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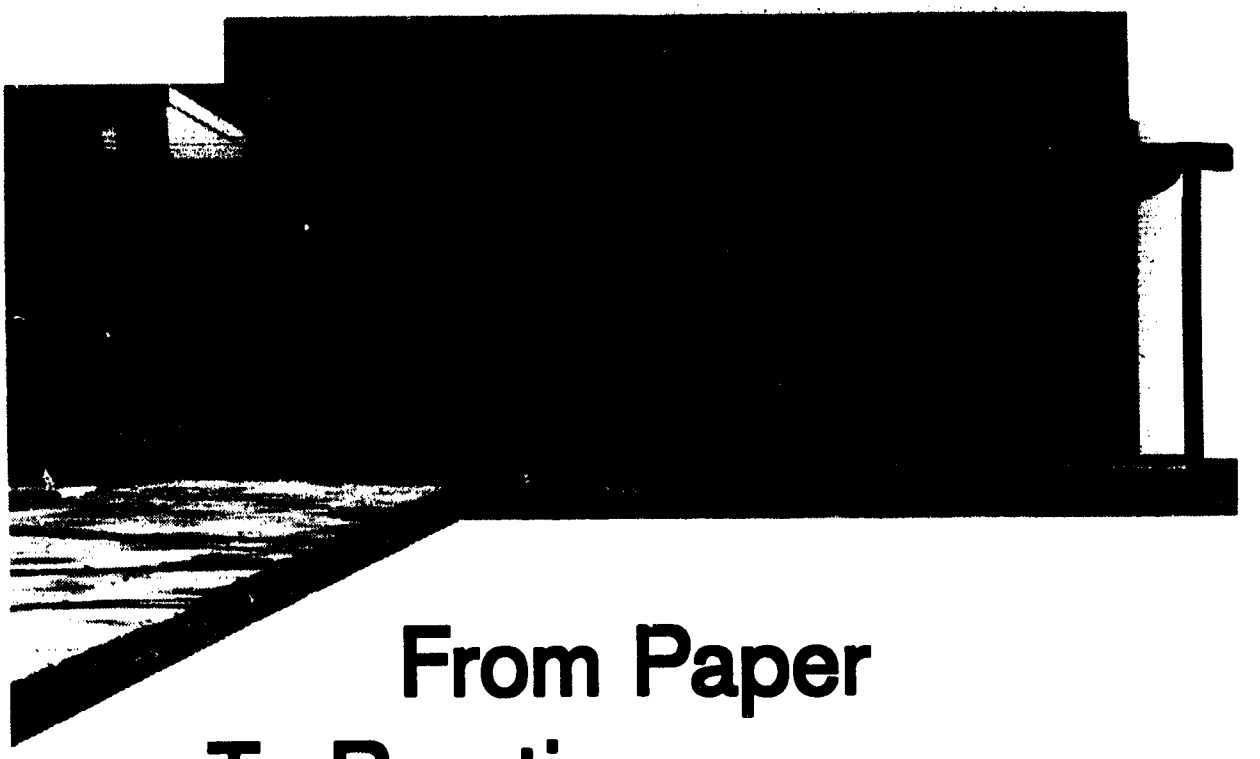
ABSTRACT

Signed into law on September 2, 1992, California's charter-school law has led to the approval of over 100 charter schools. San Diego City Schools (SDCS) was one of the first districts to sponsor charter schools, including the Harriet Tubman School, 1 year after the law became effective. This document provides a brief overview and summary of a case study-report of the charter school at Harriet Tubman Village operating since September, 1994. Data were derived from document analysis; a review of literature; parent questionnaires (81 out of 180 parents, a 45 percent response rate); classroom observation; and interviews with school district staff, school administrators, school board members, teachers, and parents. Findings are presented for four general areas--education program staff characteristics and beliefs, governance, and parent participation. The study found that: (1) The lines of authority and liability between charter schools and the district are ambiguous; (2) the review and approval process did not produce a charter that is clearly consistent with the legislation or the school district's requirements; (3) the charter-school petition inadequately describes the school's educational program; (4) teachers express some of the concepts and teach some of the content that the petition describes; (5) standardized tests are driving significant adaptations in the educational programs; (6) the Tubman Governance Council has been partially inhibited because its authority is not clearly delineated; (7) governance council members had to grapple with serious and complex issues, often without an experienced leader; and (8) the principals of choice may be compromised if parents are not fully knowledgeable about the nature of Tubman's program and their other options. Recommendations are offered for improving the education program, governance, parental choice, and evaluation. (Contains 10 endnotes). (LMI)



From Paper To Practice

Challenges Facing a California Charter School

May 16, 1996

Executive Summary

WestEd

From Paper to Practice:
Challenges Facing a California Charter School

A report presented to the San Diego Unified School Board

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May 1996

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WestEd

WestEd is a public agency uniting Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development and Southwest Regional Laboratory to serve the education communities in Arizona, California, Nevada and Utah.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document provides a brief overview and summary of *From Paper to Practice: Challenges Facing a California Charter School*, a Technical Report, which was submitted to the San Diego Unified School Board on May 20, 1996. The report is based on a detailed case study of the Charter School at Harriet Tubman Village operating since September, 1994.

