

Issue Brief

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Authorizing Matters

Stepping Up: University Leadership in the Charter School Sector

Introduction

Colleges and universities throughout the country are stepping up their involvement in the charter school sector. Driven by a commitment to advance education reform, connect research to practice and better serve the communities in which they are located, institutions of higher education are increasingly tapping into the potential of the charter school sector to broaden the impact of their missions. Many are choosing to become charter school authorizers and operators. Some are even redefining their teacher and principal preparation programs to better address the needs of charter schools and the professionals who work in them.

“What are universities for, if they aren’t helping America solve its biggest problems?”

— Timothy Knowles
Lewis-Sebring Director of the Urban Education Institute
University of Chicago

Engaging in the charter school sector is not for the faint of heart – doing so requires grappling with many complex questions. How will the work impact the reputation of the university? What political, financial or legal liabilities will the institution assume? Who will do the day-to-day heavy lifting?

Across the country, dynamic higher education leaders are assessing these challenges and deciding to take action. The opportunities to advance the missions of their colleges and universities are considerable, as are the potential public benefits of improved teaching and learning at the elementary and secondary levels. As Timothy Knowles, director of the Urban Education Institute at the University of Chicago asserts, “What are universities for, if they aren’t helping America solve its biggest problems?”

This Issue Brief provides an overview of various ways higher education institutions are engaging in the charter school sector, explores their reasons for getting involved and shares challenges they have faced in starting and sustaining charter school initiatives. More importantly, it outlines ways their involvement has strengthened their institutions and the communities they serve.¹



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College and University Charter School Authorizers

Higher education institutions have been active charter school authorizers throughout the movement's history, along with state and local education agencies, municipal chartering authorities, non-profit organizations and independent chartering boards. Authorizers are entities empowered by law to approve new schools, oversee ongoing performance and evaluate public charter schools to make renewal decisions. Colleges and universities have been issuing charters since 1994, using authority vested in them by state charter school legislation (Gau, 2006, page 20). At present, there are nearly 40 active higher education authorizers nationwide, with more preparing to assume these responsibilities. For example, Washington University in St. Louis recently authorized its first charter school, which is scheduled to open in 2009.

According to Rob Wild, Assistant to the Chancellor at Washington University, the decision to sponsor a charter school fits into the university's long-term strategy to focus on key issues affecting the St. Louis region. “[The university] has a big presence in this city. We recruit people to work here and go to school here, so public schools in St. Louis are important to the university. The St. Louis public school system is challenged. Figuring out how to become involved in improving education in the region is important to us.”

For long-time charter authorizer Central Michigan University, the opportunity to become part of the charter landscape in Michigan was a natural outgrowth of a long-term commitment to public education dating back to its establishment as a normal school (The Center for Charter Schools at Central Michigan University, 2007). “The university has a 100 year history of preparing teachers,” says James Goenner, Executive Director of The Center for Charter Schools at Central Michigan University. “[Authorizing charters] is an extension of the university's leadership in public education.”

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In addition to expanding contributions to education reform, some universities found other reasons – both political and institutional – to become involved in charter schools. The State University of New York became a charter school authorizer when it was named in the state's Charter Schools Act, approved in 1998 in exchange for a legislative pay raise. SUNY Trustee Ed Cox recalled the controversial nature of the legislation and remembered “As Trustees we set a strict policy for ourselves and the staff that our job was to administer the law according to its legislated strictures. We were very careful to not have any other policy goals than the goals of the law [which include a focus on improving student learning and achievement]... We knew that the political community and the legislature would be monitoring us closely.”

Institutional agendas can also play a hand. When Indiana's charter law passed in 2001, Ball State University saw that the opportunity to become a statewide authorizer of charter schools would enhance the institution's overall presence. Roy Weaver, dean of Ball State's Teachers College, points out that “whenever opportunities have arisen from the legislature, the University considers getting involved.” He notes that the school doesn't have branch campuses. “Getting involved... would be a way for [the university] to have a direct connection with communities across the state.”

Charter School Operators

Since John Dewey founded the University of Chicago's Laboratory Schools in 1896, it has become common for colleges and universities to establish primary and secondary schools in order to test the educational philosophies and practices espoused by their faculty. University-affiliated schools serve as research settings for faculty and students, laboratories for innovative practices or curricula and training grounds that offer teachers intensive professional development and clinical experiences (National Association of Laboratory Schools n.d.).

