

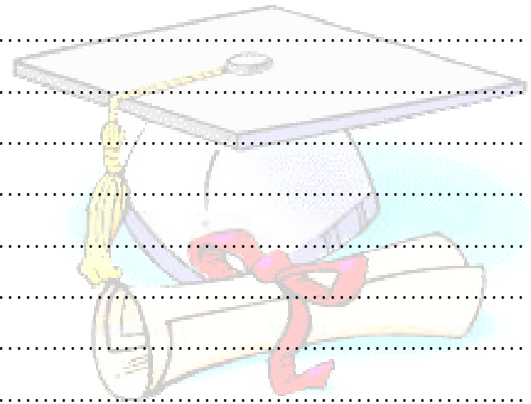
PRESSURE TO ADD MORE GRADES/ EXPAND 12

RETURN TO ORIGINAL PHILOSOPHY 12

CONCLUSION 13

PUBLIC POLICY IMPLICATIONS 13

REFERENCES 14



THE IMPORTANCE OF CHARTER SCHOOLS IN COLORADO

Charter schools are being promoted in Colorado as the best solution for low performing schools. Emanating from a year 2000 mandate, initiated by the Governor's office and passed by The General Assembly, any public school in Colorado not receiving a passing "grade" on the state school report card has three years to improve, or be converted into a charter school.

The key policy question is, "can mandating a public school to convert to a charter school really help its students succeed?" One way to become a charter is through this mandated conversion process. However, true charter schools are typically created from a grass roots effort of local parents, educators, and community members. From the information and analysis presented in this paper, many problems face any fledgling charter, and the switch may not be the best choice for the highest risk, low-income students. It takes more than just a mandate to create a successful charter school.

The purpose of this report is to inform educators, funders and policy makers about the current state of the art of charter schools nationally and in Colorado. This paper details the lessons learned from charter schools across Colorado. It provides a national context for understanding the challenges and evolution of local charter schools.

THE NATIONAL CONTEXT FOR CHARTER SCHOOLS

A recent RAND report looks at the experience of charter schools in other states. The results for academic achievement are mixed. Arizona charter schools report higher achievement in reading than typical schools. Texas charter schools that focus on at-risk, low-performing students report better achievement than conventional schools, but other charter schools perform slightly worse than the regular public schools. Early results from Michigan suggest no difference between charter and regular schools at grade 7, while regular schools outperformed charters at grade 4.

Overall, parents report greater satisfaction with charter schools. However, extending access to charter schools to poorly educated parents or parents who have children with disabilities has not gone well. We also see that most charter schools have similar racial and ethnic distribution of students when compared to their local public schools.

The RAND study also looked at "civic socialization" and reported that these schools of choice (both charter and voucher schools) are no better or worse than public schools at socializing students as citizens. This is based on "limited evidence", but still suggests that even private voucher schools are as good as public schools in socializing students as citizens.

In summarizing the policy implications of charter schools, RAND seems reticent to recommend them as a large-scale tool of systemic reform. By design, these schools are individual hybrids and do not constitute a core of common strategies within states or certainly not across states.

The following report looks from this national picture to charter schools in Colorado. We hope it increases understanding of the assets and liabilities inherent to charter schools.

START-UP CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES

Research on developing a charter school, and the stages the school will typically follow, is abundant. Eric Premack, a respected national charter school authority, synthesized the planning and development of a charter school into five stages. Within each initial stage, problems may arise that can hinder the school's opening or even guarantee its demise (1998). As the federal government continues to embrace charter schools in a bipartisan manner, a closer examination of these start-up problems is warranted. In reality, charter schools do not need to repeat the same mistakes over and over, yet nationally and within the same state, they do. This is partly due to the limited information on handling and avoiding start-up problems, and partly due to the individual characteristics of the typical charter school founders.

According to the 2001 U.S. Charter School Report, charter school founders fall into one of three groups: grassroots organizations of parents, teachers and community members; entrepreneurs; or existing schools converting to charter status. Most charter schools are formed via local grassroots efforts in search of a better fit between the community and education. These founders usually have a background in either education or in business. Few possess a background in both fields. Lack of balance between the staff knowledge of both fields is just one example of start-up problems a charter school can experience.