Introduction

At first glance, the Charter School at Harriet Tubman Village seems like any other neighborhood school. A few sparse jacaranda trees edge a lawn, well-worn in places by children's play. Located in a district building that once housed an elementary school and later administrative offices, the main facility is unusually well-kept and clean. A small vegetable garden grows next to a newly paved playground and a striking mural made of glazed tiles designed by children extends on a wall near the auditorium.

Tubman's K-6 classrooms mirror the multiethnic community surrounding the school. Of the 227 children, approximately 24 percent are Caucasian, 34 percent African American, 35 percent Hispanic (most of whom come from Spanish-speaking families) and another 15 students (seven percent) from families of Asian descent.

Yet Tubman is not an ordinary public school; it is one of eight charter schools in the San Diego City Schools (SDCS). And even among charter schools, Tubman is unusual. While most charter schools are conversions of existing public schools, Tubman is not. It started from scratch. All of its teachers either were new hires or newly selected from other schools in the district. Even a new school facility had to be found.

When the district reopened the former John Muir School site to relieve overcrowding at two other schools in the area, Tubman found a home. Now the school shares the site with a conventional public school, the district believing that children bused to the Tubman site should have a choice of which school they want to attend.

Finally, and perhaps most distinguishing, Tubman is different in its educational program. It is one of a small, but growing number of public schools where the educational program is based on the private Waldorf school model.[1] Tubman derives its teaching and learning strategies from the theories of Rudolph Steiner, founder of an eclectic, allegedly religious philosophy called Anthroposophy.[2]

Due to the complicated policy issues surrounding such a distinctive school, WestEd, at the request of the SDCS, conducted a study of the Harriet Tubman Village Charter School between November 1995 and May 1996. The WestEd study team, in collaboration with district staff and with the cooperation of the school, was guided by an eight-member Advisory Committee representing the local county office of education, universities, schools, and business and civic organizations. The findings, conclusions and recommendations from the WestEd study team's research are summarized in this executive summary.

Overview of Charter Schools

Charter schools are essentially deregulated, site-based managed schools of choice. In California, charter schools receive automatic exemptions from most state codes and district policies regarding curriculum, instruction, budget and personnel. Such freedom is supposed to allow those closest to the learner the flexibility to implement innovative programs. In return, charter schools are required to show results, by participating in state-mandated testing programs and demonstrating attainment of the goals specified in their charter. If they fail to show results their charter can be revoked and if students or parents are not happy with the charter school's program, they can choose to attend another school. Advocates believe that as charter schools become more successful and more prevalent, they will force the other schools operating in an open-enrollment area to adopt equally exemplary models or be forced to shutdown, thereby effecting a systemwide transformation.

California has nearly 40 percent of the nation's 270 charter schools. Signed into law on September 2, 1992, California's charter school law has led to the approval of over 100 charter schools, including eight charter schools in San Diego.[3] SDCS was one of the first districts to sponsor charter schools, approving three charter schools, including the Harriet Tubman School, one year after the law became effective.[4]

Leading the vanguard both in number and relative seniority, California's charter schools are being watched closely by those inside and outside the charter school movement. Amidst the hard work of many parents, teachers and community members, research has already shown that the risk-taking -- and mistake-making -- of these dedicated reformers has yielded intriguing and innovative approaches to education.[5]

Charter schools have not stood alone in facing the uncertainty and challenge involved in this new venture. In order not to limit the freedom granted to charter schools, sponsoring agencies, such as SDCS, must now rethink conventional responses to handling unfamiliar and often unforeseen issues. Inevitably, as those involved with Tubman and other charter schools have learned, controversy and conflict often accompany autonomy.

Through this case study, we have identified five interrelated issues critical not just to Tubman, but to all charter schools attempting to move from paper to practice:

1. **Autonomy and Accountability** – How do the school and the district balance a charter school's freedom with an adequate amount of public accountability for what students are learning? How is the approval process for a charter structured so that a school operates legally and soundly, but has the latitude to innovate?

2. **Educational Program** – How should the charter's curriculum and educational program be judged? By statewide curriculum framework standards? Or by criteria specified in the charter petition?

3. **Site-based Governance** – How does a school create an effective, problem-solving, and representative school-based governance council?
4. **Parental Choice** – How can a school ensure that parents have genuine opportunity and adequate knowledge to choose among schools?
5. **Charter School Evaluation Design** -- To what criteria should charter schools be held accountable?