With the expansion of charter schools, some higher education institutions—including the University of Chicago—are putting their research and theories to the test by operating their own charter schools. In contrast to many lab schools, these university-run public schools operate with non-selective admissions processes, do not charge tuition and serve diverse student populations that include groups that traditionally have been underserved. Further, they are subject to the high levels of accountability for student learning and achievement against which charter schools are measured.

“The School of Education’s charter schools in the Ravenswood City School District of East Palo Alto, CA serve as the ultimate accountability for all of our work and are the most significant manifestation of the School of Education’s commitment to bridging research and practice.”

— (Stanford School of Education 2006)

“Among schools of education, Stanford is a leader,” says Deborah Stipek, dean of Stanford University’s School of Education. “We have a lot of programs where we work with schools. But running our own charter school really does hold us accountable.” Its work with the charter school enables Stanford to directly implement practices taught in the School of Education, and provides a continual reminder of the significant challenges faced by urban schools and educators. Stanford operates two buildings under its East Palo Alto Academy charter: a high school, which opened in 2001, and an elementary school that opened in 2006. A third of the School of Education’s faculty is involved, providing a rich source of observations to inform their research and university teaching. In addition, Stanford places education students at the charter campuses for clinical teaching experience.

The University of Chicago’s four charter campuses operate under the umbrella of its Urban Education Institute, which develops schools, knowledge and people dedicated to improving the social and academic outcomes of children in urban America. The charter schools represent a combined effort by charter educators and the university’s faculty and researchers to “create reliably excellent schooling for kids growing up in urban areas,” says Timothy Knowles, the institute’s director.

The University of Chicago has made it a priority to focus resources on the improvement of urban public schools.

Knowles believes higher education must take a far greater role in improving public schools. “Our colleges and universities are acknowledged as the most advanced in the world, and yet our public elementary and secondary schools continue to lag behind those of other industrialized nations,” writes Knowles in a 2007 *Education Week* article. “Because the country relies on public schools to educate its citizenry... continued failure in this realm poses one of the most significant national domestic problems of our time. It is time for higher education to take a far greater, and significantly different, responsibility for pre-K-12 schooling” (Knowles, 2007).

To that end, the University of Chicago has made it a priority to focus resources on the improvement of urban public schools, with much of its activity taking place in the four charter schools near the University’s campus on the South Side of Chicago. When they reach full capacity, the schools will serve 2,000 students, providing valuable learning opportunities for both the community and university. “For urban universities in particular, operating schools is a vital way to establish meaningful ties with community leaders and residents... which, in turn, offer compelling opportunities for the university to collaborate with and learn from its neighbors...” (Knowles, 2007). As with Stanford’s East Palo Alto schools, the University of Chicago’s charter schools serve as a training ground for pre-service educators from its Urban Teacher Education Program (UTEP), as well as a laboratory for developing innovative solutions to the challenges of urban education.

For the University of California at San Diego, the decision to apply for and run a charter school was made with the singular goal of increasing the diversity of its student population. This strategy emerged from the context of Proposition 209, which bars California’s public agencies from using racial or ethnic quotas to ensure diversity. According to Chancellor Marye Anne Fox and Senior Vice Chancellor Paul Drake, the university determined it would need to take an active role preparing more students from diverse backgrounds to become academically eligible to enroll. “We considered two proposals – helping existing schools within our community, and creating the Preuss School.” The university opened the Preuss School in the fall of 1999.

The school serves approximately 760 students in sixth through twelfth grade, and has repeatedly been recognized as one of the nation’s highest achieving high schools in *Newsweek* and *U.S. News and World Report* (Fox, 2007). Like its peer institutions at Stanford and the University of Chicago, the Preuss School provides its teachers with intensive, continuing professional development, serves as a locus for faculty research and creates placement opportunities for undergraduates who earn academic credit by tutoring and mentoring Preuss students (Preuss School, 2007).

Preparation of Charter School Teachers and Leaders

As the number of charter schools across the country grows, so does the demand for professionals to lead and teach in these schools. Some universities are now turning their attention to the design and establishment of programs that prepare the next generation of charter school teachers and leaders. Although preparation and credentialing programs aimed at traditional public schools have been integral to the missions of many colleges and universities for decades, more institutions are recognizing that traditional programs are not sufficient to prepare educators for the unique demands and responsibilities of charter school setting.² In response, colleges and universities across the country are taking a hard look at existing programs, and overhauling them or creating new programs to meet the increased demand for charter school teachers and leaders.

