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# Finding Their Own Way:

The Work of Philadelphia Charter School Boards  
in a Complex Accountability Environment



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# Finding Their Own Way:

## The Work of Philadelphia Charter School Boards in a Complex Accountability Environment

### Summary

*The following report has been developed from research conducted with Philadelphia charter schools during the 2008-2009 school year. The focus of the research was charter school governance, with an emphasis on how charter school boards evolve over time, the roles played by board members and by boards as a whole, and how charter schools boards work with staff members to help their schools navigate through challenging financial, political, and accountability waters. The names and identities of individuals and schools have been omitted or changed to ensure confidentiality and privacy.*

### Background

Charter schools continue to be a growing influence in American public education with approximately 4,600 charter schools enrolling more than 1.4 million students in 40 states and the District of Columbia (Center for Education Reform, 2009). While the national percentage of public school students attending charter schools still remains small (approximately 2%), these percentages are higher in many urban areas, and 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). In the city of Philadelphia, charter schools are an increasingly large component of public education reform efforts, with more than 60 schools currently in operation. With chartering a remedial option for consistently failing schools under No Child Left Behind, and with the expansion of charter schools a critical component of the Obama administration's education strategy, charter schools are increasingly receiving attention as a key policy instrument in public education reform.

For charter schools, meeting a wide variety of accountability measures is a continual requirement. All public schools must now demonstrate an ability to meet the demands of external accountability measures such as those contained in No Child Left Behind. The unique nature of charter schools, which are mission-focused and

granted greater autonomy than traditional public schools, also requires them to consider internal accountability pressures from parents and students who choose and attend the school, as well as from a host of other stakeholders. As with most schools, school-level leadership can be a critical ingredient to the success of a charter school. This includes school heads (e.g. CEOs, principals, etc.) as well as school-level Boards of Directors. Most state charter laws require the establishment of a Board of Trustees or Directors for each charter school at the time of charter approval. On paper, these Boards are the primary governing apparatus and overseer of a charter school's financial, legal, and academic well-being. Charter boards are usually expected to 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 evidence of great variation in the roles that they play in different charter schools.

In a September 2008 report by the Wallace Foundation, Todd M. Ziebarth, the vice president for policy at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, notes that, "we're 17 years into the charter school movement, and we still don't have a good descriptive analysis of those boards." "Without that," he adds, "it is hard to get real specific prescriptions for improving effectiveness" (Gewertz, 2008). Organizational transitions and growth, lack of training, "founderitis", and misconceptions about roles, responsibilities, and boundaries are all cited within the report as issues of concern for these boards.

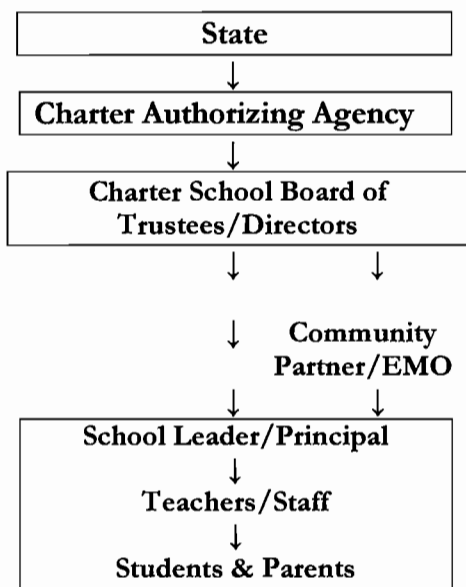
### History of Charter Schools

The concept of the charter school was developed and honed in the late 1980's and early 1990's and was, in many ways, the next step in a string of reform efforts designed to decentralize public education, long dominated by centralized local school boards. In 1991, Minnesota became the first state to draft charter school legislation, with its first charter school opening soon thereafter. Charter schools have been opening by the hundreds each year since, and now operate in 40 different states. Since each state's charter law is different, no consensus definition of a "charter school" exists. However, most definitions allude to a system in which schools have increased freedom and autonomy to determine their own fate, though the form of measurement of their success is left unspecified. This increased autonomy, charter school advocates argue, makes charter schools more likely to meet the needs of students and their parents by enabling administrators, teachers, and students to more energetically

focus on the goals established in their charters. (Nathan, 1996; Finn et al, 2000; Fuller, 2000)

Structurally, the charter school board rests at the heart of the chain of authority and responsibility that exists between the state (which holds the primary responsibility for delivering education to its citizenry) and parents and students (the primary recipients of services). As indicated in the figure below, states typically empower a charter authorizing agency (often a school district or university) to grant charters directly to schools. Charter authorizing agencies approve new charter schools and renew existing charters based upon an application system. Groups that apply for a charter are usually required to have a board of directors (or similar governing group) in place at the time that they apply. These boards of directors are empowered to choose a principal or school leader, and are primarily responsible for ensuring their school's fiscal and strategic success. In some cases a partnering organization may also be involved in managing a school, but the charter school board is typically entrusted with the authority to hire or fire such a partner. Finally, a principal or school leader delegates responsibility to teachers and staff to provide education services directly to the students.

**Typical Charter School Chain of Authority**



Numerous researchers have concluded that the functions of the charter school board – including monitoring the work of school staff and mediating between outside partners and chartering authorities - are important to organizational coherence and that many charter school boards have struggled in performing some or all of these duties. (Finn et al, 2000; Hill et al, 2002; Miron & Horn, 2003; Ascher et al, 2003) The research on

nonprofit and other education organizations reveals that these struggles are not unique to charter school boards and suggests that there may be difficult phases, stages, or cycles of growth that charter boards are likely to encounter as they mature. (Greiner, 1972; Wood, 1992) As charter schools mature as organizations, and as original founders and advocates become less involved, it is important that the governing bodies of these institutions are prepared to guide them through a difficult and complex environment. However, very little research has been conducted on charter school boards to inform us about how they change over time, what their roles and responsibilities are and should be, and how an effective charter school board might best guide the work of a school.

**Review of Literature**

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 these other organizational forms, there are also similarities and commonalities among them. By applying models, theories, and research developed to study these other organizations, we can test their applicability to the charter school board model and draw conclusions or potentially develop new models or theories from these tests.

**Research on Charter School Governance**

Limited research conducted to date on charter school governance has found that most boards are similar, in composition, to the boards of other non-profit organizations, typically consisting of a mix of professionals (e.g. lawyers, bankers, etc.) and community members (clergy, state representatives, etc.) who are committed to forwarding the goals of the schools. (Hill, Lake & Celio, 2002; Miron & Horn, 2003; Sullins & Miron, 2005) Like many non-profit boards, these boards usually focus their attention on budget issues, mission statements, personnel issues, policy development, and fundraising.

While charter board work is reported to be congenial, multiple researchers have noted that confusion or a lack of clarity about both individual and group roles and purposes is a common trait within many charter school boards (Hill et al, 2002; Ascher et al, 2003). Such confusion can negatively affect communication within school organizations and lead to clashes or disagreements that hinder effective functioning. Some boards and board members contribute little because they are unsure of how to best help their organization and lack guidance about

their expected role or roles. Other boards and board members may over-reach or meddle inappropriately in organizational management for similar reasons.

Finally, there is evidence that charter school boards may experience phases of growth and that the progression through stages can be both turbulent and complicated (Hill et al, 2002). Lack of funding, external administrative and accountability demands, the need to integrate staff and board members into a new organization, and the hectic nature of operating schools all likely contribute to this turbulence, especially in a school's first years.

## **What We Know About Non-Profit Governance**

During the past 30 years significant research has been conducted on how non-profit governing boards operate, the roles that board members play, how boards relate to organizational leaders, and how boards evolve over time. While much of this work originated out of research on the for-profit corporate governance model, a substantial amount of research has moved exclusively into the nonprofit sector, as the perceived complexities of the nonprofit board role allow for a wide and intriguing range of study, and because existing theories on for-profit governance have proven insufficient to explain the behavior of nonprofit boards. (Alexander and Weiner, 1998, Miller, 2002; Brown, 2005).

The following is a brief glance at some of the more heavily researched topics and concepts in non-profit governance, all of which are applicable to the charter school governance model.

### ***Agency Theory***

Many early studies of for-profit and non-profit boards focused on the immediate relationship between executives and their boards of directors. Jensen and Meckling (1976) are credited with developing and forwarding the concept of "agency theory" as a framework for analyzing the relationships and decision-making processes of boards and executives. (Eisenhardt, 1989) In short, agency theory posits that the desires and goals of a "principal" and an "agent" (e.g. board member and executive) within an organization are inherently in conflict and that these actors will typically act in their own self-interest. The theory also hypothesizes that it is difficult for principals who are not involved in the day-to-day operations of the organization to monitor the actions of the agent, and that these parties are likely to have different attitudes towards risk, with principals more concerned with long-term success and agents more focused on immediate rewards. (Eisenhardt, 1989) These

circumstances support, the theory holds, the need for explicit separation of control and decision-making among board members and executives. (Jensen and Meckling, 1976) Concluding that this theory was too inflexible, Kramer (1985) later proposed a "contingency" model that takes into account a variety of organizational conditions when considering issues such as power sharing and division of responsibilities between boards and executives. These conditions include organizational size and complexity, professionalization of the field, and the level of reliance on governmental funds. (p.25) Changes in these conditions may increase or decrease the strength of an executive's role, in relationship to the board, as the balance of information or expertise changes or as time restraints restrict the ability of one party to participate fully in governance and management decisions.