As this study will reveal, there are no easy answers to these questions. Yet how they are addressed, we believe, will have long term implications for the future of this and other charter schools.

Methodology

This study is not meant to be a report card to determine Tubman's future. Instead, it contributes to the pool of information available to the district and the school, providing information that will help each to make better decisions about how best to proceed. During the course of the study, WestEd wrestled with several critical issues that have shaped the study's direction and outcomes.

A critical first issue was determining the purpose of this study. The district needed many types of information, including fiscal audits, compliance monitoring and evaluation of learning outcomes, as well as program improvement information to help the school improve its effectiveness and to assist the district as it establishes effective working relationships with charter schools. However, conducting fiscal audits and monitoring compliance with laws and district regulations are activities inconsistent with WestEd's mission. The study does, however, provide some general information that may be helpful in answering some compliance questions.

Although a study of this nature would usually measure educational outcomes, it was decided that, given the current stage of the school's evolution, it would be more appropriate and productive to focus on obtaining a better understanding of the school's progress in meeting its objectives and carrying-out its program. Understanding these objectives is a prerequisite to designing fair outcome evaluation measures and is also critical for assisting the school and the district in improving its programs. In time, such evaluation measures will be a vital component to assessing the school's performance. In the meantime, the district already has two mechanisms in place to begin tracking standard outcomes across all schools including charters: district-wide tests and parent satisfaction surveys.

The preceding question raises another, one that has not been fully resolved. What is a fair and reasonable period of time to give a newly started school before it is held accountable and required to clearly demonstrate an acceptable level of student progress? Realistically, new schools require some time to achieve enormously challenging start-up tasks, such as staffing, curriculum development, and setting up an effective governance structure and monitoring system. On the other hand, students pay the potential penalties

of risks associated with new ventures, and parents are justifiably concerned and anxious for evaluation results in order to make informed decisions, not to mention taxpayers who also have a right to be assured that public funds are well-spent.

Another prevailing question that was answered at the outset, but that has nonetheless re-emerged at several points in the study is: Will this study be able to determine whether the school has in the past, or is currently, teaching religion? WestEd's response from the beginning has been that this study would not resolve the sectarian issue. Answering the question responsibly hinges on the answers to complex legal issues which would likely require a detailed investigation of that single issue. The study does, however, provide limited descriptive information about this issue.

Core Evaluation Questions

To guide the study's investigation and analysis, 15 core research questions were developed that covered a wide range of topics. District staff collaborated with the study team in identifying an initial pool of questions, and the final revised framework included the following 15 questions:

1. Is there evidence of progress toward achieving the student outcomes identified in the charter?
2. Does the racial and ethnic balance among student backgrounds reflect the general population within the district?
3. How is the school being governed?
4. How closely does the school's educational program reflect district criteria?
5. How is the school being staffed?
6. Is the school targeting low-achieving students?
7. Has the charter school provided expanded choices in educational opportunities available within the public school system?
8. Is the school following school district procedures?
9. Has the charter school met other conditions upon which the charter petition was approved?
10. Is the educational program consistent with the objectives stated in the charter?
11. Is the school offering the educational program promised in the petition?
12. Are teacher qualifications consistent with the charter petition?
13. Is the school following general procedures described in the petition?
14. Is the school following administrative procedures described in the petition?
15. What process was used to approve the charter petition and what was the role of the district's criteria?

However, after selecting the above questions, WestEd took responsibility for deciding the research priorities, and the appropriateness and feasibility of answering each

question. Furthermore, WestEd distilled and supplemented this list with additional questions as the study progressed. We made these decisions within the context of an evolving project and growing familiarity with Tubman's situation.

Sources of Information

Information for the study was drawn from a variety of sources. Unlike other research on charter schools to date, this study provides a rich body of in-depth information, both qualitative and quantitative. The primary sources are listed below:

- The compilation and analysis of the requirements and expectations of the school based on
    1. state legislation governing charter schools;
    2. the charter petition; and
    3. the school district's guidelines for approving charter schools.
- An analysis of documents available in the school and in the district pertaining to the Tubman school, including curriculum and teacher materials, selected training materials, and minutes of the Governance Council meetings.
- Twenty informal interviews with six school district staff and a variety of individuals involved from the school's inception, including founding parents and former teachers; a representative from the business community; and the legal counsel for the California Teachers Association.
- Two interviews with the former director of the school and his administrative assistant.
- Five interviews with members of the San Diego Unified School Board.
- Nine interviews (lasting up to 1-1/2 hours in length) with the eight main teachers responsible for the seven grades in the school and one teacher responsible for supervising the early childhood education program and for teaching crafts.
- Eight informal and unstructured observations of each teacher's class (to provide study team members with concrete examples of the teaching approaches described in the interviews).
- Seventeen interviews with parents, 13 randomly selected and four who serve on the governance council.
- Eighty-one questionnaires mailed to 180 parents (45 percent response rate).