The Hunter College School of Education in Manhattan is emerging as a leader in this trend by collaborating with three high-performing charter organizations to redefine the college's teacher education and credentialing program. Led by Dean David Steiner, Hunter College is joining forces with KIPP, Uncommon Schools and Achievement First—three non-profit school networks with a presence in the New York City area—to create Teacher U, a new teacher credentialing program. Graduates will be eligible for initial certification and a master's degree from Hunter College. Their studies are supported by Americorps grants, given in recognition of the contributions they will make as teachers in high-need communities.

"Schools of Education across the country have been rightly criticized for not teaching the skills required to teach in today's schools," says Steiner, explaining his decision to collaborate with the charter organizations. "It is never easy to turn around a century of behavior, but I am determined to help break the mold, and work with my colleagues to make Hunter a model of outstanding teacher clinical preparation."

"Fundamentally, schools of education like ours should be working with high performing inner-city schools to draw on their experiences and best practices, and to break down the walls between higher education and the K-12 school system," says Steiner. Teacher U students work at full-time teaching jobs during the week, engage in school-based clinical and professional development activities and take weekend courses that are co-taught by Hunter faculty and teachers and school leaders from the three charter networks.

The charter networks gain capacity from the partnership, according to Norman Atkins, former CEO of Uncommon Schools and founder of Uncommon Knowledge and Achievement, Inc. (UKA) the non-profit organization cre-

ated to administer the program with Hunter College. "Achievement First, KIPP and Uncommon were looking at the capacity of our organizations to grow over the course of the next five years, and the pool of available teachers and leaders was the biggest barrier. We could have ended up competing over fewer and fewer people, but we decided to be more proactive about finding and developing our own human capital."

Asked what makes Hunter College a good fit for the emerging initiative, Atkins says "Dean Steiner was waiting for us with open arms. He had been thinking about doing something similar on his own. But we realized that a partnership made sense. Hunter College is a public institution, like our schools. Their mission is aligned with ours in terms of a focus on training teachers for urban schools. He is an ed reformer interested in working with charter schools. He shared our vision for being outcomes-driven."

And outcomes-driven they will be. One requirement to graduate from Hunter's program is a condition that the master's degree candidates will improve student achievement within their classrooms, as demonstrated by a master's defense using data from state tests and other assessments.

Not all graduates will work in a school run by KIPP, Achievement First, or Uncommon. Atkins acknowledges that one goal of Teacher U is to "disseminate some of the more effective practices we have developed and share them with others." Each year, the program expects to enroll Teach For America corps members and individuals from the New York City Teaching Fellows program, in addition to the teachers employed by KIPP, Uncommon, and Achievement First.

The need for charter school leadership preparation has been confirmed by recent studies.

While the Teacher U partners are counting on developing future charter school leaders from within their pool of teaching talent, other colleges and universities are devising programs to recruit and cultivate new charter school leaders from broader populations. The need for charter school leadership preparation has been confirmed by recent studies, including *Closing the Skill Gap: New Options for Charter School Leadership Development*, from the National Charter School Research Project at the University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE). This report supports claims that there is a dearth of programs tailored to equip charter school leaders "with a broad base of knowledge [to] meet the challenge of managing a complex self-governing institution" (Campbell, 2008, page 4).

Thirteen programs were studied by the CRPE researchers, based on their emphases on preparing charter school leaders. Five included a university-affiliated component: the KIPP School Leadership Program at Stanford's Education Leadership Institute; Central Michigan University's Masters in Educational Leadership with an emphasis in Charter School Leadership; Summer Institutes at Harvard University and Vanderbilt University; and Arizona State University's Master of Education for Educational Entrepreneurs (which has since been discontinued as a distinct program).

Higher education institutions often have to overcome significant organizational and financial obstacles to realize their charter school plans.

"There are politics involved in changing university programs, especially when introducing a new program," acknowledges CRPE's Christine Campbell, describing the challenge of launching new school leadership programs that include a focus on non-profit management. "Changing the landscape, adding things and taking things off the table can be a difficult process." Nonetheless, at least two other universities are taking initiative to fill this skill gap.

Nova Southeastern University has developed a doctoral minor in charter school education and leadership that focuses on improving students' skills in public budget and finance as they apply to non-profit management, facilities and school governance, among other areas. Through its Center for School Innovation, Ball State University is working on an entrepreneurial school leadership program that will bring together the university's Teachers College, Miller College of Business and College of Architecture and Planning. Ball State envisions a certificate program devoted to preparing entrepreneurial school leaders that complements its broader mission and increases its involvement in charter schools.

To meet national demand for charter school leadership programs, the new Nova Southeastern and Ball State programs, like Central Michigan's charter school leadership program, are offered primarily online, though Nova's program does have some on-site requirements. CMU's Goenner notes the importance of providing a program that can be completed online in a "compressed format" that allows participants "to balance the demands of work, school, family and other obligations."