### ***Boundary Spanning***

Aldrich and Herker (1976) opened up another line of questioning with their analysis of "boundary spanning" roles among for-profit and nonprofit board members. Two key functions of board members, they argued, are to process information and to provide external representation for the organization. By crossing the boundaries between inside and outside of the organization (e.g. communicating with outside partners, accessing knowledge and information, and drawing inferences from the external environment), these boundary spanners help organizations navigate turbulent political waters, develop new innovations, and establish partnerships. They also help to maintain the legitimacy of an organization by providing information to outsiders, including clients. The idea of boundary spanning has since been incorporated into the work of researchers (Chait et al, 1991; Widmer, 1993) who have looked more broadly at the various roles that non-profit board members play.

### ***Role Conflict and Role Ambiguity***

Researchers have also investigated the concepts of "role conflict" and "role ambiguity" among members of organizations, including board members. (Kahn et al, 1964; Van Sell et al, 1981; Widmer, 1993) Role conflict occurs when individuals are asked or forced to play a role that conflicts with their own value systems or to play multiple conflicting roles. Role ambiguity occurs when roles are not clearly defined, in terms of behaviors or the level of performance expected. (Van Sell et al, 1981) In their 1981 review of research on the topic, looking at employees in a variety of organizational forms, Van Sell et al concluded that role conflict and role ambiguity both appear to lower productivity and cause psychological withdrawal in affected workers, and that these phenomena are "partially a function of a complex interaction of job

content, leader behavior, and organizational structure.” (p. 66)

In more recent research on the roles of non-profit board members, Widmer (1993) detailed 5 different roles that board members tend to play in nonprofit organizations:

<i>Trustee:</i>	an oversight role, characterized by long-range planning, monitoring the work of the executive, arbitrating conflicts between the executive and staff, managing funds, and ensuring that legal responsibilities are met
<i>Worker:</i>	performing specific tasks for the board or the organization; serving as a committee chair; providing client services; or performing clerical tasks
<i>Expert:</i>	providing specialized knowledge and/or professionalized skills to assist the organizations (e.g. legal, banking, fundraising, real estate)
<i>Representative:</i>	carrying information to and from different organizations (e.g. State Senate, AARP, etc.) or groups (e.g. the elderly, the disabled, etc.)
<i>Figurehead:</i>	bringing prestige to their organization through their presence on the board (e.g. celebrity or individual representing the mission of the organization)

Widmer found that many board members actually play multiple roles, and that those roles do not necessarily include the often prescribed role of trustee. While not discounting the importance of the traditional trustee role, Widmer’s research highlights the varying roles that board members can and do play.

### ***Life Cycles of Boards***

Another topic researchers have explored is organizational change, and the effects that such change may have on both management and governance. Greiner (1972) developed an initial model of organizational development – aimed primarily at the corporate sector – that attempted to explain how organizations move from small start-ups to larger, more established bodies by passing through a number of critical phases. A number of practitioners and researchers have attempted to modify and apply Greiner’s model to the non-profit sector. Mathiasen explored how nonprofit boards of directors pass through three distinct organizational stages: the organizational board; the governing board; and the institutional board; on their way towards maturity.

“Organizational boards” are informal and very committed but become an ill fit as the organization becomes more complex. More diverse “governing boards” focus more on policy-making and governance, and less on day-to-day management. The final stage, the “institutional board”, is reached when the board grows more aware of its long-term role, becomes more comfortable and independent in its governance functions, and looks towards other long-range goals (such as fundraising) as a primary responsibility. Such boards often contain prestigious members of the community and assign many of the tasks previously conducted by the full board (e.g. planning, financial oversight, etc.) to smaller committees. Mathiasen notes that it is not clear that all organizations need to, or should, reach the third stage of development to be successful, but that many inevitably will do so.

Wood (1992) built upon the work of Greiner and others by developing a model of cyclical board behavior. Wood found four “operating phases” of the nonprofit boards she studied: founding, supermanaging, corporate, and ratifying. Wood’s boards tended to evolve from small, highly energetic, and committed bodies to low energy, minimally involved bodies that are, ultimately, unable to respond to crises within the organization. Wood found that boards in this last phase (ratifying), often recognize their inability to resolve the crises at hand, spurring a dramatic change in the board that essentially restarts the cycle of operating phases. An additional point that Wood makes, based on her research, is that over-reliance on one person (e.g. an executive director or board chair) can lead a board and an organization astray. As she writes, “a board under the influence of an executive director who *is* the agency is ripe, or ripening, for a crisis.” (p.158)

### ***Founder’s Syndrome***

As Wood highlighted, founders can play a critical role in new organizations. A fledgling subset of the research on board life cycles is research into “Founder’s Syndrome.” In an article on the topic, Linnell (2004) provides a thorough and colorful description of nonprofit founders, their importance to an organization, and the variety of roles that they tend to play within an organization:

*Founder -- those people who are sparked with a fury and a zest about a cause, a mission, an idea, and who (unlike most of the population) have the energy and the wherewithal to do something about it – are typically incredible people. Not only do they see an injustice and feel inspired to fight it, but they almost always think they can win. These are the no-barriers type people whose*

*righteous passion often catches others up in their beliefs. They take a cause, turn it into a mission, and build the people support and basic nonprofit structure to hold the flame of their passion. By nature, these are people with strong mental models of what's right and what's wrong. But it is these strengths of character – insight and vision, a sense of justice, a hopefulness, an ability to take risk, determined purposefulness, and the ambition to succeed for mission's sake – that can also be their downfall.*

Linnell describes how organizations in their early years often struggle to move to the next, more systems-oriented stage, with the founder (in his or her role of executive, board chair, or even both) contributing to this struggle. Founders often attribute disagreements with board members and staff to a lack of dedication on the part of new staff, a lack of understanding of the importance of the organization's work, or to perceived personal vendettas unrelated to the work of the organization. Unfortunately, situations like this can continue for years, leaving an organization stuck in a state of stunted or delayed growth. Linnell also highlights the inevitable fact that the founder will eventually leave, and that organizations unprepared for such an event may suffer dramatically from the resulting disruption and confusion.

In the only empirical study of “Founder’s Syndrome” in the nonprofit sector, Block and Rosenberg (2002) surveyed more than 300 board chairs, board members, and executive directors of Colorado nonprofits. The authors found evidence supporting the following conclusions:

- Founding executives and non-founding executives did behave differently
- Founders were reported to have weaker managerial skills, but more entrepreneurial skills
- Founders tended to have greater control and influence over organizational and board activities

Block and Rosenberg suggest future research exploring the circumstances under which problems with founders arise, linking founding and non-founding leaders to organizational effectiveness, and learning more about how organizations survive the effects of founder’s syndrome and the departure of founding leaders.

## **New Directions for Research in Non-Profit Governance and Accountability**

Recent research into non-profit governance has focused increasingly on board accountability, has further explored the interplay between private non-profits and the public arena, and has considered how non-profit boards might include a wider swath of stakeholders in guiding their organizations through increasingly complex accountability environments.

In an editorial on the potential role of non-profit boards, McCambridge (2004) – the editor of *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* - calls for governance mechanisms that incorporate a wide swath of stakeholders.

*It is the responsibility of local nonprofits – if they are serious about representing and responding to constituent interests – to have governance mechanisms that can convene the individuals they are established to serve with other stakeholders, engage them in dialogue with the organization and one another, develop a collective dream of the future or vision of what can be accomplished, and develop strategies that will take the group from here to there. (p.352)*

McCambridge argues that a move towards broader governance considerations would help to restore faith in non-profit institutions that have recently suffered a number of high-profile public scandals and mismanagement.

Morrison and Salipante (2007) build upon and synthesize recent work in the realm of non-profit accountability and public governance that considers how board members and managers blend more deliberate strategizing (e.g. setting up agendas, developing long and short-term strategic plans) with what is described as “emergent strategizing”. Emergent strategizing occurs as new situations arise and as the environment in which the organization sits changes. The authors describe another process – termed “negotiable accountability” - whereby organizational leaders constantly work with themselves and with stakeholders to develop and modify criteria for and ways to interpret success.

In their book *Governance as Leadership* (2005), Chait et al posit that the most effective non-profit boards work consistently in three different modes: fiduciary, strategic, and generative<sup>1</sup>. Boards that know when and how to work

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<sup>1</sup> Chait et al describe “generative thinking”, the most vital component of the “generative mode”, as a cognitive process of thinking about problems and opportunities within an organization. More powerful than strategizing, generative thinking is a variation on concepts developed by other theorists that involves processes of framing and

in each of these modes, they argue, are more likely to remain productive and engaged, to meet the organization's oversight needs, and to provide critical leadership through the governance function. Working in the generative mode, boards engage in robust dialogue and work collaboratively with CEOs and other staff leaders to develop common narratives, adapt to environmental changes, and set the course for their organizations.

Collectively, the writings and research of McCambridge, Morrison & Salipante, and Chait et al provide what might be described as a "higher conception" of board roles and responsibilities. Generally, these different conceptions call for boards to move beyond providing fiduciary oversight and strategizing around logistical issues in order to develop common understandings of board roles, raise and address large and long-term organizational issues, and incorporate wider swaths of stakeholders into the governance process. While each of these authors provide a firm rationale and anecdotal evidence to support their call for such an approach, there is not yet a pool of evidence that shows these approaches to be more effective for boards of any type. Yet, these visions of governance raise the possibility that there may be ways for boards to better support their schools or organizations than the traditionally acknowledged prescriptive literature on non-profit governance suggests.

### **In Context: Charter Schools in Philadelphia**

This study uses the city of Philadelphia as a sampling pool to look more closely at the issue of charter school governance. Before considering the role of charter school boards within the city of Philadelphia, it is important to briefly look at the historical evolution and growth of charter schools in the city, the policy environment in which this growth has occurred, as well as the prevailing laws and espoused principles and guidelines that have helped steer charter school governance. It is within this context that all of the schools studied as part of this project originated and have operated.