- WestEd's previous studies and surveys of charter schools in California as well as our published briefs on relevant policy issues.
- Literature and other information relating to the charter school movement and other choice programs in education, including information about charter schools gleaned from the Internet.

Initially the study team intended to focus exclusively on the Tubman school as it is operating this year. However, as the study progressed it became clear that events in the first year shaped those in the second year. Therefore, the report includes an account of the critical events that occurred during the first year of operation.

The importance of the larger context of the state charter school law and the conceptual issues surrounding the charter school movement also became increasingly prominent as the study team pondered conclusions and recommendations. Ambiguities in the law and the way it is being interpreted by key actors within the district account for some problems and issues that are discussed throughout, but particularly in the last section of the report.

Background and Context

Few could have predicted the tumultuous journey that lay ahead for Tubman school when it first opened its doors in September, 1994. During the first and second years, the school faced several challenging issues which we believe significantly affected the school's current operations.

Tubman's origins date back to the fall of 1992 when a parent, hearing that the Governor had signed charter school legislation, called a member of the San Diego Unified School Board to inquire about the possibility of establishing a Waldorf charter school in the district. The board member whom the parent spoke with had previously visited a public Waldorf school in Milwaukee and had been impressed by the experience. After more discussion, the parent eventually drafted the Tubman charter school petition.

Tubman's First Year

- **Drafting of the Charter Petition.** The Tubman charter petition was written hurriedly, essentially by one person whose association with the school ended shortly after it opened. Many who now work at the school lack familiarity with the contents of the petition. Even the school's founders agree that the language in the petition outlining the school's purposes is somewhat vague and that the petition lacks measurable outcomes. Perhaps more important, it does not reflect many of the district's guidelines for approving charter schools – e.g., following state curriculum frameworks.

- **Tubman Designated an Overflow School.** The opportunity to house the Tubman charter school emerged when the district established an "overflow" program by reopening an idled school. Children were to be bused from two other neighborhoods whose elementary schools were crowded. Founders of the Tubman school, who were in search of a facility, suggested this newly reopened site as the location for the charter school. With this designation as a charter/overflow school site, however, came confusion on the part of some parents whose children were being bused to the Tubman charter school.

- **Compressed Staffing Timeline.** Once the site was designated on April 29, 1994, the school had only four months to organize. It needed to hire and train staff, prepare the facility, and inform parents of their options before the following year. Personnel selection consequently took place very late in the recruitment season, which meant that in some cases the school often had to settle for second choices and for staff members unfamiliar with the school district's administrative procedures and/or with Waldorf education. For example, the director, who was selected by the founders after the petition was approved, had never been an administrator in a public school system, let alone charged with starting a public school from scratch.

- **Early Loss of Key Parent Leaders.** Two parents who initiated the idea of a Waldorf-inspired school--as well as the one who actually wrote the petition--withdrew their children from Tubman within a few months of its opening. Another parent who had been involved in initial planning became embroiled in a conflict with the school's director. As a result, the school was left without the full participation of its strongest advocates.

- **Legal Suits Filed.** During the first year, two suits were filed in relation to the Tubman School: one by the California School Employees Association (CSEA) concerning the way the charter petition was ratified within the district; the other by the California Teachers Association (CTA), as part of a statewide action against charter schools.

- **Complaints from Parents and Teachers.** A few parents and teachers voiced a series of complaints during the first year, which led to negative press reports that colored the public's perception during the subsequent year. Criticisms by former teachers included: 1) claims that the Waldorf training did not sufficiently address day-to-day classroom challenges and that the content was sectarian and of a highly personal nature, and 2) criticisms of the educational director relating to misleading statements and unfair treatment. Parent criticisms included: 1) concerns about their children's progress, lack of academic rigor, lax grading, no homework, and discipline problems; and 2) claims that the director was unresponsive to concerns, and 3) concerns about how teacher dismissals were handled.

Tubman's Second-Year

- **Opening of Second School on Site.** Over the summer, in response to complaints and issues raised by parents and teachers, the district decided to open an alternate, traditional public school on the same overflow site. They also surveyed parents involved in the busing program to find out if they wished to continue sending their children to the Tubman school or to the newly established traditional school.

- **An Evaluation Requested.** Also in response to parent and teacher complaints, the district collaborated with WestEd to evaluate Tubman's programs. Data collection began late that fall.

- **Release of Test Results.** At the end of the summer, the faculty received disturbing results of Tubman students' performance on the Abbreviated Stanford Achievement Test (ASAT) taken the preceding spring as part of the district's system-wide testing program. According to national norms, Tubman scores in reading comprehension placed it at the 21st percentile; in math applications, at the 25th percentile; and in language expression, at the 22nd percentile. These rankings are 11 to 23 percentile points below similar scores at Birney and Jefferson elementary schools, neighboring schools which have similar student populations. This ranking spurred a series of changes to the Waldorf curriculum during the second year.

