

Appendix D. Charter School Report

Can School Leaders Lead?

A Study by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and the American Institutes for Research®

I. Introduction

A charter school principal was interviewed in each of the three states (western, midwestern, and southeastern) the interview teams visited. As with the public school interviews, the aim of the charter school principal interviews was to determine (a) how charter school principals characterized effective school leadership, (b) the degree to which they felt they were able to exercise effective school leadership as they perceived it, (c) the barriers to leadership they perceived, along with sources of those barriers, and (d) the skills they believed today's principals need to be effective leaders. Additionally, the interviews examined the areas in which comparisons with district-operated public schools can be made.

The charter schools visited for this report have some similarities, but also represent the differences and multitude of approaches that the charter school movement is meant to accommodate. The charter schools are similar in that each was operating in an urban district and being held accountable by the state based on information from student results on the state-mandated high stakes assessments. Additionally, each was accountable to a state or district authorizing board to ensure their compliance with state and federal regulations. There are also differences among the three charter school principals. Besides some of the philosophical differences in their approaches to teaching students, the location of the school accounted for differences among them. Each of the charter school principals was working in different states, and state law determines how charter school initiatives are designed, developed, and implemented. Thus there is some variation among the schools.

It is important to note that the sample size is too small to come to any significant conclusions about charter school principals. Rather, the purpose of gathering this

information is mainly to provide a richer context for examining the perspectives of principals functioning in different environments.

Overall, the charter school principals felt they had few serious barriers to being an effective school leader. The biggest challenge cited by each of the principals was the number of roles they had to play within the school with varying levels of support, depending upon the state in which they were running their schools.

II. Principal Characteristics

Among the principals there are some significant differences in circumstances. One of the principals was leading a charter school that was part of a “charter management organization” in which a chief executive officer/superintendent was overseeing the school, much like the way a district operates. Interestingly, this principal identified the most number of constraints, but did not believe they were serious barriers. This is especially true in comparison to the other two principals, who felt that some of their operational and time management issues did pose barriers to effective school leadership. The second principal was leading a school that had been in existence for more than 7 years and, interestingly, was the principal who felt the most constrained. This principal was challenged by the number of roles he had to play, as well as working with a board that was beginning to develop its own identity and own agenda. In the early years of the school, the principal found that he had much more discretion and influence over all aspects of the school. As the board grew more authoritative, he felt the difference between the freedom he initially had and the freedom that was being taken away with a more active board. The third school had been in business for slightly less than 3 years. This principal identified the least number of constraints, but was struggling with time management issues. In addition to time management, finding a building to house the school posed a big challenge for the principal. Without state assistance to find suitable facilities, the principal struggled to simultaneously keep the school running and look for a new, more suitable, location for the school.

As noted previously, three charter school principals from three different states were interviewed. All of the principals were leaders of schools that served students in the elementary grades. Among the schools, one taught grades K–8, one taught grades 1–8, and the other taught grades 1–6. Two of the principals were female, and one was male. Two were White/Caucasian, and one was Black/African American. One of the principals was of Hispanic ethnicity. The principals of the charter schools were fairly young, with one being between the ages of 25 and 34 and the other two between the ages of 35 and 44 (Table 1).

On average the principals had 5 years of experience as principals. Most of their combined years of experience as principals were spent in their current schools (Table 2). In fact, two of the three principals had gained all of their experience in the charter school they were currently leading. The charter school principals had an average of 5.7 years of experience teaching, and only one of the principals had experience teaching in a public school district. The charter schools were more likely than district-operated schools to be run by principals with less than 10 years of experience. All of the charter school principals held master’s degrees, and none of them held specialist degrees or doctorates (Table 3).

Table 1 Average Age of Charter School Principals and District-Operated School Principals Interviewed

Age Range	% of Charter School Principals	% of District-Operated School Principals
65–74	0%	3.33%
55–64	0%	43.33%
45–54	0%	23.33%
35–44	66.7%	23.33%
25–34	33.3%	6.67%

Table 2 Average Years of Experience of Charter School Principals and District-Operated School Principals Interviewed

Years of Experience	As Principal		As Administrator (Not Principal)		As Teacher	
	<i>Charter Schools</i>	<i>District Schools</i>	<i>Charter Schools</i>	<i>District Schools</i>	<i>Charter Schools</i>	<i>District Schools</i>
Total	5	10.5	4.3	3.3	5.7	12.4
District	0	9.1	1	2.5	.5	8.4
School	4.3	6.2	1	0.3	1.7	1.4

Table 3 Educational Attainment of Charter School Principals and District-Operated School Principals Interviewed

Educational Attainment	% of Charter School Principals	% of District-Operated School Principals
Master's Degree	100.0%	83.3 %
Specialist Certification	0.0%	16.7 %
Doctorate (PhD/EdD)	0.0%	6.7 %

The charter school principals, like the other principals interviewed, indicated that being a principal had both positive and negative aspects. They described their job as enlightening and exciting as well as frustrating and challenging.