#### *Policy Context for Charter School Approval*

Since Pennsylvania first passed charter school legislation in 1997, the city of Philadelphia has seen the approval of a steady stream of charter schools. This collection of charter schools (62 at the beginning of the 2008-2009 school year) is diverse in the grades served, thematic directions, and partnering or sponsoring

organizations. Yet, the growth of charter schools in Philadelphia has been overshadowed, at times, by other efforts at public school reform. The most significant during this time was the 2001 state takeover of the School District of Philadelphia. As a result of this takeover, the existing school board was disbanded and replaced by a 5-member School Reform Commission (SRC). In exchange for this increased oversight, the state legislature directed additional funds towards the District's schools, with much of the money directed specifically to new reform ideas. This has included experiments in privatization, contracting, and university partnerships. In recent years, much attention has been focused upon these new and unique reform measures. However, during this time, the SRC has also continued to review charter applications and approve new charter schools on a steady basis, adding an average of approximately 6 new charter schools each year since the takeover occurred.

#### *Debates over Funding*

Charter schools have proliferated in Philadelphia despite the School District's insistence that the approval of new schools continues to drain funds from its coffers. As School District supporters argue, it is unable to fully capitalize on decreasing student enrollment in its schools as a result of charter schools because it is not always possible to make subsequent cuts in staff or facilities when relatively small numbers of students leave for other schools. (e.g. a class of 22 students and a class of 25 students each require at least one teacher, and a school housing 20 less students is unlikely to be able to reduce its monthly electric bill.) From the perspective of charter school supporters, the state and the School District's systems for funding charter schools (with funding allocated primarily based upon a per-pupil funding formula) is unfair to charter schools, as funds are removed by the District for a variety of back-office services, and add-on funds (such as federal or private grant monies) may not be included in the base of funds from which the per-pupil allocation is drawn. Because of this, charter school advocates argue, charter schools receive a substantially smaller percentage of per-pupil funds than their District counter-parts while also having to rely on private money and limited government grants to finance the purchase or rental of school facilities. Regardless of the merit of these parties' various arguments, what has evolved and persisted since the charter law's inception is an atmosphere of distrust that has led, at times, to frustration and antagonism between School District supporters (including District employees) and charter school advocates (including charter school Board and staff members).

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"making sense" of problems and situations, noting important environmental cues, and thinking retrospectively about past events.

As public institutions, most charter schools must adhere to most of the same federal and state laws and regulations as other schools. These requirements have increased with the passage of No Child Left Behind and other federal laws. These regulations often require charter schools, which in states like Pennsylvania are technically independent school districts, to compile data, to provide timely information, and to file a substantial amount of paperwork. This paperwork may include everything from collecting and reporting student enrollment data or test scores to submitting information for federal free-lunch programs or information as required by state or federal special education regulations. In traditional public school systems, some of these required duties may be fulfilled by a central district office. Philadelphia charter schools, however, must submit much of this information independently. As the authorizer for most city charter schools, the School District may also impose its own regulatory or administrative demands on charter schools, including the requirement of intermittent reports and the provision of timely data. Together, these requirements and regulations place a heavy administrative burden on Philadelphia charter schools. The historic atmosphere of non-cooperation between the School District and these schools has added to this burden. Whereas school districts and other charter school authorizers in different states may be viewed as “partners” who facilitate these administrative processes for their schools, the School District of Philadelphia is generally viewed by charter school employees and advocates as contributing to this burden more than easing it.

The School District’s Office of Charter Schools has historically been composed of only one or two professionals with minimal administrative support. Therefore, it has been difficult for the office to provide support, guidance, oversight, or supervision of city charter schools. (Woodall, 2009) Instead, the School District has relied primarily upon the 5-year renewal process as its primary vehicle for monitoring charter schools, with the School Board and now the SRC making final decisions about charter schools’ fates.

It is within such a policy and political environment that Philadelphia charter schools have developed and proliferated. The Pennsylvania charter laws provide only a minimal amount of direction to charter schools around the area of governance, while the School District has provided, on paper, an evolving set of guidelines and requirements for new charter schools through its application process.

## **Research Methodology**

The research conducted for this study employed a two-pronged design, incorporating a mix of research methods. The first prong of this research consisted of a questionnaire designed to elicit basic facts and knowledge about charter school boards. The second prong consisted of six case studies of charter schools with a mix of shared and unique characteristics. This case study portion of the research project delved more deeply into the workings of charter school boards and attempted to generate hypotheses and further questions about how these boards act and interact within the charter school model.

### **Research Phase 1: Questionnaires**

The first phase of this research consisted of a 7-page questionnaire that was self-administered by the school heads of Philadelphia charter schools serving children in grades K-8 during the 2007-2008 school year. For each school, the administrator with primary responsibility for the general day-to-day management of the school was asked to complete the questionnaire. An abbreviated questionnaire was also developed and utilized in order to gather a limited amount of information from charter school heads who expressed an inability or unwillingness to complete the initial questionnaire.

#### *Sampling*

The sampling pool for the questionnaire was all 31 Philadelphia charter schools serving students in grades K-8 that had been in existence for three or more years at the start of the 2007-2008 school year. Schools that had been in operation for less than three years were excluded to move the focus of the research away from schools in the initial, start-up phase of their existence in order to better focus on schools as they address the unique sets of issues facing more mature charter schools.

### **Research Phase 2: Case Studies**

The second phase of this research consisted of case studies of 6 Philadelphia charter schools representing a diversity of characteristics.

### *Sampling Method*

Case study schools were chosen based upon their variation within a limited number of key characteristics. These characteristics included:

- Schools with founding administrators and board chairs and schools with non-founding administrators and board chairs
- Schools with and without EMO or institutional partner involvement
- Performance as determined by AYP
- Schools at different stages of the re-chartering process
- A range of years in existence

In gaining the cooperation of schools, some criteria were more difficult to fill than others. CEOs and Boards serving multiple schools under a multi-school model reported being extremely busy or were unresponsive to requests for participation or discussion. Schools struggling to meet AYP and schools serving students in extremely low-income neighborhoods were also less likely to respond.

Because of the aforementioned difficulties in gaining access to certain schools, the case study sample for this project is biased toward Philadelphia charter schools that have managed to regularly meet AYP, have greater access to private funding than the average city school, and draw from parent bases with greater incomes and levels of education. As the research shows, however, there still exists great diversity amongst the case study boards, in how they are structured, how they conduct their work, and in the different challenges and obstacles they face.

### *Data Collection*

During the case study phase of research, the following research methods were utilized:

- *Interviews with 2- 3 board members from each school:* Interviews were conducted with Board Chairs, parent board members, founding members, non-founding members, and Board members with a diversity of careers and experiences.
- *Interviews with school heads of each school:* In some cases, additional staff members with Board involvement or contact were included.
- *Review of school documents:* Relevant documents included board meeting minutes, board agendas, academic reports and updates, charter renewal applications, and PA school report cards.

Most often, initial contact with a school was made with either the CEO or the Board Chair who helped solicit the involvement of other participants.

### **Findings and Analysis**

Twelve full-length questionnaires and five abbreviated questionnaires (for a total of 17 questionnaires and an overall response rate of 55%) were received from school-level leaders. After an initial analysis of this data, six schools were selected for participation in the case study phase of the research. For the purposes of this report these schools have been given the following aliases, which were assigned randomly and not based upon any characteristics of the schools themselves.

#### Sample Schools

Adams  
Jefferson  
Lincoln  
Madison  
Roosevelt  
Washington

Data from both the survey and case study interviews revealed a number of findings about charter school governance. The following over-arching research themes that were illuminated through the research are discussed in this section:

- 1) Patterns of Board Growth, Change and Evolution
- 2) Founders and Organizational Origins
- 3) Board and Staff Relations
- 4) Accountability and Pressure at the Governance and Leadership Levels
- 5) Role of the External Policy Environment

#### **1) Patterns of Board Growth, Change and Evolution**

From this study, charter school boards in Philadelphia can be viewed as evolving entities that continue to change in form and function far beyond their start-up years. In fact, of the six case study schools (which had been in existence between 4 and 9 years at the time of the study) all are continuing to adapt to changing circumstances. In some cases boards are responding to external pressures, such as the need to improve test scores. Other schools' boards are evolving to meet internally set goals and needs, such as to raise money or expand their programs. Boards are also changing and evolving because of other internal factors, such as board member fatigue or

## Possible Triggers for Board Changes

an internal acknowledgement that the board has become stagnant in its thinking or actions.

*Do charter school boards evolve in a similar way to non-profit boards?*

A review of the six case study charter school boards indicates that charter schools likely evolve in a similar fashion to non-profit boards, as has been described by Greiner, Wood and others who have studied the evolution of these bodies. Evidence from these schools indicates that most boards begin as extremely hands-on, micromanaging boards that serve any role necessary, from governance to management to performing the day-to-day functions of the organization. Numerous board and staff members from different schools describe how, in the earliest days of the school, board members did everything from recruit students, clean buildings, or pick up furniture on behalf of the school. This description matches those provided by Wood, Mathiasen, and others of the prototypical “start-up”, “organizing” or “founding” board.

Most charter boards soon move beyond such extreme hands-on activities, but may still perform a large number of tasks typically ascribed to management, such as selecting curriculum, producing financial documents, or interjecting themselves – sometimes inappropriately in the eyes of staff - into hiring and other personnel issues. A number of board members from multiple schools report a continued struggle as boards attempt to move past this stage of micromanaging or super-managing. Most board members and staff members interviewed recognize that there is a thin line between supporting the CEO or other staff and overstepping boundaries, although this “line” may vary from school to school and from situation to situation. In many schools there may also be too much work, of any kind, for one person to complete, necessitating a more hands-on, active board role.