- **Governance Council Conflicts and Resignation of the Director.** The dispute between the school's director and the governance council reached a climax during the second year. Conflicts which began the year before arose between the governance council and the director due to: 1) the lack of governance council involvement in personnel decisions, 2) the fact that records and documentation of personnel decisions were not provided and were then reportedly lost in a fire, and 3) the fact that a teacher accused of misappropriating funds was eligible for unemployment compensation because the explanation accepted for her resignation was not related to the alleged misappropriation of funds. After a heated discussion at the council meeting in early March of the second year, the director resigned. Though he offered to withdraw the resignation the next morning, the council turned him down. He was reassigned to a support position within the school until the remainder of the year. The principal from the other overflow school on site was appointed as acting principal to the charter school.

Interviews with parents, teachers and others suggested that by the middle of the second year, ongoing controversies had led to low morale within the school as well as skepticism from outsiders. Any site-based governed school, and especially charter schools, however, are bound to face daunting personnel and organizational issues that can

lead to disgruntled parents and even community outcry. The question is how can the governance council be structured and operated to address other challenges that lay ahead?

Findings

Several themes emerged from our data collection and analysis in response to the 15 core evaluation questions. These themes are addressed in our Conclusions and Recommendations section too. Our findings are divided into four general areas: 1) educational program, 2) staff characteristic and beliefs, 3) governance and other issues, and 4) parent perspectives, including their attitudes about the school.

Educational Program

Classroom observations and interviews with teachers reveal the following about Tubman's educational program.

Educational Goals and Practices. To some degree, the school's program embodies some of the general concepts mentioned in the charter petition and characteristic of the Waldorf model. For example, classroom observations and interviews indicate there is:

- learning through imitation, repetition, recitation and rhythmic exercises;
- emphasis on kinesthetic and fine motor skill development; and
- emphasis on literature, the arts and music.

Adaptation and Modification of Program. Staff report that they are striving to modify the private school Waldorf model to meet certain academic expectations of the district and the legal requirements of a public school. One teacher described the program as combining "the best of Waldorf with the best of the district." Three significant areas of adaptation were identified and/or reported:

1) *Flexibility in selecting instructional materials and techniques* -- teachers using their own discretion in using Waldorf materials and curriculum, using district textbooks more frequently, and adapting some teaching to cover district assessment content;

2) *Integrating multicultural elements into curriculum* -- broader (than traditional Waldorf) approach to accommodate diverse backgrounds of children by adapting Waldorf practices, exposure to other culture through celebrations of events observed by different racial/ethnic groups, and stories about certain ethnic groups; and

3) *Varied student assessment practices* -- portfolios, in-class performance; teacher-made tests, open-ended quizzes, timed skill tests, shape and pattern

forming assessments, test accompanying district texts, district's Quick Reading Test, required district-wide tests (ASAT).

The results from the districtwide test were a significant impetus for changing the school's emphasis on academic skill attainment. However, this responsiveness to test results set up an uneasy tension, expressed by some staff. Some teachers confide that they are challenged by how to merge conventional skills required by standardized test with the Waldorf approach. Others, meanwhile, are not always comfortable with pushing students academically whom they believe are not developmentally ready. Despite such concerns, the staff demonstrates a willingness to adapt to their context, a resilience in the face of adversity and a readiness to learn from the past.

Staff Characteristics and Beliefs

Staff Characteristics. Tubman employs a wide range of individuals to carry out the functions of its school consisting of 30 full-time staff whose roles include: the director, eight teachers (2 kindergarten teachers and one teacher for each of the remaining grades), resource specialists and classroom aides.

Teachers at Tubman have varied backgrounds. According to a background profile form submitted by each teacher, five of the eight full-time teachers have teaching certificates (two earned in other countries). Seven had U.S. public school teaching experience before coming to Tubman. Of those, most had three to nine years of experience, but one teacher's public school career spanned more than 20 years. The former director and three teachers had from seven to over 20 years' of experience in Waldorf education, and several have had other education-related work experiences, including building a school in another country, starting a pre-school, counseling and language instruction in third world countries.

Teacher Beliefs. Information from a variety of sources indicates that teachers are committed to their work (e.g., they work long hours, including weekends; attend regularly-scheduled in-service meetings, summer Waldorf trainings at own expense) and are dedicated to Tubman (e.g., all plan to return next year). Teachers believe in the importance of balancing students' affective and cognitive needs, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Specifically, teachers mentioned the importance of achieving balance in students' lives, particularly between the emotions (e.g., through artistic development) and the intellect (e.g., through reading), and also between self-motivation and teamwork. Creating this type of harmony is also an educational purpose of the school, as stated in the charter petition.