This policy paper provides a review of typical start-up problems and start-up problems faced by Colorado charter schools. Premack's five stages have been collapsed into three problem phases: 1) Development problems are problems the charter school works through during its conception and implementation stage; 2) First year issues are problems the charter school will likely encounter in the first four years of operation; and 3) "Second-generation" issues are those recurring problems that continue to frustrate veteran charter schools.

The Colorado charter school start-up problems were identified via interviews with administrators, board members, teachers, and parents of four Colorado charter schools. All interviewees were sent an outline of the literature review and were asked to reflect on their charter school's challenges and experiences. Of those interviewed, only 17% have stayed with their school since inception. This is not uncommon. Quite often, founding members and parents are exhausted or frustrated and relinquish their responsibilities to newer members.

PHASE 1: DEVELOPMENT

Charter schools are typically developed to: 1) realize an educational vision not available in the regular public schools, 2) gain autonomy from the school district, or 3) serve a special population of students. Regardless of the reason, charter schools face many of the same challenges. Quite often the founding members are unaware of these challenges and, once confronted, do not have the resources to address them properly. As a result, the first phase, development, is the deadliest for most charter schools. Although there is information available generally to inform the founding members of the typical pitfalls and how to overcome them, many of the challenges and solutions are idiosyncratic, particular to mandate or a local school board. Some states provide assistance with troublesome aspects of their charter school law while other states turn a blind eye to the problem and let the charter school work the challenge out on its own.

Thus, a national review of the literature is not sufficient for the survival of a charter school. Assistance with individual state laws and local school board dynamics is paramount if the charter is to proceed.

The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) established a Charter School Division in 1998 to provide charter schools assistance with state regulations and requirements. The Colorado League of Charter Schools also provides technical assistance to potential and currently operating charters.

INITIAL FINANCING OBSTACLES

All the research points to financing as the greatest challenge for start-up as well as second-generation charter schools. The financial challenges include limited start-up funds, inadequate per-pupil funding, uneven cash flow, and the expectation that with these limited funds the charter school will:

- ✓ produce a building
- ✓ provide supplies, equipment and curricula
- ✓ recruit students
- ✓ market the charter school
- ✓ recruit, train and compensate qualified teachers and staff
- ✓ negotiate food and transportation contracts
- ✓ negotiate special education contracts

Colorado's constitution does not allow charter schools to have access to bonding authority and other sources of tax-financed capital. Founders must raise the capital from private funds or obtain credit, which is difficult to obtain since charter schools have no financial history and school districts are hesitant to back charter schools. Additionally, there is the perception among participants in capital markets that charter schools are a risky investment. When borrowing is possible, interest rates tend to be excessive. These economic struggles are even harsher within low-income communities and for grassroots charter schools.

However, the latest U.S. Department of Education report states there has been a decline in the percentage of charter schools facing start-up funding struggles due to a federal increase in available start-up funds, as well as an increase in grants from private contributors and philanthropic foundations.

CLEAR EDUCATIONAL VISION

A charter school's success, and thus renewal, is based on whether the charter has met its stated educational outcomes. It is critical that founders have a clear, well articulated and agreed upon understanding of the educational vision, the educational goals and how those goals will be measured. Premack's research suggests that many charter school founders have not spent sufficient time on the educational vision, nor how the goals will be measured. Confusion surrounding the vision can sabotage early progress. Conversely, goals and outcomes can become so narrowly defined and focused that they do not generate enrollment interest among prospective parents.

SUFFICIENT PLANNING TIME

Nationally, many charter schools have rushed to open their doors and quickly realize they overlooked many critical details. Within Colorado, several charter schools hurried to open their doors after an unforeseen, lengthy approval process; final approval was not awarded until late spring or early summer with the charter school opening its doors three months later- unprepared. To avoid critical pitfalls, these charters should have delayed the opening of the school until the following school year.

Other charter schools have opened their doors with a frenzied start due to the unforeseen amount of time consuming tasks associated with opening a charter school. Examples of time consuming tasks are: advertising and filling teaching positions, marketing to prospective students, fine-tuning curriculum and instructional strategies, and learning about laws and regulations. After jostling for facilities, staff, and students, administrators and Boards sometimes find that they have not devoted nearly enough time toward curriculum and staff training. Once again, these charter schools would have been better off in the long run by delaying the opening.