All of the charter school principals articulated a need to meet the external expectations set by the states in which their schools were operating. They believed that it was their responsibility to combine the charter school's unique academic program, which varied among the three schools, with state standards so that students performed well on state-mandated assessments. The need to meet the state standards was palpable because continuation of their charters relied heavily on the performance of their students on the state assessments.

III. School Characteristics

The principals of the three charter schools served 486 students in grades K–8. All schools served students in grades 1–6, one served students in grades K–8, and one served students in grades 1–8.

School Demographics

It is important to note that the charter schools selected for this study are not necessarily representative of the types or numbers of students served by charter schools across the nation. Rather, these schools were selected because they were serving students in the same state and urban district in which the district-operated public schools included in this study were operating. The following is a summary of the demographic make up of the student body at each of the participating charter schools.

On average, there were 21 students per grade, and about 43% of these students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Only one of the charter schools served students who were limited English proficient (LEP) (1% of the student population at that school). In contrast, the LEP students served in district-operated schools made up 25% of the student population. On average, 33% of the students in the charter schools were in special education (Table 4). When compared to the district-operated schools, the charter schools served a higher percentage of special education students and a much lower percentage of students who were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

Table 4 Charter and District-Operated Schools Demographics

	Total Enrollment	Average Enrollment	# of Students Per Grade	% Receiving Free or Reduced-Price Lunch	% Special Education	% Limited English Proficient	Per-Pupil Expenditure*
Charter	486	162	21	43%	33%	0%	\$ 5,593
District Operated	14458	482	70	74%	15%	25%	\$ 6,871

* Per-pupil expenditures are based on each principal's self-reported figure for the 2005–2006 academic year.

In the charter schools, there were approximately 11 students per teacher. Teachers possessed an average of 4 years of experience among the schools, while teachers in the district-operated schools had about 14 years of experience. According to the charter principals, there was an average of three novice teachers per school, which is about the same as in the district-operated schools. However, it is clear that charter schools tended to have less-experienced teachers than their district-operated counterparts. The average percentage of teacher turnover within the charter schools is 11.4%.

Table 5 Charter and District-Operated Schools Teacher Information

	# of Students Per Teacher	# of Teachers Per Grade	Teachers' Years of Experience	# of Novice Teachers	# of Teacher Dismissals (2004–2005)	% Teacher Turnover
Charter	11.0	1.9	3.9	3.0	0.7	11.4%
District Operated	15.7	4.5	14.2	3.2	0.8	12.3%

School Status

For the purposes of this report, schools have been categorized into one of three categories: high performing, average performing, and low performing. State school rating systems were arranged into these three categories so that comparisons across states based on school status could be made. The actual state designations have been withheld to protect the anonymity of the states visited.

Of the charter school principals, one was the leader of a high-performing charter school and two were the leaders of average-performing charter schools (Table 6). There were no low-performing charter schools included in this study.

Table 6 Charter School Designations

School Status Category	Report Designation
High Performing	1
Average Performing	2
Low Performing	0

IV. Constraints on Leadership

Charter school principals were more likely to feel they had stronger levels of influence over raising student achievement than district-operated school principals (Table 7). Both charter and district-operated school principals had a strong sense of their ability to exercise effective school leadership (Table 8). Their sense of ability is more of a personal sense of empowerment, and the principals' answers reflect this, rather than ability within their organizational context.

Table 7 How Much Charter and District-Operated School Principals Feel Their Actions to Raise Student Achievement Are Constrained by Outside Forces

	Not at all Constrained	Not Very Constrained	Somewhat Constrained	Very Constrained
All Charter School Principals Interviewed (<i>n</i> = 3)	33.33%	33.33%	33.33%	0.00%
All District-Operated School Principals Interviewed (<i>n</i> = 30)*†	13.33%	23.33%	60.00%	0.00%

* Not all principals answered this question.