*What triggers changes in board composition or board behavior?*

Charter school boards appear to change and evolve over time, and often these changes are triggered by a realization or an incident that occurs within the organization. Looking at what causes these boards to change one finds a multitude of reasons that may overlap or occur at different times within each organization.

- Failure to perform as judged by outside measures (e.g. low test scores)
- Failure to perform up to internal expectations
- Leadership and staff turnover
- Expressed lack of purpose at board level
- Low board participation or turnout
- Internal Board turmoil, strife or disagreement
- Inability to monitor financials
- Need or desire to increase fundraising
- Change or looming change in Board leadership
- Desire to grow or expand

In some cases, more than one of these triggers has occurred or is occurring at one time within a school, and these triggers occur at different times in different schools. While some triggers are more likely to occur as a school matures (e.g. desire to grow or expand), most of these triggers can occur at any time during an organization’s existence. While some of these triggers are less likely to occur once a school or its board “stabilizes”, there is little evidence that any of the charter school boards in this sample have reached a point where they are inoculated to most of these concerns.

*Is there a destination point for charter school boards?*

Certainly there are some charter school boards that appear to demonstrate more productive, supportive, and helpful behavior than others. However, there does not yet appear to be one or more models for charter school board composition, structure, or behavior, either in the literature on charter school governance or as modeled by any of the case study schools. The ideal board role may differ, in fact, depending on whose view is taken, be it a board member or staff member. The following quotations provide a comparison of some of the responses from participants to questions about the “ideal” role for a charter school board:

*I think like I see any board's role, non-profit, even corporate, except with corporate you're looking at profits. But, I mean, you have to look at what is the school supposed to be producing? What are its outputs supposed to be? And then creating the infrastructure.*

*Staff Member/Administrator*

*I think success for the board would be having the resources to support the administration and the accomplishment of the mission of the school. So that when they are needing support then we're able to provide it, when they're needing direction we're able to provide that in a very coherent and clear way. And, I also think it's the board's responsibility to hold them accountable and so, if the goals aren't being met it's the board's responsibility to say, "listen, this is not satisfactory."*

*Board Member*

*Well the ideal role is to be involved, but respect the person who is in charge that you hired to do their job. That's the ideal. Now you may, out of nine people, may get five people that see it that way and four the other. But I do think that if you're gonna hire someone and you respect that hire, then you have to give that [person] the opportunity to do just that, run the school.*

*Charter School CEO*

*The most important thing is to know where you're at and where you're going. When the board sits down and looks at what's on the table today, we have to not only look at what's here, but we have to look at what's going to happen 5 years down the road, 10 years down the road. I may not be here; I may be long gone and whatever, but we have to think ahead. And sometimes that's difficult because you're so concerned with this piece of paper. Well, okay, fine. We adopt this piece of paper, what's going to happen five years down the road?*

*Board Member*

Looking at these answers collectively one can see a number of similarities, as well as some key differences from answer to answer. First, there appears to be a mix of

short and long-term priorities. While charter school boards may ideally be looking forward to long-term goals and strategies, there is also a great need for them to provide immediate and clear oversight and guidance. However, as the CEO's response indicates, an ideal charter school board may also need to respect the authority and qualifications of its staff members. Two concepts that appear to run through multiple responses are those of accountability for results or outputs, and providing support – in the form of guidance or infrastructure – to the staff in order to meet the goals of the school.

The fact that each of the boards studied is continuing to seek ways to improve the composition, structure, and/or role of the board is evidence, alone, that none of the boards studied is populated by members who believe that they have charter school governance "figured out."

There are a significant number of board and staff members who express a desire for their charter school boards to act in "the way boards are supposed to act," or in some other prescribed manner. Pressed to explain from where these notions of proper board behavior arise, most board members point to the traditional role as described in the non-profit board literature, to their experiences on other non-profit boards, or to a more vague sense of what board membership and governance entails.

Confidence and conviction around what a board should be doing and how it is supposed to be operating may help a board member or staff member act more strongly or decisively in their role. However, such confidence may restrict individual board members, boards as a whole, or school leaders from deeply exploring their roles and adapting to the circumstances that may be affecting their schools.

*What roles do individual board members play?*

Most of the boards studied have made intentional efforts at different times to diversify and broaden the skill sets of individual members of their boards. For some schools these efforts were made at a very early stage of operation as an immediate response to school needs. Other boards have recognized these needs over time, with a small number not addressing these needs until their fifth or sixth year of operation. In some cases, a lack of board expertise in areas such as finance, law, or human resources is moderated by staff members with a strong skill set in these areas.

Considering the different roles played by the charter school board members in light of Widmer's categories, we see a mix from school-to-school. Every

school in the case study sample appears to have some mix of trustee, worker, and expert board members. In some schools there are a wide range of experts such as lawyers, finance experts, educators and real estate specialists to help provide guidance and support around areas critical to their school's success. Other schools are focused on bringing in board members to fulfill the role of trustee by providing general guidance and oversight for school staff. Only one school has had a significant presence of figureheads on its board, and it has made efforts to move away from populating its board in such a manner in order to better serve the needs of the school. Representatives are also rare on the boards of the schools studied, although board members from a number of schools expressed a desire to increase the number of local politicians and representatives of community and city organizations to help them better navigate the city's political waters or develop stronger ties within the surrounding civic and cultural communities.

A number of the case study schools have been focused on developing boards with deeper skill sets, or a large number of "experts" as Widmer would describe them, to help their boards navigate the variety of challenges and obstacles that charter school boards must face. The case study portion of this research further confirms findings from the questionnaire phase of the research that the "experts" typically sought for charter school boards are often professionals with a background in law, finance, human resources, or real estate/facilities. Case study respondents also expressed a desire for greater fundraising expertise on their boards, a desire expressed by CEOs and other school leaders in the questionnaires.

## 2) Organizational Origins

In many ways the future paths and struggles of charter schools and charter school boards are strongly related to their origins. Who designed the school and why? What was the political atmosphere surrounding their creation? Was the process a group process or driven by one or two people? These are all critical questions that appear to have tremendous implications for schools as they mature.

### *Culture of Origination*

The charter schools studied were all designed by a small group of people (with one person often times at the forefront) possessing a strong idea of why they were opening a school and what they hoped it might accomplish. In some schools, however, it is apparent that all members of the founding group or board did not share the same ideas about what the goals of the school were,

who the school was designed to serve, or how the school might be governed at the time of founding. While these groups were able to agree on a mission as written in the charter, in some cases disagreements or differences in understanding of the school's purpose quickly emerged. The following quotation highlights how misconceptions or differing viewpoints at the time of one school's founding bled into governance and management:

*[A]t the beginning in particular there were a lot of issues with some board members about the business and management of the school and that was difficult... I think it was a personality issue and that there may have been some - some board members had some goals, some individual goals, personal goals that maybe had been getting in the way of their duties as a board member at that point. So that's my belief and at that point within about two years, then the school, the board really splintered, and it was around the support of the administration. One group really wanted to look for another administrator, and another faction wanted to support the current administrator at the time.*

*Board Member*

Fundamental disagreements about the purposes of a school at the board level can have a powerful effect on a school. In fact, in both the Roosevelt and Washington schools, board level disagreements around the purposes of the school and the beneficiaries of its mission led to damaging board conflict that hindered the work of their boards and threatened the stability of board and staff.

Strong conceptions of board roles and board membership at the time of founding were influential in other schools as well. In the Madison School, a culture of board non-engagement fostered by a Board Chair who had assumed all governance responsibilities led to a board that was eventually deemed too uncommitted and too lax to tackle the school's problems. A similar situation occurred at Jefferson, where heavy staff involvement and leadership fostered the emergence of an unengaged board that was eventually deemed unsuited to meet the school's needs. In schools like Adams and Lincoln, the extremely hands-on involvement of board members in starting the school established a consistent culture of over-involvement and micromanaging that required staff to set boundaries and clarify limits for their board.

While all of the case study schools have, thus far, survived any disagreements about the nature of the school

at the board level, and most have managed to move beyond these problems over time, a handful still wrestle with these seeds of discontent that were planted before the school even opened.

### *The Continuing Role of Founders*

Founders continue to play an influential role in many of the schools studied, at both the staff and board levels. In fact, founding members are still involved at all 6 of the case study schools as Board Chairs, board members, and as CEOs. Regardless of their title and role, charter school founders who are still actively involved in their schools tend to be the most influential members of their organizations. As one founding Board Chair states:

*Boards run one of two ways. It depends who the founder is. I'm the founder. So our board is stronger than the school.*

#### *Board Chair*

In many of these schools the board is wrestling with strategies to phase out founders from key leadership roles without suffering from a loss of school quality or mission.

In the two schools in which founders are Board Chairs, these leaders influence a wide range of decisions and are the driving forces behind school strategies, often times participating in management-level activities. In the schools where founders are CEOs or CEO/Principals, these staff members are somewhat reluctant to accept strong board oversight and very wary of Board interference in day-to-day management activities.