While postponing the opening may be sensible, there are downsides to delaying, such as losing momentum and finances. Energy is required by all individuals to keep the vision alive for another year. Funding may be necessary to pay administrators and staff so they can carry the vision for one more year. Finn, Manno and Vanourek (2000) state that schools with the ability to postpone opening day tend to be initiated by prosperous individuals and organizations. Delaying the opening works against low-income and grass roots organizations as these populations tend to lack the finances and energy to keep the momentum alive for another year.

FACILITIES

Nationally, thirty-five percent of responding charter schools reported difficulties in implementing their charter due to inadequate facilities (RPP, 1999). By far, the most significant start-up expense is the cost of a facility. While conversion schools tend to avoid this issue, start-from-scratch charter schools view this as the greatest initial cost. Non-educational locations (portables, strip malls, old buildings) are common solutions; however, renovation costs typically required to bring a building up to code tend to be high. Makeshift portables have been the simplest solution for many charter schools nationwide, as well as in Colorado, but housing the school within trailers can spoil the vision of charter developers and turn prospective parents away. Within Colorado, no sponsoring school district can deny a charter because it has failed to secure a location. Unfortunately, there are several cases where approved charter schools have failed to open because they could not find or afford a location within the sponsoring district.

Prior to the 2001 School Finance Act, Colorado charter schools did not have access to local district funds for capital construction, improvements or operation. Charters had to pay for facilities out of their operating budget. Based on Colorado League of Charter School data, the average charter school committed approximately 13% of its operating budget towards facility costs. The 2001 School Finance Act now provides "qualified" charter schools with access to capital construction funding. "Qualified" is defined as any charter school that expends more than three percent of its operating revenues on capital construction (Colorado School Finance Act, 2001, 24-54-124 (f)).

Capital construction means "construction, demolition, remodeling, financing, purchasing, or leasing of land, buildings or facilities used to educate pupils enrolled in or to be enrolled in a charter school" (22-54-124 (a)). Under the School Finance Act, each Colorado charter school is expected to receive approximately \$317 per student for capital expenses.

STAFFING

Because charters are free from district regulations, they face a unique set of challenges in selecting staff. The charter school's vision is fundamental to all aspects of human resources; thus, recruiting and selecting effective staff is one of the most important processes. Public Impact, along with the Annie E. Casey Foundation, created a resource guide for charter school leaders to help them think creatively about human resource issues such as recruitment, selection and evaluation.

The ability to attract and retain qualified teachers within Colorado is a concern. Although charter schools provide more opportunity for teachers to be directly involved in operations and become "owners" rather than just employees, salaries often start and remain lower than what the traditional school offers. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has maintained the position that teachers will not work in charter schools if they continue to offer lower salaries and limited benefit packages than the districts.

The national teacher shortage is also affecting Colorado charter schools. Based on interviews with charter school administrators, there is a genuine concern that Colorado charter schools are becoming "teacher training camps." Once a rookie teacher has gathered enough experience via charter schools he/she will enter the traditional school system in search of a better salary.

Many charter school leaders veer from the traditional definition of teacher qualification and tend to avoid teacher organizations when hiring (Schwartz, 1996). Colorado charter school law does not require teachers to be certified. Many charter schools, claiming to have alternative and somewhat visionary people, employ adults who would otherwise never be involved in teaching. Charter school leaders are exchanging certification for creativity, new perspectives and different skill sets in their teaching staff. Charter school teachers are exchanging pay for autonomy and a focused learning philosophy. In the 1998-1999 Colorado Department of Education's charter school evaluation, educational philosophy was the top choice as to why teachers selected to work in charter schools over public schools.

STUDENT ENROLLMENT

The actual number of students who will enroll each fall is difficult to gauge with challenges in student enrollment typically taking three forms:

- ✓ not enough students
- ✓ too many of one kind of student (gender, grade level)
- ✓ too many students with needs and challenges for which the school and staff were not prepared

(Finn et. al, 2000)



For fortunate charter schools facing an over-enrollment problem, first-come basis and lottery selection are the two most common admission policies. For charter schools receiving any federal funds, lottery selection is the only acceptable admission policy. Waiting list procedures are typically stated within each individual charter school contract.