Balancing Risks and Rewards

Regardless of the pathway taken by the colleges and universities to become leaders in the charter school sector, their progress would not be possible without what Hunter College's Steiner terms "earned good will and a lot of good fortune." While charter schools have been widely accepted in most states as an important part of the education landscape, these higher education institutions had to overcome significant organizational and financial obstacles to realize their plans.

Earning institutional commitment among key constituents—trustees, high-ranking administrative officials, faculty members, students, and donors—was of primary importance to higher education leaders who have successfully integrated charter school programming into university offerings. At some institutions, such as Washington University in St. Louis, buy-in was accomplished through a steering committee of university administrators and faculty, which ultimately made a recommendation to the chancellor that the university should sponsor a charter school. A similar decision-making process was followed when faculty at the University of California – San Diego proposed that the university should consider running its own charter school.

In other cases, decisions were driven by one or two individuals with a vision. Ball State's Roy Weaver said "People often ask how the faculty at the college felt about [becoming a charter authorizer]. I didn't bring it to the department chairs for a vote. I met with them and told them this is a direction the University wanted to go, and here's why... It wasn't what you'd expect, or what the textbooks would tell you to do to get buy-in, but we wanted to act quickly."

Hunter's David Steiner moved forward with developing the Teacher U program, and invited his faculty to participate. "The one assumption throughout this process has been that the involvement of all faculty is completely voluntary. I presented it to the faculty, but left it up to them to say yes, or 'I would prefer to be involved in other projects.' It is not a command performance." But Steiner did encourage faculty members to learn more about the vision for the program by holding a "town hall meeting" with Atkins and KIPP co-founder Dave Levin, and by inviting faculty to visit charter schools in the three participating charter networks. He estimates that 20% of the College's faculty are involved in the Teacher U program, including all three department chairs.

In most cases, the primary concern voiced about moving forward with charter activities relate to the perceived risk to the reputation of the institution, especially given the unprecedented levels of accountability set for the charter school sector. Stanford's Stipek acknowledges "this is a

“If you start a school and put your university’s name on the door, there is no viable exit strategy. I’m not going to tell a 3rd grade parent, ‘Sorry. We’re not going to do this any more.’... A university that decides to run a school puts a stake in the ground, and is making a permanent commitment.”

— Timothy Knowles
Lewis-Sebring Director of the Urban Education Institute
University of Chicago

highly visible activity, and it’s highly risky. It doesn’t look good if the students are not performing well. The president was intrigued by the idea, and encouraged the trustees to support it. But university officials are vigilant and need reassurance that we will succeed. This is not for the weak of heart.”

Indeed, some university trustees and administrators have had to fervently defend their decision to become involved in the charter school sector. When Central Michigan University began to authorize charter schools it found itself in the midst of a very controversial public debate. “The university became the lightning rod of the political debate on charters,” James Goenner explains. “In 1996, a school district superintendent sent the president of the university a letter. He said he would no longer hire CMU graduates or encourage his high school students to attend CMU.

The president and the board of trustees stepped up and said ‘We are going to do this. We are not going to be intimidated and blackmailed.’”

Ultimately, charter school initiatives must become a high priority if they are to succeed over the long term. Chicago’s Knowles observes it is important to “cultivate support and have a formal architecture to ensure that people know [the charter school] is a strategic priority for the university.” This is especially true over the passage of time, as trustees come and go and the institution experiences turnover in its administration. Like the University of Chicago, which, through the Urban Education Institute, has “formal architecture” to oversee its charter schools and other education initiatives, Stanford University founded a non-profit organization, Stanford New Schools, to operate its two charter campuses.

The same is true of several university-affiliated charter authorizers, which were initially operated by one or two individuals out of chancellors’ and deans’ offices. Central Michigan University established The Center for Charter Schools, Ball State University formed an Office of Charter Schools and the State University of New York oversees the Charter Schools Institute. Although Hunter College’s Teacher U is not a department within the college, the

school has signed a memorandum of understanding formalizing its relationship with its non-profit partner, Uncommon Knowledge and Achievement, Inc.

However, it is less-often the case that these organizations are fully-staffed, or fully-funded, especially during the early years. SUNY Trustee Ed Cox described a sense of urgency for getting the Charter Schools Institute up and running quickly. “We were the 34th state to approve a charter law. There were a lot of schools ready to go, and we felt that if they were ready we shouldn’t hold them up. Within six months we had three charter schools authorized and up and running. We achieved this with a skeleton staff, bringing in charter school administrators, authorizers, finance specialists, and others from around the country to evaluate the large number of initial applications. Since charter schools had been around for about ten years there were people out there who had the necessary skills and experiences, and they were eager to be helpful. This system of outside expert evaluators worked well, and we continue to use it in lieu of building an internal bureaucracy.”