In each of these schools, however, an internal desire to moderate the role and influence of these founders has led to changes at the board level. These changes include the development of succession plans, the modification of these founders' job titles or roles, and increased board support for their work. In each of these schools, board members and staff members prefer continued involvement, but also a reduced role, for the founders in the future. Finding an appropriate successor is a daunting task and one that weighs heavily on board members' minds. One board member discusses the succession planning for the Board Chair and founder of his school, as follows:

*Well, the key word there is "over time." And we've talked about it at the Governance*

*Committee... So we said, we have got to find a way to transition him. In fact, I don't believe he expected to stay as active as long as he has, but nothing's been done to prepare the organization otherwise. So we actually talked to [him] and got a commitment from him on when he's going to drop off the board... it's just not going to happen until we have an engaged and very active board. We're gonna do succession planning on the board. We're gonna do succession planning on the leadership team. So we're gonna phase this in... Now, it's not that [he's] going to disappear, but he'll take a much more diminished role once he feels comfortable, we all feel comfortable, that we've got a sustaining board of directors.*

#### *Board Member*

The case study portion of this research indicates that schools with ineffective founders at the board level, or founders whose ideas of the school proved to be an ill fit with the realities once the school opened may have mostly voluntarily left their positions or have been replaced. However, many founders that have successfully guided their schools into an adolescent age are still in positions of authority and, in many cases, continuing to provide important leadership to their schools. Despite whether these founders are contributing positively or negatively to the growth and success of their schools, the case studies find that efforts appear to be underway to replace or phase out most of these founding figures.

### **3) Board and Staff Relations**

The nature of relationships developed and maintained between board members and staff are a key component of any school's system of governance and management. Because many charter schools are small and financially-challenged, especially in their early years, most of the sample schools began with a small board that supervised the work of one unitary executive, often with the title of CEO/Principal. For many schools, establishing the framework for a dual CEO/Principal position has been a challenge, as the jobs of CEO and Principal each require a unique skill-set that very few people possess. Regardless of how these positions are structured and filled, however, another important factor in effective governance is the ability of board and staff to share information freely and efficiently.

#### *Challenges of the Dual CEO/Principal Role*

It can be a challenge for Philadelphia charter schools to find one or more people to fill the chief leadership roles at the school level. While titles may be different from school to school and over time, two distinct roles that must be filled at each school are that of the CEO and that of the Principal. While there is significant overlap in these roles and while each school may define the responsibilities of each position differently, most participants viewed the CEO role as a more business-oriented management role – including responsibilities that include finance, real estate, and fundraising - and viewed the Principal role as one that revolved primarily around managing the work of the teaching staff, directing the academic program, and hiring new teachers. In many schools, primarily for financial reasons, these roles are combined into one CEO/Principal position, although the actual title may not include both terms.

Even in schools in which a dual CEO/Principal has been successful, board and staff members find this to be an extremely challenging role for one person to fill. This is because the role demands an enormous amount of time, energy, and responsibility and requires a person with a diverse and unique combination of skill sets that is virtually impossible to find and difficult to develop. Having one person fill this role can work out for a period of time, but the board may need to provide more hands-on support to fill in gaps and ease the workload on the CEO/Principal. The following statements reflect the difficulties inherent in performing these varied tasks and in finding or training someone to do so:

*Interviewer: Just from looking at it from slightly afar, is that a do-able dual role, do you think? Is it possible for one person to do that?*

*Board Member: Let me tell you. I don't know. I don't have kids. This is my first involvement in education. And I've wondered that myself. The skill set and personal interests to make somebody a successful principal is not anywhere near the same as somebody who's going to be a CEO of an organization.*

*Interview with Board Member*

*[T]he position of being both principal and the CEO is a very useful combination, but it's also quite insane, especially if you're starting a school up and especially if you've not had experience doing it before.*

*Charter School CEO  
(formerly CEO/Principal)*

*I'm both CEO and Principal. So, it was impossible to do everything...*

*CEO/Principal*

*In reality, whether you call me a coordinator of curriculum and instruction, Academic Director, or CEO, my role is the disciplinarian, the Dean of Students, the fundraiser, the person that does all the marketing, does all the Web site development, also is here to support the staff, is responsible for all the guidelines and mandates, is the person that interfaces with the Office of Charter Schools and the Department of Education. So, without having any of those layers of people that I think that you really, truly need in the school, you wind up wearing so many, many hats, and I think that you said it best when you said all the slashes that wind up next to your name. The smaller the school, the more slashes.*

*Charter School Administrator*

These interview excerpts reveal a variety of characteristics of the dual CEO/Principal role. First, there do not appear to be any schools that would not choose to break out these two roles if given the opportunity within their budget. There also appears to be consensus that it is virtually impossible to find someone with all of the necessary skills to fill these two roles fully. Finally, the “make do” approach of many of the individuals filling a dual CEO/Principal role is envisioned, often, as a temporary arrangement that will eventually be resolved as a school’s enrollment grows or when additional funding sources are tapped.

While the dual CEO/Principal role is a difficult one to sustain, separating these roles may also create some challenges for schools’ boards as they seek to provide guidance and oversight. Since very few board members from the charter schools studied have any experience in K-12 education, many appear to desire the hiring of a CEO who can then, in turn, provide guidance and oversight to a principal or school-based leader. Such an arrangement can pull board members further away from direct involvement in issues such as student achievement and school performance. However, such a proposition rests on the assumption that the person filling the CEO position can adequately judge the work of a principal, and that the board is capable of finding an effective CEO and

evaluating the CEO's performance in selecting, managing and evaluating other school-based leaders.

### *Information-Sharing Systems*

One aspect of the board/staff relationship that appears to be a hallmark of more functional relationships is the existence of processes, both formal and informal, for information-sharing between board members and staff. In some cases these exchanges may take place primarily between the Board Chair and the CEO, but other pathways and vehicles of communication may also be helpful and help to alleviate pressure or moderate disagreements.

For example, at the Roosevelt School the chief administrator supplies his board with a constant stream of information, as he describes in the following passage:

*I do a lot of stuff by email. A lot of the successes that are happening, a lot of the opportunities that we have, any grants that we get, a lot of that is just sent by email, just to update them. One of the things I don't want my Board to ever say to me is, "I wish you would have told us." I give them more information than they may need, I can't read it for them, but I give them the information and say to them, you know, I'm happy to have your feedback, if you look it over and want to call me. I am available to them 24-7.*

*Roosevelt Chief Administrator*

Board members at Roosevelt appreciate this continual stream of information as it allows them to keep informed of school activities and provide proper guidance and insight. This flow of information also appears to help build trust between board members and school staff, as evidenced by the following interview exchange:

*Board member: I do request information. Basically, it's like who to connect with. But often times he will volunteer information, and I believe that I have come to find it's useful information. I read the newsletter that he has signed up to receive that's promoted by an outside, third-party company. It seems to be very relevant to what we need... I mean, he seems to have more of a worldly concept of opinion. He's definitely enthusiastic and passionate about the kids...*

*Interviewer: So, it sounds like you're satisfied with the amount of information that comes up to you at the board level about the school?*

*Board member: Yeah. And also, I think, if I ever have any questions he would be forthcoming in getting me the answers. That's just a feeling that I've developed about him.*

*Roosevelt Board Member*

Positive board and staff relations at the Lincoln School have developed over time as a result of open and honest communications between the Board Chair and the school's CEO. While these conversations can be difficult, they appear to have created an atmosphere of trust and respect for each other's work that allows problems to be addressed at an early stage. As the school's CEO explains:

*I cannot deny [the board] the opportunity to come in and discuss what's going on in the school. They're ultimately the people who are the governing body of the school. Granted, they're not the managers, but they certainly have the ability to come in here and take a look and see what's going on... I'm not uncomfortable with them coming in and asking questions about what's going on. I find that the more transparent you are with this group and myself, the better the relationship.*

*Lincoln CEO*

Conversely, board members from the Madison School have recognized that poor communication and information-sharing between board and staff is a critical problem that is standing in the way of the school's greater success. While the board receives regular reports on academic performance from the school's CEO/Principal, there is little evidence of regular, informal information-sharing between the CEO/Principal and the board. Most board/staff discussions take place solely between the Board Chair and the CEO/Principal. Unfortunately, this relationship is strained with little evidence of trust between the two parties. While one board member with a human resources background is working to improve communications between the two parties, the difficulty of this relationship continues to be a detriment to board/staff relationships and is likely keeping the board and school from operating at their highest capacities.

Continual communication, both formal and informal, seems to be critical to the development and maintenance of productive relationships between board

and staff leadership in charter schools. Representatives of the schools studied during the case study phase of research appear cognizant of this. In schools where communication is fluid, participants acknowledge the importance of information flow and communication. In those schools where information flow is strained, leaders show concern and a commitment to improving communication in the future.

#### **4) Accountability and Pressure at the Governance and Leadership Levels**

As described in the literature review, charter schools are subject to a wide variety of accountability pressures from many different sources, both external and internal, formal and informal. Within school organizations leaders feel pressure applied from different sources depending on their role, be it Board Chair, board member, CEO, Principal, or other staff. What is also clear from the research is that different schools feel very different levels of pressure or scrutiny from different sources depending on their school's circumstances, mission or goals.

##### *External and Internal Accountability Pressures Differ by School*

Both the survey and case study phases of this research support the idea that the various sources, paths and intensity of accountability pressures vary from one charter school to another. While some similar external measures are applied to each school on a regular basis, such as AYP or the District's renewal process, the weights and consequences applied to these measures and the amount of time or energy devoted to meeting these measures is variable from school to school. In addition, different schools exert different internal accountability pressures on members of their organization at different times. Therefore, while one school may dedicate a significant amount of resources towards raising test scores in anticipation of its upcoming charter renewal process, another school may have little or no concern about renewal or meeting AYP, instead focusing upon meeting internally set student performance goals. Among the case study schools, most schools studied were engaged in a process of continual internal expectation setting, with the drive to be an "elite" charter school often the goal. Yet, the driving force of these internal pressures often varied, from CEO to Board or Board Chair to parents. Test scores were usually the primary measure for determining success or failure, although external recognition and awards or financial stability were also taken into consideration.