Other charter schools have opened to below-capacity numbers because parents, playing it safe, will often place their child on several waiting lists or, by the time the charter school is approved, parents have become nervous and enrolled their children elsewhere.

Charter schools serving low-income populations have a unique set of challenges. If a charter school is receiving federal funds, all students must be selected into the school via lottery selection and no slots can be reserved for a particular population. This method guarantees each student an equal chance of acceptance. However, since many school districts require next years' enrollment data in late spring, charter schools hold the lottery in winter, in the middle of the typical school year, in order to be able to prepare district paperwork. Unfortunately, most low-income parents do not seek educational alternatives until the school year is almost over. Educated middle and high-income parents know about the lottery system and begin seeking educational alternatives in time to apply. Low-income parents add their child to the waiting list and wait for next year's lottery.

Mobility is another challenge for charter schools trying to serve the low-income population. According to the General Accounting Office (GAO), one-sixth of the nation's low-income third graders have attended at least three different schools since starting first grade. Many of these families will never see the result of next year's waiting list or lottery selection.

PHASE 2: FIRST YEAR ISSUES

Once the charter has been approved and the school prepares to open, new challenges arise. Always present and paramount are the financial struggles.

ACCESS TO FINANCES

Up to this point, most charter schools have been able to survive on contributions and start-up grants. Charter school developers must now begin to think about long-term sources of revenue. As previously stated, charter schools do not have access to general obligation or revenue bonds. Credit continues to be difficult to obtain (Caldwell & Arrington, 2000). There are funding streams that charter schools may be able to access, such as Title 1 and special education (I.D.E.A. part B).

TITLE 1

Title 1 is the largest elementary and secondary education aid program in the country. Administered by the U.S. Department of Education, Title 1 received \$7.9 billion in federal funding during the 2000 fiscal year for school districts educating students with low academic achievement attending high poverty schools based on free and reduced lunch eligibility. On average, about \$800 is available for each student counted in the Title 1 formula. To be eligible for Title 1 basic grants, local educational agencies (LEA) must enroll at least 10 children from low-income families and these children must constitute at least 2% of the school-aged population. To be eligible for Title 1 concentration grants, districts must enroll more than 6,500 children from low-income families and consist of 15% or more of the total school-aged population.



Within established charter schools, Title 1 funding represents between 0.5% and 10% of their total operating budget (GAO, 1998). Not all charter schools may receive Title 1 funds in their first year of operation. In Colorado, even though a charter school may enroll 15%-30% of students eligible for Title 1 funding, it may not be eligible within its district to receive the funding due to local district regulations.

INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES EDUCATIONAL ACT (I.D.E.A.) PART B

I.D.E.A. part B assists states in paying for providing free and appropriate education, within the least restrictive environment (LRE), to students with disabilities between the ages of 3 and 21. The state must meet federal conditions established by the U.S. Secretary of Education. The GAO states the funds provide an average of \$639 per student to the nearly 6 million eligible students and represent between 0.08% and 2.5% of each school's operating budget.

During the reauthorization of IDEA, Congress added provisions for charter schools to be eligible. With the reauthorization, local school districts must demonstrate to the federal government that children with disabilities attending charter schools are being served and that charter schools have access to these funds just like all other public schools. Within Colorado, charter schools must individually negotiate with their districts the terms under which the charter school will receive IDEA funds or funded services.

NATIONAL AND COLORADO BARRIERS IN ACCESSING FEDERAL FUNDS

In previous federal charter school evaluations, most charter schools reported they had been notified by their districts about the availability of federal funds and how to apply/receive these funds. But, during 1997 Congressional hearings, concerns were raised that charter schools were not receiving their share of federal funds. A 1998 GAO report concluded that charter schools have not been denied access to Title 1 and IDEA funding. The report goes on to state that two-thirds of U.S. charter school operators believe that they received a fair share of Title 1 and IDEA part B funding. Although they were not denied access, other reports identified several barriers that made it difficult for charter schools to access these funds. One was difficulty demonstrating program eligibility. The Hudson Institute notes that states typically allot Title 1 funds to schools based on the previous year's enrollment of eligible students. This is particularly troublesome for charter schools operating under a growth strategy. For example, although a charter school currently serves grades 1-4, next year it plans to serve K-6. This one-year lag in reported enrollment data reduces the amount of federal funding the school receives for three grade levels.