Table 8 How Charter and District-Operated School Principals Rated Their Overall Ability to Exercise Effective Leadership

	Strong Ability	Somewhat of an Ability	Somewhat Unable	Strongly Unable
All Charter School Principals Interviewed (<i>n</i> = 3)	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%	0.00%
All District-Operated School Principals Interviewed (<i>n</i> = 30)*	40.00%	50.00%	6.67%	0.00%

* Not all principals answered this question.

In the majority of the functional areas of school leadership, the principals believed they had a great deal of or some autonomy (Table 9). The only area in which some charter school principals felt challenged was controlling the school facility. In two of the states, the charter school principal was responsible for securing the site for the school. One principal described spending a majority of her time on finding a facility that met the needs of the school and the state during the first few years of implementation. It was particularly challenging to find a school building that was affordable with the charter school's allotted budget. In one instance, the principal described a scenario in which the

school's parents and community raised funds to invest in a new facility to supplement limitations in state funding. Identifying a school facility is something the charter school principals felt was unique to their situation and a big challenge.

Table 9 Perceived Need for Versus Actual Autonomy of Charter School Principals Interviewed

Function	Perceived Importance to Effectiveness as a School Leader				How Much Autonomy the Principal Currently Has (Actual)			
	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not So Important	Not at all Important	Great Deal of Autonomy	Some Autonomy	Not So Much Autonomy	No Autonomy
1 Number/type of faculty and staff	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%	0.00%
2 Allocating resources	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%	0.00%	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%	0.00%
3 Hiring	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%	0.00%
4 Teacher pay or bonuses	33.33%	66.67%	0.00%	0.00%	33.33%	33.33%	0.00%	33.33%
5 Assigning teachers	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%	0.00%
6 Transferring unsuitable teachers	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%	0.00%
7 Discharging unsuitable teachers	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%	0.00%
8 Assigning noninstructional duties	0.00%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
9 Teacher and student schedules	0.00%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%	0.00%
10 Controlling school calendar	33.33%	66.67%	0.00%	0.00%	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%	0.00%
11 Allocating time for instruction	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%	0.00%	66.67%	0.00%	0.00%	33.33%
12 Determining extracurricular activities	0.00%	33.33%	66.67%	0.00%	66.67%	0.00%	33.33%	0.00%
13 Program adoption decisions	0.00%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	33.33%	66.67%	0.00%	0.00%
14 Curriculum pacing and sequencing	33.33%	33.33%	33.33%	0.00%	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%	0.00%
15 Methods and materials	33.33%	66.67%	0.00%	0.00%	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%	0.00%
16 Student discipline policies/procedures	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%
17 Controlling student dress	0.00%	33.33%	33.33%	33.33%	33.33%	66.67%	0.00%	0.00%
18 Parental involvement requirements	0.00%	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%
19 Time spent on instructional versus operational issues	33.33%	33.33%	33.33%	0.00%	66.67%	0.00%	33.33%	0.00%
20 Controlling the school facility	33.33%	33.33%	33.33%	0.00%	33.33%	0.00%	66.67%	0.00%
21 Engaging in private fundraising	33.33%	66.67%	0.00%	0.00%	33.33%	66.67%	0.00%	0.00%

In discussions with charter school principals, the high level of autonomy reflected in their survey results was evident. In fact, two of them indicated that the amount of influence over different aspects of leading a school was one of the assets of being a charter school

principal. However, it was also a drawback, because the number of roles they were required to take on made time management one of the biggest constraints to effective school leadership.

V. Principals' Influence Over School Functions

In Table 10, the survey data are presented in terms of comparing the percentage of charter school principals who identified a function as being *very* or *somewhat important* to effective school leadership with the percentage of principals who currently have a *great deal* or *some influence* over this same functional area. Through this analysis one can hone in on areas in which there was a discrepancy between the perceived need for and actual autonomy principals felt was necessary to be effective leaders.

Again, there are very few areas in which there was a difference between the importance of the function to effective school leadership and the amount of influence the principals currently possess. *Determining teacher pay or bonuses, controlling the school facility, and allocating time for instruction* were three areas in which one principal felt more autonomy was needed. Teacher pay and bonuses were challenging for one charter school principal because of a combination of the charter's decision to use the district's (and union's) teacher pay scale and because of the school's funds allocation. Controlling the school facility was an issue because the principals were responsible for procuring and maintaining their school site, while district-operated schools had less responsibility over this function. The reason the charter principals felt constrained in allocating time for instruction is not clear from the data gathered. However, it is possible that the amount of time they spend on all of the areas in which they have full autonomy (especially focused on the school facility) took away from the amount of time they were able to concentrate on instruction.

