Family and Community Engagement in Charter Schools

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Handbook on
Family and
Community Engagement

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Increasing the levels of family and community engagement in schools has been an important rationale for the creation of charter schools from the beginnings of the movement in the early 1990s (Weil, 2000; Wohlstetter & Smith, 2010). While charters often have more flexibility than district-run schools, they too face challenges related to family engagement. This chapter briefly outlines some areas in which charter schools are well-suited to high levels of engagement as well as some unique challenges they face.

**Schools of Choice and Hyper-Alignment**

Charter schools have been envisioned as potential incubators for educational innovation generally (Lubienski, 2003), and family and community engagement specifically (Moore & Carr-Chellman, 1999). Family and community engagement in low-income communities has been a challenge we have not met (Ferrara, 2009; Sarason, 1995). As schools of choice, charter schools would be expected to attract more involved families because they generally were involved in the initial student application process, rather than passively accepting their district-assigned school. For this fact alone, charter schools are well-suited to be successful in family engagement. Somewhat differently, hyper-alignment in charter schools results when charters create a specific and desirable niche in a local education market. Hyper-aligned schools can be organized thematically based on curriculum or pedagogy or a combination of both. Examples of curricular themes include media arts, environmental studies, or a particular language or culture (Davenport & Bogan, 2005; Kana’iaupuni, Ledward, & Jensen, 2010; Murawski, Lockwood, Khalili, & Johnston, 2010; Voigt, 2009). Pedagogical themes include the integration of new media, social media, project-based learning, expeditionary learning, service learning, and design thinking (Carroll et al., 2010; Garran, 2008; Peebles, 2004; Permu & Maloy, 2010; Stewart, 2002; Voigt, 2009).

Niche charters provide opportunities to align curriculum and pedagogy with community strengths and needs and to foster meaningful family/community engagement. Davenport and Bogan (2005) report practices at an Afro-centric school in Michigan where parents were engaged in consensus-based
decision making and participating in specially designed rites of passage for students. Hawaiian language and culture schools (Kana’iaupuni, Ledward, & Jensen, 2010) leverage the linguistic and cultural knowledge of families and community members to accomplish their educational mission. Unsurprisingly, engagement is likely to be high when charter schools draw on a community’s cultural wealth (Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009).

**Novel Engagement Approaches in Charter Schools**

Some novel approaches to engagement have become associated with charter schools, including: board governance, home visits, and parental involvement contracts. Each of these is discussed briefly here.

The governance structure of charter schools is, at least theoretically, an innovation in and of itself (Abernathy, 2004; Fuller, Gawlik, Gonzales, & Park, 2004). Having school-level boards rather than district-level boards creates many more “seats at the table” for those interested in formal decision-making roles. Parental involvement in school governance is embedded into some state charter school legislation (Smith & Wohlstetter, 2009). Participation on school governing boards by minority parents has been found to increase overall parental involvement in a school (Marshall, 2006). However, because charter schools tend to serve low-income communities and board members are often recruited for their fundraising and management skills, there is a lack of low-income parents on charter school boards (Scott & Holme, 2002; Smith, Wohlstetter, Kuzin, & De Pedro, 2011).

Some charters, as well as many non-charters, use home visits as a means to promote family engagement with the school. Home visits can have multiple functions: student recruitment, communicating expectations, and establishing/maintaining relationships between school personnel, students, and their families (Henke, 2011; Matthews, 2009). Given the predominantly low-income communities served by charters, home visits can be particularly important for bridging cultural gaps by providing educators with firsthand knowledge of students’ home cultures (Baeder, 2010).

Similarly, parental involvement contracts (or compacts) are a common charter school tool. Compacts have been required of all Title I schools for nearly 20 years (Moles, 2005) and have been described as an opportunity to improve student outcomes by making expectations for parents and educators clear (Henderson, Carson, Avalone, & Whipple, 2011). In charter schools, they have also been decried as instruments of compliance that screen out poor families (Becker, Nakagawa, & Corwin, 1995; Wells, 2002). This is somewhat controversial because, in a context of school choice, there is a clear perverse incentive to select only higher performing students, and forcing families to meet contractual obligations could be one way to accomplish that (Becker, Nakagawa, & Corwin, 1997; Green & Mead, 2004; Weil, 2000).

**Challenges Faced by Charters**

Family and community engagement is likely to be as varied within the charter schools as it is within district-run public schools. There are several challenges that are particularly salient for charter schools, however. These include: geographic challenges, the way in which charter schools are authorized, and the growing influence of no excuses charter schools.