A number of case study respondents reflected upon the impact that No Child Left Behind and associated performance and test-based accountability measures have had, and continue to have, on their schools. For schools that are struggling to meet the requirements of NCLB, such as AYP, these measures are an overriding force. As the founding CEO/Principal of one sample school notes:

*[W]hen I started this, or when the dream was born, it was before No Child Left Behind. And I'm not anti-testing, but I am anti this. This, I mean, I knew it when it first reared its ugly head it was the end of education, I think, as we know it.*

For this school, which has always aimed to implement a special, developmentally-based curricular approach, the poor performance of the school's students on standardized tests has forced the school leadership to re-assess the mission and goals of the school, alter the school's approach to teaching and learning, and increasingly focus its resources on preparing students for these tests. Similarly, another sample school was forced to abandon an alternative curriculum around which its academic program was focused because it was an ill fit with the state tests used to judge AYP. Increasing restrictions on teacher quality and preparation have also posed obstacles for this school, as the Board Chair notes:

*Board Chair: I'm afraid the charter schools are going to lose the image and intention of the law because of the impediments placed in their path.*

*Interviewer: How do you view the original intention?*

*Board Chair: The original intention was to develop schools that worked at a lower cost for more kids that were creative and innovative. Right now once again we're back to Einstein not being able to teach at a charter school because he's not highly qualified. That's not what charters are about.*

While most of the case study schools face little immediate threat of severe sanction because of No Child Left Behind, various aspects of the legislation affect the decision-making processes and approaches to governance at many schools. In schools where NCLB sanctions are unlikely, board members and staff remain vigilant and devote time to ensuring that requirements are met, but do not feel intense pressure or stress because of them. For these schools, NCLB is often described as a nuisance. In

schools like Jefferson, however, where NCLB sanctions have already been imposed and threaten the school's future, the pressure to meet expectations is enormous. In the following exchange, the CEO/Principal of Jefferson School describes this pressure, as well as its potential negative consequences:

*As the CEO of the school that may flounder, or, you know, not continue to exist because we didn't make AYP, you know, then I have a moral responsibility. So it's, you know, the pressure is on to make AYP and personally I feel that in any system where there's pressure it becomes the pecking order. The board is on me, I'm on my teachers, my teachers are on my children. And if there is enough pressure the whole thing shuts down because people don't function well under that kind of sustained pressure, I don't think.*

Supporters of high-stakes accountability systems might argue that for some schools the only way to achieve results is to apply pressure. However, as this school's leader suggests, such pressure might also overwhelm a school's capacity at both the board and leadership levels. What is not up for debate is that these pressures can be extremely strong in urban schools struggling to meet AYP and other high-stakes performance measures.

#### *Parent Involvement in Charter School Governance*

One challenge for a number of sample schools is to engage parents in a meaningful way at the governance and leadership levels. For almost every school in the sample, it has been a challenge to include parents in this process in a manner that avoids tokenism and does not highlight skill-differentials between parent and non-parent board members. In schools that have a large number of professional or elite parents, such as Washington, this disparity is less of an issue. However, even in such cases the parent board members may represent a small and exclusive slice of the parent population. In some schools with one parent member – often mandated by the school's by-laws – that parent's role on the board may be explicitly defined or limited to a type of parent "reconnaissance" role. Even if such a role is not written into the bylaws, parent board members may be given this impression or draw this conclusion from their interactions with other board members.

A number of schools have other vehicles, such as Parent Advisory Councils or other parent groups, to provide guidance and information to their governing boards. However, these groups may struggle to sustain themselves or may become dominated by a small number

of parents, causing them to poorly represent overall parent opinion.

On the whole, the mood of experienced charter school board chairs and other board members appears to be one of skepticism toward active parent involvement in charter school governance. The following comments highlight board members' and staff members' desires for parent involvement coupled with a wariness about finding parents with the skill sets and approaches to serve in a governance capacity:

*We do have a parent. We've had two parents traditionally. Right now we have one. We're looking for another parent to bring on. But the same way that you need the right board member, I think you need the right parent and I think having that insight from that parent has been awesome because that parent is able to tell us a teacher is not working out or whatever. Again you have to have the right parent because these things can be very sensitive.*

*Board Member*

*[I]m sure that as these organizations evolve, even the ones that are the most parent-centric will become less parent-centric over time, just because they will. Because they're gonna have to get more professional and you can't have all this like weird behavior going on. And, I guess, and that's the bottom line... You know, you can't have conflicts of interest and to me a conflict of interest is as much about being a parent as it is about being a vendor.*

*Board Chair*

*Um, it takes more time to do things with [parents] because they don't have the skill sets but when - once you get them understanding, yes, very definitely.*

*Board Chair*

These comments reflect significant levels of doubt about the capability of parents – particularly non-professional parents – of providing the skills and oversight necessary to govern complicated organizations like charter schools. While many board members would like to increase parent involvement, the time commitment and business-oriented skills necessary for governance preclude – in their eyes – parents from taking a more active role.

## 5) Role of the Local Policy Environment

Philadelphia charter schools have been founded and have matured in a very loose and amorphous policy environment which continues to have a tremendous effect on the decisions that boards make and their ability to conduct their work. The following factors have framed, and continue to frame, the direction of Philadelphia charter schools and their boards.

*routinely overstepped her role as Board president by making critical decisions without soliciting input from the other Board members or informing them of her decisions...The lack of communication that existed among the Board members, as well as the absence of appropriate delegation of responsibilities throughout the Board, helped create an environment in which [the offending staff members] were able to act with the apparent authority of the Board, without the Board's knowledge.*

### *The Threat of Scandal and Impropriety*

For a number of sample schools, fear of scandal or impropriety on the part of board members dominates board training efforts and is a focus during board recruitment and orientation.

Fear of scandal and impropriety is certainly a justified emotion for charter school board members and leaders. Nationally, a large percentage of charter school closings have been done on the basis of financial mismanagement or impropriety in the view of authorizers. In addition, recent scandals involving a number of Philadelphia charter schools have dominated much of the local news surrounding city charter schools for much of the past year.

In the spring of 2008 the *Philadelphia Inquirer* published an investigative story that revealed that the former and current CEOs of Philadelphia Academy Charter School, one of the city's more successful and popular charter schools, were receiving more money in direct salaries and defrayed payments through affiliated non-profit entities than many urban superintendents. Further investigation into this situation unearthed a variety of complicated land and lease arrangements, as well, that also entwined another Philadelphia charter school, Northwood Academy, into the investigation. A report commissioned by the Philadelphia Academy board and conducted by a prominent city law firm found that the board's lack of effective oversight contributed significantly to creating an environment ripe for scandal. (Ballard Spahr, 2008) As the report notes:

*[Philadelphia Academy's] Board also did not operate effectively or serve as an effective overseer of the school. According to [the Board Chair at the time of the scandal], there were many occasions on which the outside obligations of board members prevented them from participating in decisions that she believed needed to be made immediately. From the perspective of other Board members, in contrast, [the Board Chair]*

This excerpt highlights a number of issues and themes that are evident in sample school boards, including poor exchange of information, inadequate role definition, and the over-extension of board members. When one of these issues occurs at the board level, the schools studied have typically managed to compensate for or overcome these problems. However, in a school like Philadelphia Academy where multiple problems mix with bad intentions, a school is likely to find itself in great trouble.

The School Reform Commission – Philadelphia's central governing body for public schools – voted not to renew another school, Germantown Settlement Charter School, in April 2008 after discovering a number of budgetary improprieties at the school, including operating deficits greater than \$400,000 per year, unaccounted-for funds, and conflicts of interest between the school and affiliated non-profits.

A number of board members and CEOs mentioned these incidents, specifically, as another obstacle in achieving their school's goals or focusing the work of their boards. These incidents have also refocused the attention of board members, staff members, and schools' legal representatives on issues of legality, conflict of interest, and fiduciary oversight when orienting new board members and training veteran board members. While some schools appear to have been moving beyond basic issues of fiduciary responsibility and liability in developing and conducting board training activities, scandals such as that at Philadelphia Academy are likely to ensure that a primary focus remains on these fundamental concerns.

### *Sunshine Laws*

Under Pennsylvania charter legislation, charter school boards must conduct virtually all of their business in a public and transparent manner. Commonly known as the "Sunshine Laws", these regulations require charter school boards to publicly advertise all meetings, hold all votes and make all procedural decisions in a public forum, provide board meeting agendas and minutes upon request,

and allow for open public discussion at all meetings. Cumulatively, board members see the application of these laws to their work as a mixed blessing. Some board members see the openness of their work as a critical component to the democratic and public nature of their work and a special aspect of charter schools. Other board members find these regulations unwieldy, limiting, and a detriment to effective governance on behalf of their parents and students, as evidenced by the following quotations:

*Well, as I understand it, all of our meetings are open to the public. So, we tend to be mindful of that and documentation of those meetings are open to public scrutiny, so they can be a little bit formal in the sense that...here's a resolution...the matter is voted upon...next one, next one. And so we haven't had a private, executive session yet, but I feel it's coming. We're going to need to figure out a way to do closed-door executive sessions. So, it's a little cumbersome.*

*Board Member*

*[O]ne of the things I've said to the Board is that, I would like us to meet occasionally, and just have lunch, individually with Board members, collectively with Board members, away from school, in a setting that is not so pressured, not so worried about what you need to say or how you need to say it. There's not a lot of time for the Board and I to sit, where the Board can just ask those kinds of questions. When you're operating in a fish bowl and the Board wants to be transparent, they're not about to ask questions that might evoke an answer that they're not really comfortable with. So, having opportunities to meet outside of the regular Board meetings and work sessions, I think is extremely valuable. I'd like to do more of it.*

*Board Member*

Most board members, however, recognize both the benefits and drawbacks of these Sunshine Laws and have worked to find ways to effectively govern their schools within these boundaries. Ironically, many boards have been able to operate in an essentially “private” manner while still abiding by the Sunshine Laws because of low parent and community turnout at board meetings and otherwise low public involvement or inquiry into their decisions.