In addition, charter school officials reported difficulty in demonstrating program eligibility due to data collected on students' family income. Due to the sensitivity of the data, some charter families failed to return surveys sent home to the parents asking about family income. The reliance on free and reduced lunch counts for this information often excludes charter schools that do not have a district-operated lunch program.

Another barrier hindering charter schools ability to access Title 1 and IDEA funding is staff workload demands. Nationally, several charter schools have stated that the time and demands involved in accessing these funds, coupled with the amount of funds the charter school would receive, was not worth the effort.

Other charter schools reported a lack of business and administrative savvy necessary in pursuing these funds. Charter school business managers reported that accessing these funds required several visits and phone calls to the district just to understand the allocation process and procedure as well as to negotiate the charter schools' fair share (GAO, 1998).

Often it is assumed that there is a friendly working relationship between the district and the charter schools. Unfortunately, many charter schools operate under a hostile relationship and any assistance from the school district is difficult to obtain. School districts often regard charter schools like private schools who steal "their best students" away.

When Colorado school districts receive Title 1 or IDEA part B funds, they are not required to share the funds with charter schools. Some school districts do not allocate Title 1 funds to schools with less than 50% eligibility enrollment. Another local barrier is negotiation. As per Colorado law, charter schools must individually negotiate with their district the terms under which IDEA part B funds are provided to them. Since these are individual negotiations, funding arrangements vary by school.

The results of a Colorado Department of Education survey shows that the majority of charter schools respondents think that their school did not receive any federal program monies and/or services and had no knowledge about the individual programs and monies available to the districts. As discussed in the CDE 2000 report, it is clear that many charter school staffs either do not understand or do not have the time to apply for federal funding. If charter schools are to overcome some of their financial obstacles, funding knowledge and accessibility must be increased.

UNEVEN FUNDING

All public schools receive their funding based on the mandated October one day count. Many charter schools do not see this funding until late in October - well past the school's opening date. This funding delay affects payroll and capital costs. Some first year schools borrow against their projected enrollment income until the October funding is received.

While some Colorado charter schools receive the October funding in one lump payment, others receive the funding in two payments, a July payment (based on the schools expected enrollment) and a second payment in January reflecting the school's actual enrollment. Still other charter schools receive the funding on a monthly basis, again reflecting the schools actual student enrollment.

PER PUPIL REVENUE

Prior to recent Colorado legislative changes (H.B. 99-1113), charter school funding was based upon the district's per pupil operating revenues (PPOR). A district's PPOR was calculated by subtracting the mandatory transfer to capital and insurance reserve funds from the total per pupil revenue (PPR). The 1999 legislation increased the minimum funding levels of charter schools. This law required districts and charter schools to begin negotiation at a minimum of 95% of the district PPR (not PPOR) for each pupil enrolled in the charter school. Part of the negotiation includes "central administrative costs" which can add up to, but not exceed 5%. Due to heated debate between Colorado charter schools and their districts the 2001 School Finance Act requires all chartering school districts to provide a detailed accounting for the "up to 5%" of central administrative costs 90 days after each school year. In essence, districts will have to be accountable to charter schools with detailed records of what the 5% bought the charter school.

BUY BACK SERVICES

The Colorado Charter Schools Act allows charters to contract services from the school district or purchase them from a third party. Such services are referred to as “buy back services.” These buy back services can add up to between 8-17% of the operating budget. CDE's Charter School Report (2000), reports that almost half of Colorado's charter schools (49%) purchase special education from the district. Insurance and student assessment were the next two largest buy back services. In a survey done by the Colorado League of Charter Schools (2001), 40% of the responding charter schools reported that their districts mandated the charter to buy several services from them with districts not allowing the option of purchasing from a third party. Additionally, many of these districts are charging charter schools an average of \$300 per student-regardless of whether these students require special education services and regardless of the level of satisfaction the charter school has with the services.

STRAINED RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE DISTRICT

Several Colorado charter schools operate under a strained relationship with the district. Charter schools that open with strained relationships seldom patch up their differences. This rocky beginning can lead to the questioning of central administrative overhead costs, the required “buy back” services and inability to access capital finance funds. There are Colorado charter schools that have chosen to challenge their district on certain issues, but on the average, most charters have chosen to turn a blind eye in order to maintain a positive relationship with their sponsoring district.