For charter school principals, the challenge was not necessarily areas in which they felt they needed more autonomy. Rather, the challenge charter school principals faced was having more autonomy than they felt was necessary in functional areas they did not deem very important in contributing to effective school leadership. For example, one area in

which the charter school principals indicated they had more influence over a function that they did not necessarily see as *very* or *somewhat important* to effective school leadership was *controlling student dress*.

Table 10a Perceived Need for Effective School Versus Actual Influence of Charter School Principals Interviewed

Function	Function Is "Very" or "Somewhat" Important to Effective School Leadership	Currently Have a "Great Deal" of "Some" Autonomy	Difference Between Importance of Autonomy Less Actual Autonomy
Determining the number and type of faculty and staff positions within your budget	100.00%	100.00%	0.00%
Allocating resources for materials, textbooks, maintenance, equipment, and so forth	100.00%	100.00%	0.00%
Hiring teachers and support staff	100.00%	100.00%	0.00%
Determining teacher pay or bonuses	100.00%	66.67%	33.33%
Assigning teachers and support staff	100.00%	100.00%	0.00%
Transferring unsuitable teachers or support staff	100.00%	100.00%	0.00%
Discharging unsuitable teachers or support staff	100.00%	100.00%	0.00%
Assigning noninstructional duties to teachers and support staff	100.00%	100.00%	0.00%
Determining teacher and student schedules	100.00%	100.00%	0.00%
Controlling key features of the school calendar	100.00%	100.00%	0.00%
Allocating time for instruction	100.00%	66.67%	33.33%
Determining extracurricular activities	33.33%	66.67%	-33.33%
Making program adoption decisions	100.00%	100.00%	0.00%
Pacing and sequencing decisions about curriculum	66.67%	100.00%	-33.33%
Determining methods and materials	100.00%	100.00%	0.00%
Determining student discipline policies/procedures	100.00%	100.00%	0.00%
Controlling student dress	33.33%	100.00%	-66.67%
Setting parental involvement requirements	66.67%	100.00%	-33.33%
Determining how much time you spend on instructional versus operational issues	66.67%	66.67%	0.00%
Controlling the school facility	66.67%	33.33%	33.33%
Engaging in private fundraising	100.00%	100.00%	0.00%

Table 10b compares the degree of influence charter school principals and district-operated school principals felt over different school leadership functions (listed in the table). What immediately draws attention is the “Differences” column. In nearly all of the functional areas, charter school principals believed they had the right amount of influence over the function (indicated by 0%), while the district-operated school principals felt they currently did not have as much influence over functional areas that they deemed important to being an effective school leader (indicated by the positive percentage).

Table 10b Perceived Need for Effective School Versus Actual Influence of Charter and District-Operated School Principals Interviewed

Function	Function Is "Very" or "Somewhat" Important to Effective School Leadership		Currently Have a "Great Deal" of "Some" Autonomy		Difference Between Importance of Autonomy Less Actual Autonomy	
	Charter	Dist.-Oper.	Charter	Dist.-Oper.	Charter	Dist.-Oper.
Determining the number and type of faculty and staff positions within your budget	100.00%	93.33%	100.00%	30.00%	0.00%	63.33%
Allocating resources for materials, textbooks, maintenance, equipment, and so forth	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	70.00%	0.00%	30.00%
Hiring teachers and support staff	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	56.67%	0.00%	43.33%
Determining teacher pay or bonuses	100.00%	50.00%	66.67%	0.00%	33.33%	50.00%
Assigning teachers and support staff	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	83.33%	0.00%	16.67%
Transferring unsuitable teachers or support staff	100.00%	93.33%	100.00%	23.33%	0.00%	70.00%
Discharging unsuitable teachers or support staff	100.00%	96.67%	100.00%	36.67%	0.00%	60.00%
Assigning noninstructional duties to teachers and support staff	100.00%	80.00%	100.00%	76.67%	0.00%	3.33%
Determining teacher and student schedules	100.00%	86.67%	100.00%	93.33%	0.00%	-6.67%
Controlling key features of the school calendar	100.00%	80.00%	100.00%	33.33%	0.00%	46.67%
Allocating time for instruction	100.00%	96.67%	66.67%	66.67%	33.33%	30.00%
Determining extracurricular activities	33.33%	83.33%	66.67%	80.00%	-33.33%	3.33%
Making program adoption decisions	100.00%	90.00%	100.00%	50.00%	0.00%	40.00%
Pacing and sequencing decisions about curriculum	66.67%	80.00%	100.00%	33.33%	-33.33%	46.67%
Determining methods and materials	100.00%	93.33%	100.00%	56.67%	0.00%	36.67%
Determining student discipline policies/procedures	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	76.67%	0.00%	23.33%
Controlling student dress	33.33%	66.67%	100.00%	86.67%	-66.67%	-20.00%
Setting parental involvement requirements	66.67%	86.67%	100.00%	50.00%	-33.33%	36.67%
Determining how much time you spend on instructional versus operational issues	66.67%	100.00%	66.67%	73.33%	0.00%	26.67%
Controlling the school facility	66.67%	93.33%	33.33%	96.67%	33.33%	-3.33%
Engaging in private fundraising	100.00%	46.67%	100.00%	86.67%	0.00%	-40.00%