### *The School District of Philadelphia as Authorizer*

Since the establishment of the state's charter legislation, the School District of Philadelphia – the primary authorizer for most city charter schools – has regularly changed its approaches to approving, monitoring, and re-authorizing charter schools. While providing little or no guidance to some new schools, the District has provided helpful assistance or clear direction to others. Renewal procedures have been clear for some schools, while information about the process has been virtually non-existent for others. Asked if the District had provided her school with guidance about her school's upcoming renewal, one administrator replied:

*No. They only have on their website posted still, as far as the last time I looked which was like a week ago, last year's process. They did not have this year's process. I contacted the Charter School Office and our CEO separately contacted the Charter School Office. We had an email from the Charter School Office that said, generally, look on our website and see, and then she, just, in a conversational way, said you should have this, this, this, and this. So we noted that, and we put all those things together. Then it just so happened that our business office manages other charter schools and one of their charter schools was up for renewal, and that school got a letter saying you're going to have your document review audit next week. No previous notice, which is not how the process went last year.*

*Charter School Administrator<sup>2</sup>*

During the charter renewal process, the District has provided some schools with inaccurate information and required vast amounts of data, although some schools report the renewal process as being little more than a formality. The District's Office of Charter Schools has, in recent years, consisted of between one and three staff members<sup>2</sup> with different schools interacting or communicating with different staff representatives more closely than others. The titular head of the charter school office has also changed frequently, with at least three leaders during the last five years.

For charter schools in this sample, the disorganization and inconsistency within the District's

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<sup>2</sup> This interview was conducted in October 2008 and reflects that year's renewal process.

Charter School Office has been both a blessing and a curse. A number of participants noted that their main goal was to avoid contact with the School District whenever possible. Asked about a strategy for working with the District, one respondent answered:

*Um...maintain a low profile...there's no relationship particularly. We haven't done anything wrong, no one's wanted to talk to us. We don't want to talk to people...[]just put your head to the grindstone and do your work and ignore all that stuff unless you sort of have to deal with it. But, that's not to say...I mean we have a lovely relationship with everybody. Everybody's been very nice. But...and there is no Charter Office and there hasn't been a Charter Office for a long time, so...you know, I mean, if someone has an issue they'll call us on the phone.*

*Founding Board Chair*

Most board members expressed relief that the Office was only occasionally interested in or involved with their affairs. In the eyes of many of these charter school representatives, greater Charter Office involvement would most certainly restrict their ability to operate in their preferred manner, take away time from important work, or pose unnecessary obstacles to success.

### *Money, Money, Money*

Representatives from all of the sample schools expressed concern over financial considerations for their school. For some schools, the per-pupil flow of money received from the School District makes it difficult to keep up with District and suburban salary scales, offer a wide array of programs, or provide school leaders with adequate administrative or support staff. This is particularly true for schools with small student enrollments which are unable to take advantage of economies of scale in a way that larger schools can. Some schools also struggle to acquire or maintain adequate facilities within their budgets or are unable to expand their programs because of insufficient physical space. Many schools cite fundraising as the best possible hope for taking their school to the next level and achieving the impact that they have hoped to achieve.

For some charter school representatives, funding issues are a source of stress and anger, as they view charter schools as getting less money than they should because of

the state's formula for funding the schools. As one Board Chair argues:

*The School District of Philadelphia says we cost more than they do even though we only get 0.75 on a dollar. And they keep the other 0.25 for shipping and handling.*

Another school's Board Chair compares her school's funding situation to that of private and suburban schools:

*It's very different because of your revenue stream, I mean. You figure that it's dramatically different from the private school my kids go to. Do you know what I mean? Where parents not only pay ridiculous tuition rates but then are expected to contribute in other ways, and, you know, their annual fund can raise over a million dollars a year. Whereas this is an inner city school where the revenue stream is the per student amount that you get from the city. I think there are opportunities for more grants and that sort of thing, but a lot of granting authorities don't support public schools. So in some ways you're in the worst of both worlds.*

While most schools view tapping additional sources of funding as critical to future success, there is not consensus around who within the organization is responsible for identifying these sources and how. The Board Chair of one school sees fundraising as a critical component of CEO work and hopes to identify, in the future, a CEO who can take on the responsibility for raising additional funds. At other schools, fundraising is seen as a board responsibility, in some cases guiding the composition of the board and definition of its role. As one Board Chair notes:

*[W]e need more financial support, and I think that's ultimately going to be the role of the board. Ultimately... I would like the board to be people who are giving a lot of money every year, and there's that additional source of income to do some of the things that I think we need to do.*

Participants in the questionnaire phase of the research noted fundraising as one of the greatest gaps in board level skill, as well as one of the primary goals of schools' boards in the years ahead. The case study phase of this research reaffirms that schools are focused on raising more money from public and private sources, although few of the schools studied have yet to successfully meet these fundraising goals and many have

yet to develop or implement any significant fundraising plan or develop the board capacity to do so.

### Toward “Higher Conceptions” of Governance

Earlier this report discussed how some recent research and theorizing on non-profit and charter school governance was pointed in the direction of new, “higher” conceptions of the board role and the incorporation of a broader spectrum of stakeholders into the governance process. The case studies offer only glimpses of boards that have the expertise, time, resources and energy to deeply examine their roles or move far beyond providing the traditional forms of oversight or leadership outlined in the prescriptive literature on non-profit governance. While some boards have recently begun to move beyond basic issues of fiduciary and legal oversight, time and resource constraints and different political and environmental factors – such as the Philadelphia Academy scandal – have served to refocus attention on the role of boards as fiduciary and legal overseers. As Chait, Ryan, and Taylor (2005) note, this is a common dilemma for many organizations:

*When these fiduciary alarms sound, nonprofits respond like most individuals faced with an emergency: reflexively. For most of us, no matter how often we have been lectured about the physics of steering into a skid, when we hit the ice, we wrench the wheel in the direction we want to go. For the nonprofit sector, the reflexive response to icy fiduciary roads has been to build and strengthen [boards that focus primarily on fiduciary responsibilities] – on the long-held assumption that fiduciary boards deliver the best governance. (p. 34)*

For most of the case study schools, the threat of not being renewed by the School District or of receiving a severe penalty through NCLB is not strong. The biggest threat to their school’s survival, in fact, is the potential for malfeasance or mismanagement that could result in scandal or official reprimand. Therefore, it makes great sense for these schools’ boards to “keep their eye on the ball” by not losing focus on their fiduciary and legal responsibilities. However, as some non-profit and charter school governance experts would argue (see Chait et al, 2005; Morrison & Salipante, 2007; and Hill et al, 2001 ), just being careful and prudent is not necessarily the only definition of “good governance” and may not be the best way for these boards to serve the needs of their schools.

## Discussion

This research project was designed to explore the complexities of charter school governance in greater depth and detail. It has aimed to look behind the structure and composition of charter school boards to learn more about how they are formed, how they change over time, and how they balance and juggle responsibilities and pressures within what many would describe as a complex, challenging, and stressful environment. In urban areas such as Philadelphia, the financial, political, and social challenges of public schooling are especially formidable, and are likely to increase during the current national economic downturn. Increased emphasis on student performance as measured through standardized tests, as a result of No Child Left Behind and other state and local mandates, has added to this pressurized environment.

While this research certainly offers no “silver bullets” to improving charter school governance, especially given the study’s small sample size, it does highlight a few characteristics that appear to lead to more effective board functioning, as well a number of policy implications and recommendations that may allow for and encourage better governance. The following sections highlight a number of “positive board attributes” derived from the research in addition to a handful of policy recommendations directed towards schools, authorizers, and those involved in the legislative process.

### Positive Board Attributes

The following “Positive Board Attributes” were observed during the research process and appear to be characteristics that improve board functioning and create an atmosphere in which productive governance activity may occur. Conversely, boards that do not possess these attributes or act in contrary ways appear more likely to find themselves in troubling situations, less likely to resolve difficult situations, or unable to move beyond unproductive states.

#### *Self-Awareness, Reflectiveness and a Willingness to Change*

Looking closely at the experiences of the six case study charter school boards, it is difficult to derive a “model” for charter school governance. In fact, in viewing the evolving experiences of these schools since their inception, one draws the impression that schools require different levels of commitment and involvement, different strategic approaches to governance, and different skill sets depending on their circumstances at various times. Put

more plainly, things change for these schools and schools appear to be well-served by boards that are aware of these changes, reflective about their role as board members, collectively and individually, and willing to change if necessary. Certainly this does not mean that boards should be overly reactive, constantly change their composition or role at any change in circumstance, or not retain certain structures or activities that serve them well over periods of time. Rather, boards that are consistently considering and re-considering their roles, their value, and their priorities and willing to make changes in structure (e.g. size, number and use of committees, etc.), policy, and approach appear to be better equipped to tackle problems and overcome obstacles as they arise.