STUDENT ISSUES

More than half of the national charter schools in the Bruno Manno et al. study (1998) encountered unexpected challenges from at-risk and disadvantaged students. Nationally, charter schools tend to attract “...disadvantaged youngsters, many of whom bring a full measure of pathologies of the American underclass, one pathology being a history of previous institutional failure and low achievement. Such girls and boys are also likely to be poor, live in single parent families in troubled neighborhoods, and have health and nutritional problems.”

This pattern has not emerged in Colorado to the extent it has nationally. At-risk, low-income students are actually under-represented within the Colorado charter school movement. The Colorado Department of Education has informally attributed this under-representation to the fact that two of the largest school districts, Denver Public Schools and Aurora Public Schools, representing the majority of this population, have been reluctant to accept the charter school movement. As of 2000, Denver Public Schools approved only 8 charter schools. Three were remanded back from the State Board of Education after being rejected by the Denver district. Aurora Public Schools just opened its first charter and approved its second.

Other potential explanations for the under-representation of low-income students in Colorado is that 1) these students tend to be more mobile and often enroll after the October student count, 2) for most charter schools, transportation cannot be offered thus limiting the low-income population enrollment, 3) many charter schools do not provide a hot lunch program so there is no way to identify students eligible for free and reduced lunch, thus decreasing the count, and 4) low-income parents are not identifying themselves on school surveys to avoid being stigmatized.



ACHIEVEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Nationally, there is still little agreement on how to determine a common approach to charter school student achievement, since many such schools are founded to avoid the standardized curricula and the traditional testing and measures of accountability. Some schools are focusing on at-risk populations and thus will be enrolling dropouts and academically struggling students who are two years or more behind grade level. Standardized test results will always be below district and state levels so finding an alternative approach for accountability is critical.

For charter schools focusing on more mainstream populations, gauging student progress can be challenging. Each student's original school may have used a different achievement test and making valid comparisons between different tests to illustrate student progress can be difficult. Charter schools that use portfolio assessments, or presentations of learning, regard accountability and achievement on an individual student basis, maintaining fidelity to their philosophy about documenting learning.

Medler & Nathan (1995) found that charter schools were using a variety of measures to assess student progress. The most frequently used were standardized tests and student portfolios. Other schools used not-so-traditional follow-up measures of success such as number of graduates involved with the criminal justice system and observations (report cards) from those who employ the students.

Under Colorado law, all schools – charter and traditional - are required to administer the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) tests. While some individual charter schools have struggled with success on the CSAP, as a whole, charter schools have outscored their district's 3rd grade reading CSAP scores. Between 1998-99 both charter schools and their districts at or above proficiency scores decreased. In 1999-2000 both charter school scores and district scores improved; the charter school scores improved by 2.13% at or above proficiency while the district scores improved by 2% at or above proficiency. In 2000-01 charter school "at or above proficiency" scores increased by 4.28 %, while the districts at or above proficiency gained 2.87%. These scores suggest that by traditional measures, charter schools are successfully educating their students (Colorado League of Charter Schools, 2001).

While the CSAPs are important indicators, they rarely capture the entire academic picture. Most charter schools select additional achievement testing such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and Terra Nova. Which standardized achievement test the school chooses (if any) is agreed upon between the charter school and its district. However, developing and reporting measures of accountability that are consistent with the mission and educational philosophy of a charter school continues as a major challenge.

PHASE 3: SECOND GENERATION ISSUES

As a charter school matures, crisis management decreases and stability and predictability begin to permeate. Over time, charter schools gain the trust of the parents, community and district administration. The mature charter schools know their funding sources, have secured a building (at least for the time being) and are beginning to focus on long-term goals. However, that does not imply that all start-up difficulties have vanished. For some schools, several of the initial start-up problems will continue.

STAFF BURN OUT

Rothstein (1998) states, "In an initial burst of enthusiasm, teachers and parent volunteers in many charter schools will be willing to work 80 hours a week, clean bathrooms, and give up weekends and vacations to realize a vision of what schools can be. But this can get tiresome." The first several years are grueling and few teachers have the energy to continue. Many of the teaching staff have degrees in other fields (business or science) and return to those fields. It was never their intent to remain a teacher. Certified teachers move into the district in search of a better paying, less hectic job.