VI. The Effect of School Status on Perceived Influence of Principals

There were too few charter schools participating in the study and no charter schools that were declared low performing, making an analysis of the effect of school status inappropriate. It is important to note that although there certainly are charter schools that are considered “low performing,” the stakes for charter schools are much higher because charters can be taken away. Although chronically low-performing, district-operated schools by law (No Child Left Behind) also face “restructuring,” the school is still not eliminated; rather, it is required to change.

VII. Barriers to Effective School Leadership

Charter school principals’ responses to the key areas of leadership in which they have a limited role varied. For example, the western state’s charter school principal identified having a limited role in 52% of the functional areas listed in Table 11, and the midwestern state’s charter school principal had a limited role in 48% of the areas, while the southeastern state’s charter school principal identified only 5% of the areas as those in which she had a limited role. Among these areas in which the principals had a limited role, the principal from the western state felt that 19% of them were serious barriers to school leadership, while principal from the midwestern state only felt that a 5% were serious barriers, and the principal from the southeastern state felt that none of these limitations were serious barriers.

Table 11 Charter School Principals' Responses to Their Role in Functional Areas and Whether These Areas Are Seen as a Serious Barrier to Effective School Leadership

Function	% of Principals Who Identified a Limited Role CHARTER	% of Principals Who Have a Limited Role and Who Believe It Is a Serious Barrier CHARTER	% of ALL Principals Who Identified Area as a Serious Barrier CHARTER
Determining the number and type of faculty and staff positions within your budget	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Allocating resources for materials, textbooks, maintenance, equipment, and so forth	66.7%	0.0%	0.0%
Hiring teachers and support staff	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Determining teacher pay or bonuses	66.7%	100.0%	66.7%
Assigning teachers and support staff	33.3%	100.0%	33.3%
Transferring unsuitable teachers or support staff	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Discharging unsuitable teachers or support staff	33.3%	100.0%	33.3%
Assigning noninstructional duties to teachers and support staff	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Determining teacher and student schedules	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Controlling key features of the school calendar	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Allocating time for instruction	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Determining extracurricular activities	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Making program adoption decisions	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Pacing and sequencing decisions about curriculum	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Determining methods and materials	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Determining student discipline policies/procedures	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Controlling student dress	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Setting parental involvement requirements	66.7%	0.0%	0.0%
Determining how much time you spend on instructional versus operational issues	66.7%	50.0%	33.3%
Controlling the school facility	66.7%	0.0%	0.0%
Engaging in private fundraising	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%

Discussions with principals revealed a challenge that was not identified in the survey. The biggest challenge charter school principals identified was the budget. Each principal believed he or she could do more if he or she had more funding. District-operated school principals believed the budget was a limitation, but not as unanimously as the charter

school principals. Still, none of the principals believed this was a serious barrier. The idea of scarce resources, as it is for district-operated school principals, was an accepted part of the context in which charter school principals were leading their schools.

Charter school principals characterized barriers in such a way that they did not focus on the barrier; rather, they focused on the problem solving and solutions. One principal summed up this sentiment by stating, “It’s not about obstacles. It’s about getting there.” Each of the principals conveyed a strong sense that barriers were actually challenges, and they employed a variety of strategies to overcome the challenges they faced, with collaborative leadership and communication as the central element of these strategies.