For Ball State, early chartering activities required a significant investment by the university. Larry Gabbert, Director of Ball State’s Office of Charter Schools says “one of the biggest challenges we came across was funding [the Office of Charter Schools]. When I was hired there was a significant deficit in the budget—a result of the investment the university had made in the development of charters—due to cost recovery. Another challenge was staffing the office. The rapid growth of new charters across the state required rethinking and reorganizing the office and adding additional staff.”

In the case of university-affiliated charter schools, the funding challenge has been to supplement per-pupil allocations to meet the real costs of educating urban students. Timothy Knowles describes the challenge: “Our mission is getting kids into college. You can’t get there solely on public dollars, so we raise money... from private, public, and corporate sources. The financial architecture is a definite risk. It is easy for a university not to do this for financial reasons.”

Dean Stipek of Stanford echoes this concern: “It’s really hard to provide for kids who have the significant needs our students have and to do it with the limited financial support provided by the state. I spend a lot of time fundraising.”

Despite risks, higher education involvement in the charter sector has created significant opportunities for institutions that pursue it.

In contrast, Hunter College and the Teacher U program have overcome funding challenges. The Robin Hood Foundation provides long-term support for the program, and Hunter College’s School of Education receives an Americorps Professional Service grant that significantly offsets the tuition of all students in the program, as well as provides administrative funds to support project coordination.

Establishing and implementing a clear governance structure to provide oversight and accountability also plays a critical role. University authorizers tend to report to senior administrative officials within the university (such as Ball State University and CMU), or to university trustees directly (as is the case at SUNY). University-operated charter schools are often overseen by independent boards of trustees whose members include a broad representation of community members as well as university faculty and administrators, who serve in lieu of the university’s full board of trustees. In the case of the University of Chicago, the university established a non-profit corporation which holds the school’s charter. The board of the non-profit corporation has oversight for the four charter school campuses and abides by public meeting law—a requirement that the University of Chicago, a private institution, is not otherwise obligated to meet.

In the case of the Preuss School, organizational oversight, accountability systems and the school’s reputation (as well as that of its sponsor university) were challenged by allegations of grade tampering during the spring and summer of

2007. The charter school is ultimately overseen by the university’s chancellor, who delegates day-to-day oversight to the senior vice-chancellor. A separate board of trustees, which includes community members, also advises the chancellor. But when news of the allegations came to light, the chancellor and senior vice-chancellor responded to the potential crisis by relying on university systems already in place. “We handled it the way we handle any complaint. We have the ability within the university to respond to similar allegations; we have an active internal audit function and we utilized those resources. Our primary concern was to worry about the health, safety and education of our students in such a way that wouldn’t harm their credibility to get into college.”³

Despite risks, higher education involvement in the charter sector has created significant opportunities for institutions that pursue it. To organizations like the University of Chicago, becoming involved in the charter schooling has attracted high quality scholars and practitioners to the university community. At Stanford’s charter school, intra-university partnerships such as the one between the School of Education and the Child Psychiatry Department, are emerging on an ongoing basis. University-affiliated charter schools also provide a hospitable site for faculty research, where relationships and trust are developed over time and remain despite changes in leadership and administration. And in the case of Ball State University, becoming a charter authorizer has helped the university reach communities throughout the state.

Colleges and universities throughout the country are increasing their involvement in the charter school sector. This involvement is not without challenges, but the rewards have been considerable. Whether overseeing schools as an authorizer, operating schools directly or preparing teachers and school leaders, the charter sector represents a new and dynamic opportunity for institutions of higher education to advance knowledge and learning. After all, “What are universities for, if they aren’t helping America solve its biggest problems?”

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Universities play an important role as researchers and analysts of charter school policy, practices and results. While these contributions are significant, this Issue Brief focuses on specific roles of colleges and universities play as actors in the charter school sector, primarily as charter school authorizers, operators and providers of teacher and leader preparation programs.
- ² See *Closing the Skill Gap: New Options for Charter School Leadership Development*, released by the National Charter School Research Project at the University of Washington’s Center on Reinventing Public Education, available online at http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/view/csr_pubs/236.
- ³ See http://www-chancellor.ucsd.edu/letter2007_1212.html for a full report from the University of California at San Diego regarding allegations of grade tampering at the Preuss School.

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