The grueling pace is a challenge for administrators as well. As the charter begins to stabilize, some administrators find that their strengths as builders are no longer as valuable to the charter school. A stable school has very different needs. Directors with educational backgrounds recognize a need for business and management expertise. Directors with business savvy begin to recognize the charter school's need for an instructional leader with an educational background. Few charter schools have the luxury of employing both an education and a business leader as co-directors. Those that have employed both types of leaders report fewer start-up struggles and more stability as the charter matures.

PRESSURE TO ADD MORE GRADES/ EXPAND

Successful charter schools will always be pressured to expand. Sometimes the pressure is to expand into middle or high school grades, while other times the pressure is to expand by the number of students served. Although expansion can be tempting when one considers the increase in per pupil funding, most expansions will create difficulties for the charter school.

RETURN TO ORIGINAL PHILOSOPHY

Many charter schools lose their way during the initial years. Federal funding and the required lottery system may have changed the school's original target population. District agreements and contracts might alter or dilute the vision. Deals made with funders may revise the mission. As charters stabilize, some choose to re-examine their original mission. Few have the energy to change the school and to make the necessary changes to return to the original vision. Additionally, by this time, many of the founding members have left and there is a general attitude of "why fix it if it is not broken?" More documentation is needed on this evolution to make judgments about such an impact on the students and the charter school's overall performance. It is clear that change does seem inevitable, even for the most narrowly committed start-up charter school.

CONCLUSION

Most of the charter school start-up challenges can be overcome with plenty of sweat equity from the charter schools' founders and staff, and with assistance from national and local organizations. Within Colorado, there is no central organization that walks a charter through the entire start-up process because each hopeful charter school faces challenges unique to its environment and school district. Clearly, there is a need for a central clearinghouse and resources for school problem solving in Colorado.

With the opening of each charter school, the start-up issues seem to be less severe. Lessons are learned and passed along. For example, five years ago start-up funding was difficult to obtain. Today, there are many start-up grants available and new resources for ongoing operations are appearing. As the charter school movement matures, many of the issues and challenges presented in this policy paper will be ameliorated. However, the issue of the at-risk and low-income student in a charter school will be a longer-term question to be answered.

PUBLIC POLICY IMPLICATIONS

A big concern identified among Colorado educators is the lack of charter schools serving low-income students. Nationally, charter schools serve a higher percentage of low-income students than public schools. Colorado as a whole enrolls fewer minority and low-income students within their charter schools. Little is known about why low-income parents select, ignore or never hear about charter schools. Some schools may keep demographic records of who requests information, but this is not a universal practice. Many start-up charter schools may not know how to outreach to low-income or higher risk student populations.

Low performing or "failing" traditional schools are in the spotlight as Colorado rolled out its school-by-school report cards in 2001. State-imposed charter schools have legislatively been identified as the major salvation for failing schools. To date there is little evidence that this is a viable the solution. There are many characteristics of charter schools that could help low achieving students (e.g. smaller size, more parent involvement, a consistent educational philosophy). However, as this policy paper points out, start-up problems, adequate funding, teacher qualifications and staff turnover, are but a few of the challenges that will accompany any massive public policy that mandates charter schools. One of the biggest barriers in choosing state imposed charter schools as the strategy for low performing students is that the schools will not be founded by a committed group of parents and educators who choose a consistent philosophy. Presumably, a group of state level consultants will come into a community to "take over" the failing school and somehow convert it into a "charter" school. As a matter of mandated educational reform strategy, this seems to be seriously flawed and inconsistent with the essence of what makes charter schools successful. However, there is still time under the legislative requirements to develop a better approach to failing schools that may use some of the best learning from charter schools and other successful strategies for improving student performance. Charter schools can be one alternative for failing schools but should not be the only alternative.

Because of the important policy implications of charter schools, both as a driver of educational reform and a strategy for improving failing schools, the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children will continue to examine this issue in greater depth. We seek information, advice and partnerships that help us merge social and educational policy in new ways to serve our most vulnerable children and their families.

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