Teachers also stress the importance of creating a family-like, nurturing and welcoming environment. Parent comments confirm this sentiment. One parent, for example, said she appreciated the "...total commitment of the teachers, the open-door policy and family togetherness in the classrooms."

In addition, teachers espouse a common, yet eclectic, set of assumptions about child development and how learning occurs that are unique to the Waldorf approach,

including: a belief that learning occurs in developmental sequence (i.e., to write and do math, a child must first draw and trace well); and that student learning is enhanced when accompanied by musical and body rhythms and other physical activities.

Teachers also report that the school provides them with continuous learning, self-evaluative and professional development opportunities. Most teachers have been involved in professional development activities such as Waldorf training during Saturday workshops or summer sessions. Nearly all teachers were observed by the director, usually at regular intervals, during the year. Some mentoring was reported as occurring within the school as well. An external review of the school was also conducted by a regional Waldorf schools association.

The school also provides services for students with special needs, but some teachers believe that the pull-out nature of these services is disruptive. This was reported by teachers in particular reference to some limited-English proficient children who are pulled out for language tutoring. Students with disabilities are said to be served by a district specialist.

Governance and Other Issues

Since a large degree of regulatory and decisionmaking authority is transferred to charter schools, the smooth operation of their governance bodies is critical. For this reason, the research team focused in depth on Tubman's governance council.

The Governance Council. This year there are five parents and four teachers represented on the governance council. Voting rules require a majority, but most decisions are normally reached by consensus. The governance council meets regularly, about once a month, and its meetings are open to the public. Although the council has primary responsibility for budget and operations of the school, another decisionmaking body, "College of Teachers," is responsible for pedagogy (i.e., curriculum and instruction). Parents are active members of the council, but only a handful of parents are involved in other governing bodies of the school, including the Parent Advisory Council.

This year the council has reported taking proactive steps that should noticeably improve fiscal accountability. Council members are taking steps, for example, to receive clarification about their level of authority and responsibility. Nevertheless the council has had to face numerous difficult issues this year regarding personnel decisions, hiring/firing authority and communication issues between the faculty and administrative staff.

Other issues. Although WestEd did not make determinations regarding sectarian, fiscal, safety and other issues, some general descriptive information was provided. With regard to sectarian issues, Tubman parents and teachers--this year--report that religion is not being taught. However, the school uses some unusual practices and materials, some of which may be susceptible to an interpretation that religion is being taught. No significant health, safety or discrimination incidences were reported.

Parent Perspectives

We obtained information on parent perspectives primarily from parent interviews and a parent survey. District-collected data was used when possible for comparison purposes.

Student Demographics. Tubman serves a diverse student population that is fairly representative of the district student population. The most notable difference is among African American students, who accounted for 34 percent of the Tubman student population. Currently, over half the students at Tubman are overflow students from other parts of the district. Nearly 60 percent of these students are bused from overflow neighborhoods, another 21 percent are from the local neighborhood and the remaining 20 percent were not from a designated attendance area and had applied for admission.

Types of Parents. On the survey parents were asked to list why they decided to send their child to Tubman. Of the 74 parents who responded to this question, 43 percent say they sent their child to Tubman because of "pull factors" (i.e. positive features of the school that attracted them). These same parents express more satisfaction with Tubman than the remaining 57 percent who stated "push factors" (i.e., felt it was their only option, proximity to home, dissatisfied with other neighborhood school).

In addition to this survey data, patterns in our interviews with randomly selected parents (and two members of the governance council) identified three categories of parent perspectives: supporters of the school who are familiar with the Tubman program; supporters of the school who are somewhat familiar with the Tubman program; and non-supporters of the school who are not familiar with the Tubman program. Parents interviewed were fairly evenly distributed among these groups, with slightly more parents in the second group.

Parent Satisfaction. According to survey data, most parents say they are satisfied with the school, but a small core are not. Forty-six percent indicated being "very satisfied," while another 38 percent were "satisfied." The remaining (less than 20 percent) expressed dissatisfaction or uncertainty about the school. Similarly, 10 out of 15 parents interviewed expressed satisfaction.

Most parents are also satisfied with their child's academic progress, but a small core are not. Over three-fourths of parents surveyed, report satisfaction with the academic progress of their child at Tubman. One-fourth of the parents surveyed and one-third of the parents interviewed are not satisfied or had yet to reach a decision regarding their child's progress.

Tubman's parents' feelings toward their school reflects those reported by parents districtwide. According to the 1995 Survey of Parent Satisfaction, conducted by SDCS, over 90 percent of elementary school parents in the district were satisfied with their child's school and their overall progress, and believed the school to be a clean and safe environment. This is just slightly higher than the 85 percent rating given by Tubman parents on the WestEd survey.