**Geographic Problem**

Geographically, charter schools often serve a wider area than neighborhood schools. As schools of choice, charters generally draw their student population from multiple school attendance zones, rather than primarily from one or two, as would traditionally be the case. While this form of school choice liberates students from being assigned to failing schools by their zip code, it means that individual charter schools are forced to interface with multiple elected officials, to forge bonds with multiple dispersed community groups, and to help transportation-challenged families get to school for meetings.

**Charter School Authorization Problem**

Recently, many charter schools have followed a path to inception that inhibits community participation (Beabout, 2010a). Individuals aspiring to serve as the principal of a charter school apply for an incubation fellowship, receive leadership training, select a board, submit a charter, and then, when the charter is approved, a school site
is assigned; then families are recruited and the school opens. This timeline front-loads decision making so that very little is left to be negotiated by the time families come into the picture. The school leader has had his or her ideas encoded in the approved charter and has selected a board that will supervise the implementation of the plan. Parents can help implement the plan, but this is less meaningful than helping to revise it. The last-minute assignment of school buildings to new charters by districts presents additional constraints on building local relationships. Community development or community organizing approaches to charter school creation provide an alternative development path (Fabricant, 2010; Oakes & Lipton, 2002; Shirley, 1997; Warren, 2005).

**No Excuses Problem**

A rapidly growing piece of the charter school universe (often called the no excuses schools) has framed urban schooling with three axioms: (1) educational inequity can be rectified at the school site, (2) low-income students can and will meet state standards at all costs, and (3) educators need to do whatever it takes. This statement, for all of its power and good intentions, places the school as an interloper in—rather than a part of—the community it serves. The community is seen as a problem to be fixed (Warren, Thompson, & Saegert, 2001). Such thinking predisposes schools to use state-articulated goals as the primary (or sole) objectives of schooling, and stakeholder engagement is beneficial only to the extent that it furthers progress towards achieving these goals. For example, a review of research studies from the National Charter School Research Project, based at the University of Washington, found that those dealing with community issues tended to focus on parent selection factors and parental evaluation surveys, with nearly a total absence of research on family and community engagement. This go-it-alone philosophy is potentially exacerbated in schools run by charter management organizations (CMOs), where decisions are made at the corporate level and not at the school site (Anderson, 2005).

**Action Principles**

**State Education Agency**

1. Incentivize the formation of strong community partnerships in the authorization and renewal of charters. These relationships provide curricular and pedagogical supports, rather than auxiliary services like tutoring and healthcare (see Beabout, 2010b).

2. Provide legal guidance to charters on the use of parental involvement compacts, particularly focusing on any failure to comply clauses that might present constitutional problems or serve to screen out low-income parents.

3. Earmark funds in charter school start-up grants for parent/community liaisons in charter schools.

4. Work with state-level funding agencies to create charter school incubation fellowships so that local leaders, with community connections, can create charter school applications that can compete with those created by some of the national fellowships.

5. Allow charters to create attendance zones so that students can attend schools close to home.

**Local Education Agency**

1. Be proactive about supporting strong community-based organizations as they partner with charter schools and/or apply for their own.

2. Make school building assignment decisions for charter schools as early as possible to facilitate community engagement. Minimize the shuffling of charter schools between buildings as this disrupts delicate relationships.

3. Support the school choices of parents by providing a comprehensive guide to increasing the levels of family and community engagement in schools has been an important rationale for the creation of charter schools from the beginnings of the movement in the early 1990s.
local schools that includes school locations, grades served, academic and other school performance data, and entrance requirements.

4. Bring together community resources to provide board service training and development for low-income parents wishing to serve on charter school boards.

School
1. Facilitate faculty–parent–community discussions about issues of power and how they impact school engagement levels.

2. Create a specific community relations plan that involves two-way communication with parents, even when this is not required in a charter application. These can include the formation of a parents’ cabinet, monthly coffee chats, home visits, and focus groups on potential school initiatives, and should include purely social gatherings as well.

3. If using parental involvement compacts, allow for multiple forms of participation so as not to deter low-income families from enrolling in the school. If compacts have a failure to comply clause, seek legal guidance or else do not include this type of provision.

4. Seek out specific neighborhoods that need a good school when writing a charter application. This focuses the search for community-based partners and helps recruit students from a narrow geographic area, simplifying future engagement efforts.

5. Seek out community-based organizations when recruiting students and community partners. These intact constituencies can help to mitigate some of the power differential that often thwarts successful engagement efforts.

References