VIII. Skills for Effective Leadership

Charter school principals, on the whole, deemed all of the skills listed in Table 12 as either *very important* or *somewhat important* to their jobs. The principals believed they could use more training in many of the areas; particularly *business and financial management* as well as communications. They felt that the requirements of the charter gave them more autonomy over business and financial management. Because of the amount of influence they had over this area along with the regular state audits of their schools, more training in business and financial management would be beneficial. *Communicating a vision, resolving conflicts, and communicating externally* were also areas in which the principals felt they could use additional training. Discussions revealed that in the two schools that were not part of a larger management organization, the charter school principals relied entirely on their own skills to communicate to various audiences and, on top of their other duties, this was challenging. More training was seen as a way to accomplish these tasks more efficiently and thus give them more time to work on other aspects/needs of their schools.

Table 12 Charter School Principals’ Identified Effective School Leadership Skills and Areas for Additional Training

Skill	Charter Schools	
	% of Principals Who Indicated This Skill Was <u>VERY IMPORTANT</u> to Effective School Leadership	% of Principals Indicating They Could Use <u>MORE TRAINING</u> in This Area
Manage business and financial administration	66.67%	66.67%
Take risks	0.00%	33.33%
Make decisions	66.67%	33.33%
Persevere in challenging situations	66.67%	0.00%
Develop and communicate a vision	66.67%	66.67%
Experimentation	0.00%	33.33%
Function in an environment of cultural differences	66.67%	33.33%
Manage teachers and staff	66.67%	33.33%
Develop a teacher/staff performance accountability system	66.67%	33.33%
Communicate effectively (internally)	66.67%	33.33%
Promote collegiality through collaboration	66.67%	33.33%
Resolve conflicts	66.67%	66.67%
Design curriculum	33.33%	33.33%
Evaluate curriculum	66.67%	33.33%
Evaluate classroom teachers	66.67%	33.33%
Build a community of learners	66.67%	33.33%
Communicate effectively (externally)	66.67%	66.67%
Build a community of support	66.67%	33.33%
Manage and analyze data	66.67%	33.33%
Make data-driven decisions	66.67%	33.33%

IX. Conclusion

Charter school principals conveyed a remarkable sense of control over their schools, especially compared to the district-operated school principals. Having to report to their boards, the district, and the state was challenging, but these principals did not see any of the challenges they faced as serious obstacles. Like the principals in the district-operated schools, they had a strong sense of their own ability and a pervading sense of acceptance of the environment in which their schools operated. Though the circumstances were different than those found in the district-operated schools, the principals in charter schools persevered in areas that were challenging (e.g., control over facilities).

Effective School Leadership and Charter School Principals' Ability to Exercise School Leadership

Although the pressure to meet external expectations set by the state (primarily student assessment results) weighed heavily upon the charter school principals, they each felt that they had the autonomy to effectively meet these demands. This included freedom to choose staff, schedule instruction time, and work directly with teachers to determine what methods and materials were to be used in the classroom. A few of the principals felt that their relatively “novice” staff enabled them to more readily shape and mold the teachers and teaching strategies, which created a stronger team environment and enhanced buy-in to each school’s shared vision.

Barriers

The barriers the charter school principals faced were dependent upon the state charter school laws and the length of time the school had been running. The principal from the charter school that had been operating for more than 7 years did not find that controlling the facility was a barrier; however, the same principal identified more areas in which she had a limited role. Still, most of these were not seen as barriers to effective school leadership. In the two, newer charter schools, control of the facility and the amount of time spent on instructional versus operational issues were challenging. This is not surprising, given that much of the start up for a charter school requires the school leader to spend a sizeable amount of time on operational issues. Overall, the biggest barrier that each of the principals alluded to was the significant amount of influence and control over most of the functional areas—making time management difficult and forcing them to be involved in areas they did not necessarily feel were pertinent to their main mission. Nonetheless, all the charter school principals felt their level of autonomy over the school was a key element to their school’s success.

Skills for Effective School Leaders

The charter school principals valued the skills that would make them more effective and efficient school leaders. Communicating to all stakeholders (e.g., staff, parents, students, community) and managing the day-to-day business and financial operations were areas in

which they felt they could use more training, not because they felt they lacked these skills, but because they strived to improve their skills to become more efficient school leaders.