Parents are split between those who report they do and do not understand the school's objectives and philosophy. About half of the parents feel they understand the

purposes of the school and the Waldorf philosophy guiding Tubman and approximately 60 percent indicate that some efforts had been made in the past to explain the Waldorf philosophy to them. Over 60 percent believe they know what their child is supposed to be learning at Tubman.

Parents are also split between those who think the school gives high priority to academic skills and those who believe it stresses non-academic skills. About 40 percent believe that academic skills are the primary focus of the school, while another 40 percent indicate non-academic skills, such as crafting and learning to interact properly with others, as the primary focus. The remaining 20 percent thought academic and non-academic skills were of equal importance at the school.

Correlates of Overall Satisfaction with the School. More than half (64 percent) of the parents who were satisfied with the school also report some level of college education. Conversely, 75 percent of those reporting dissatisfaction report having no college education. Approximatley the same pattern was found for parents' education and satisfaction with their child's progress in reading, but not for math.

Parents who said they understood the school's program report a higher level of education than those who say they do not. Among the parents who did not understand the Waldorf philosophy, 60 percent reported no college experience

Thus, level of education is associated with both understanding of the school program and level of satisfaction. In addition, most of the parents who were not familiar with the program were also satisfied with Tubman.

Nearly all parents who understood the Waldorf philosophy expressed satisfaction with the school. An understanding of the program, regardless of education, had the strongest correlation with parents who said they were satisfied with the school.

Parent Involvement and Communication. Both parents and teachers indicate that the school interacts frequently with most parents. Eighty-six percent of the parents said they had visited their child's classroom, 91 percent indicated that they had attended at least one parent conference, and 99 percent had been invited to attend others. Over 80 percent of the parents also said that their child's teacher occasionally or frequently assigns homework that requires or encourages parent participation, and even more (89 percent) reported that they have occasionally or frequently received information from teachers regarding their child's progress at school. There were some parents, however, who indicated there is very little communication regarding school assignments and lessons between themselves and the teachers at Tubman.

Parents who are involved do so in a variety of ways. However, most parents are not involved in school activities. According to teacher interviews, parents attend daytime "theme meals," help organize or assist with field trips and other social activities, and become involved in classroom instruction. Parents report, however, that their participation in these varied roles is moderate to minimal. Over 40 percent of the parents indicate that they had been a part of a club or other social activity at Tubman, but just over one-third had attended parent workshops or classes. Thirty percent attended governance council meetings and 25 percent helped or taught in the classroom.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Tubman's case is an important one, one that helps those involved in the charter school movement better understand the complexities involved in starting a new charter school. As with any new effort that takes risks to achieve higher ends, mistakes must be accepted as inevitable. Nonetheless, most would agree that mistakes that may adversely affect children's academic success and well-being should be avoided when possible.

As our study team learned, just as charter schools themselves are pioneers, so too are the sponsoring agencies that try to monitor and support them. The recommendations below suggest options for the Charter School at Harriet Tubman Village and the San Diego City Schools district. In so doing, it also offers insights into some of the more general issues concerning the relationship between California charter schools and their sponsors. While many of the critical issues confronted by Tubman are specific to its situation and context, others are more directly linked to the fundamental way in which charter schools are initiated and overseen by their districts. The following conclusions and recommendations are organized according to the main, interrelated themes that have emerged during the course of the study and shaped much of the information in our report: autonomy and accountability; the educational program; the governance council; parent choice and charter school evaluation.

Autonomy and Accountability

Years of related research on site-based governance show that granting schools more autonomy will not, in itself, yield the improved learning results hoped for unless certain conditions are in place.[6] The Tubman case illustrates the problems involved when these lines of authority and responsibility between groups and individuals are not strictly drawn. The experiences of those involved at both the school level and the district level offer a roadmap for better managing such decisions in the future.

The lines of authority and liability between charter schools and the district are ambiguous.

According to the way the charter school law is structured in California, each charter school is required to negotiate its relationship – i.e., the degree of autonomy it is allowed – with its sponsor. As a result, charter schools in this state relate to their districts along a broad continuum of independence and dependence.[7] Ambiguities in legislation thrust charter schools into uncertain positions, raising important questions. To what extent can charters really exercise their freedom to create ground-breaking models when districts maintain control during the approval process and have oversight authority? Districts, too, are in an enigmatic position. In the name of innovation, how can they allow a certain element of risk while at the same time avoiding the natural tendency to respond to mistakes or conflicts with blanket policies or come to conclusions about a school's success based exclusively on traditional public school norms?

Given the lack of clarity in the law, especially with regard to liability issues, some districts have necessarily turned to creating additional criteria and guidelines for the approval of charter schools. Yet, creating a layer of prescriptive policies at the district level to better direct charter schools seems inconsistent with the deregulatory aspect of the charter concept. The legislation is unclear as to whether districts have the legal authority to apply their own policies to schools and whether charter schools are, ultimately, obligated to abide by them. Thus the approval process becomes a pivotal point in the life of a charter school and the role of the district in overseeing that school.