### ***“Room” to Discuss Strategic Issues***

One characteristic that appears to be more conducive to functional and productive governance is the availability of time and space for board members, on their own and in the company of key staff members, to hold open discussions around strategic issues. For this to occur, all parties must be interested and willing to hold such discussions and vehicles must be developed for these discussions to be held. Frequently, time restrictions, fears about transparency, board/staff mistrust, or deference to traditionally accepted modes of governance stand in the way of creating such “space.” However, boards that carve out time for such discussions, communicate in a variety of ways (not just during formal board meetings), and include key management staff in strategic conversations seem to foster more open, positive, and sophisticated dialogues. Monthly board meetings, whether publicly or privately conducted, may not be the best vehicle for many of these discussions, particularly when they are structured in ways that promote unanimous consensus-building instead of vigorous discussions of important organizational issues. Traditional board meeting devices such as Robert’s Rules of Order may save time and help preserve a sense of order, but may also limit divergent thinking or creative strategizing, especially if board meetings are the only time set aside for board and staff interaction. Boards that have found a happy medium between utilizing only rigid, public meeting structures (e.g. monthly “public” board meetings that adhere to strict procedures) or working primarily in an informal and closed manner (e.g. informal meetings among some, not all, board members in one member’s living room) appear to better address problems or avoid them before they arise. Case study boards accomplished this goal by holding staggered forms of board meetings (Roosevelt), better structuring and clarifying the roles of committees (Washington & Madison), or regularly incorporating the CEO and/or Principal into key decision-making processes (Adams & Washington).

### ***Accessing Knowledge about K-12 Education***

There are a wide variety of ways that charter school boards can access information and knowledge about K-12 education on a continual basis. Case study schools accessed such knowledge by recruiting board members with educational experience, by utilizing educational consultants, or by having CEOs, Principals and other staff provide upward training on important educational issues or regularly distribute information via email or newsletters. In terms of helping boards address and avoid problems, what seems most important is not how boards get their information, but rather, that they are sufficiently well-informed to provide quality oversight of the school’s academic professionals. Numerous case study participants expressed concerns about their personal level of knowledge about K-12 education or the ability of their school’s board to fully understand the work of school-level leaders or the regular inner-workings of the school. Representatives from schools with board members possessing strong K-12 education backgrounds (such as Adams and Lincoln) reported that they had relied heavily upon these colleagues’ expertise.

Information flow between and among board members and staff members is also an important ingredient in keeping board members well-informed of a school’s academic activities. As is the case in most organizations, the CEO of a charter school usually possesses more knowledge about a school’s day-to-day activities, the mood of staff, or other immediate issues affecting the organization than any individual board member or the board as a group. Not surprisingly, charter school board members appreciate receiving regular feedback and information from their CEO and use this information to inform their governance activities. This upward flow of information may also serve as an important ingredient in boards’ efforts to judge the work of the CEO and/or Principal of a school, as well as to better understand what goes on in the school on a daily basis.

### ***Trust and Respect within the Organization***

An atmosphere of trust and respect is another characteristic of charter school governance systems that appear to be functioning in a manner conducive to cooperation and growth. Perhaps more noticeably, in schools where an atmosphere of distrust exists trouble often looms ahead or difficult situations arise. In case study schools where trust is evident, information is exchanged more freely, board members and school leaders do not fight for credit over successes and work together to

address challenges. It is not entirely clear whether trust encourages information-sharing, information-sharing engenders trust, or some combination of both. However, there does appear to be an anecdotal correlation between trust and information-sharing. Conversely, in schools (such as Washington and Roosevelt) where distrust or a lack of respect has, at different times, been evident among board members or between board members and staff, organizational discord is more likely.

Trusting relationships among board members and between board and staff members also appear to contribute to stability amongst these groups, as trusting relations often turn into lasting ones. Frequently, the ability of school leaders to work together cordially and productively creates a positive working environment that makes it easier for board members and staff members to withstand the rigors and frustrations of governing and managing a charter school and to avoid disruptive or problematic board and staff turnover.

## **Policy Recommendations**

While this research could support a wide variety of policy recommendations for Philadelphia and beyond, a few appear to offer clear pathways to more cooperative and productive charter school governance. They include the following:

### **1. Clarity and Consistency in Charter School Oversight and Guidance**

It would be beneficial for the state of Pennsylvania, PA Department of Education, Philadelphia School Reform Commission and other policymaking bodies to focus on creating and maintaining clear, straightforward, and consistent laws, regulations, and guidelines in order to monitor the growth and success of charter schools. Charter schools have, in some ways, been asked to hit moving targets for achievement and compliance during the last decade.

Faithful implementation of a number of recommendations made in 2009 by a School Reform Commission-sponsored Charter School Task Force would likely go a long way towards creating a more stable and consistent playing field for Philadelphia charter schools. These recommendations include the creation of a clear set of standards for charter school renewal and the development of an optional process of “progressive review” that allows charter schools to receive annual feedback on progress. (Charter School Taskforce II, 2009)

### **2. Broader and Deeper Training for Charter School Board Members**

While most boards currently engage in some form of board development, there is great variation in the amount, structure, and content of these efforts. For the most part, boards seek knowledge about board training through traditional non-profit training methods or through a small number of charter school-specific programs. Consultants and outside experts are frequently utilized, while many boards often also conduct internal trainings. Internal trainings are typically focused around educational and academic issues and may be led by the school’s CEO, Board Chair, or other member of the organization with a strong background in the topic at hand.

Additional training around the role of board members as long term directors of their schools’ futures might help schools better navigate the challenging charter school waters. This could include training in areas such as establishing and maintaining school-wide goals and cultures that permeate all levels of the organization, providing support to CEOs and principals as they navigate difficult political and accountability environments, or establishing a wider range of stakeholder participation in the governance process.

### **3. Improved Cross-School Coordination and Cooperation around Governance**

As discussed within the report, coordination between and among charter schools in Philadelphia appears to be rather weak, particularly around the area of governance. Philadelphia charter schools demonstrated very little sharing of knowledge or interaction in these areas. While at least one organization – the Pennsylvania Coalition of Charter Schools – organizes an annual meeting with opportunities for charter school representatives, including board members, to build skills and share knowledge, some of the organizations studied did not appear to work closely with the organization.

The School District’s Office of Charter Schools might play a role in increasing cross-school communication and cooperation by maintaining and posting accurate contact information for all schools on its website, distributing information and materials across charter schools upon request, and by working consistently with Philadelphia charter schools to gather and share best practices, including in the area of governance.

## Conclusion

Almost a decade ago, researchers entitled an article focused on the complicated management aspects of start-up charter schools, “Building a Plane While Flying It.” (Griffin and Wohlstetter, 2001) Looking now, more specifically at the governance function in Philadelphia charter schools, one can conclude that while many of these planes have successfully reached a cruising altitude, they are still being modified in-flight and that their destinations remain unknown. These boards must continue to learn and to adapt to changing circumstances while also developing and honing governance strategies that are conducive to charter school sustainability and success. Better regulations, stronger oversight and support, increased training, and a mindset open to learning will all help charter school boards more successfully navigate difficult terrain.

Future research on charter schools and on charter school governance might look more closely at schools where boards are incorporating wider swaths of the school community into the governance process. Research might also investigate the extent to which financial restrictions (or conversely, the availability of funds) restrict or enable schools’ ability to focus on long-term and strategic planning at the governance level. Finally, further study into how charter schools move into their 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generations (after founding board members and staff members leave) might illuminate how schools can build stable and lasting structures, policies, and cultures that allow the organization to continue successfully during times of turmoil and change.

The work of charter schools board members and charter school leaders is challenging and requires flexibility, shared-purpose, and the ability to identify and react to critical points in an organization’s growth and evolution. The end of this report contains a handful of questions for board members, CEOs, principals, and other participants in the charter school governance and leadership process to consider. By considering, discussing, and addressing these guiding questions as a group, I hope that charter school leaders will be able to more nimbly and openly tackle or avoid problems and position themselves (individually and collectively) as more effective guides for their schools’ futures.

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## Questions for Charter School Boards and Leaders to Consider

Who do you, as a board member, serve?

To whom are you most accountable? (For purposes of discussion, it is assumed that all board members feel accountable to “the children.”)

How comfortable are you in your own ability, and the ability of your board as a group, to gauge the effectiveness of your school and of your school leaders?

What measures and criteria do you use, both formally and informally, to make judgments about the effectiveness of your school and school leaders?

Are there things you would like to know more about in order to better judge the effectiveness of your school and school leaders? What are they?

What other kinds of things would it be helpful to learn more about from your CEO, Principal, or from outside experts in order to better fulfill your duties as a board member?

Are there ways your board might better structure its formal and informal meeting times to encourage long-term planning and strategizing?

To what extent do parents have a “voice” in the direction of your school? What structures or vehicles foster the authentic participation of parents?

What types of roles do you, individually, play as a board member (using Widmer’s classification of roles from page 4 of the report)? Are there roles that you or your board could be playing to better support your school?

## Quotes from “Finding Their Own Way”

*The most important thing is to know where you're at and where you're going. When the board sits down and looks at what's on the table today, we have to not only look at what's here, but we have to look at what's going to happen 5 years down the road, 10 years down the road. I may not be here; I may be long gone and whatever, but we have to think ahead. And sometimes that's difficult because you're so concerned with this piece of paper. Well, okay, fine. We adopt this piece of paper, what's going to happen five years down the road?*

*Charter School Board Member*

*[T]he position of being both principal and the CEO is a very useful combination, but it's also quite insane, especially if you're starting a school up and especially if you've not had experience doing it before.*

*Charter School CEO*

*Boards run one of two ways. It depends who the founder is. I'm the founder. So our board is stronger than the school.*

*Board Chair*

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