The review and approval process did not produce a charter that is clearly consistent with the legislation or the district's requirements.

Though the charter school legislation suggests that accountability parameters are to be outlined in each charter proposal, many districts are currently struggling with the difficulty of actually holding charter schools to the outcomes or measures listed in those petitions, especially when, as in the case of Tubman, the charter language is somewhat vague. The Tubman charter was written primarily by one individual, without broad community participation. In addition, the charter provided some guidance about the curriculum, but many features critical to starting and running a school were ignored. A few of the people who work at the school now believe the charter is obsolete and others tend to adapt the terms of the charter to the context of their individual classrooms.

As discussed in more detail in the next section of recommendations, the petition did not fully address and sometimes omitted key provisions of the charter law or the district guidelines. The document was also approved by the board without changes made to ensure that the school's progress could be tracked. From a monitoring perspective, the document was not uniformly specific about its objectives and how they could be measured. It did not contain milestones or a timeframe for when certain events would occur. This lack of specificity in key areas has also made it difficult to evaluate its progress post hoc.

Part of the problem with the charter approval process may stem from a lack of consensus, not only in this case but across the state, about the role of the charter document itself. Is the charter petition, for example, to serve as a rigid contract by which districts can hold charter schools accountable? Or is it more akin to an evolving, school improvement plan that is modified over time?

Recommendations for Autonomy and Accountability Issues

1) The district, charter school stakeholders and members of the community should conduct a series of roundtable discussions to reexamine the assumptions underlying relationships between the district and charter schools. Within those relationships, the charter petition plays a pivotal role. As a

starting point, these discussions might consider the following range of options:

- At one end, charters could be legally designated as independent, liable entities (assuming this is clarified through pending legislative proposals or court cases), which would mean that the district could conceivably be hired by the school to provide certain services, such as payroll and school maintenance, etc.
- Conversely, charters could be viewed as subcontractors to the district, *almost* independent of the district (analogous to hiring an outside not-for-profit or for-profit organization to run a school). If problems occur, the district then has a very clearly stated document from which it can argue violations. However, negotiating such contracts would require charter schools to have skilled administrators or the funds to hire people with the requisite legal skills to negotiate such contracts.
- At the other end, charter schools could be treated like any other site-based management arrangement. The district's role would be to ensure they have adequate training, up front, on governance, fiscal and legal liability issues. In this case, the charter petition would be viewed more as a general plan or a living document that changes over time.

2) Once some agreement has been reached regarding the role of the charter proposal, Board members, staff from the district and various members from the community (including parents and students from the school) should convene to clarify terms within the Tubman petition and to ensure that the document is compatible with the school's own *current* operational procedures and goals.

3) The district should develop and make available a handbook providing suggestions about how to write a charter, including examples of clearly written statements outlining a school's goals, measurable objectives, self-assessment and other evaluation processes. This development could be done in collaboration with members of the charter school community within the district and state, or by drawing on benchmarks from other charters.

4) The district and charter school should expand and partner with others in the community (e.g., universities and businesses) to involve them in technical assistance to those writing charter proposals.

Educational Program

The Tubman school staff has exhibited considerable flexibility in its second year of operation as it has come to realize more fully the reality of adapting an educational program normally found in very small-scale private settings to the setting of a large urban school district. The school district is similarly working through challenges of how best to communicate the program to the public and is finding ways to support the school's educational program. These conclusions and recommendations address the need to clarify both what the school is intended to be and what it is likely to become and to identify the actions that will support the school in its evolution.

The charter school petition inadequately describes the school's educational program.

According to our content analysis, the charter petition describes the educational program in terms of its purposes, its grade-by-grade topics of instruction and categories of content, and, indirectly, its student outcomes as described in the "Assessment and Accountability" section of the petition. It meets some requirements of the law and district guidelines that relate to the educational program, but omits others. For example, the petition *does* respond to the law and the district guidelines by including:

- A statement of educational goals,
- A program goal including the objective of enabling pupils to become self-motivated, competent, and lifelong learners,
- A statement that the charter school will be nonsectarian in its programs, admission policies, employment practices, and all other operations,
- A statement that it will provide multicultural education,
- A process for reporting student progress to parents, and
- A description of who it is the school is attempting to educate.

On the other hand, the petition does *not* fully or directly respond to the law and/or the district guidelines in several areas, such as:

- A description of what it means to be an "educated person" in the 21st century,
- An explanation of how learning best occurs,
- A description of the method by which pupil progress in meeting pupil outcomes will be measured,
- A plan for implementing the California curriculum frameworks,
- A description of the organization of the instructional program. (The petition refers, for example to a "developmental model created by Rudolph Steiner . . . [which] asserts that children have very identifiable stages of development and that their education must be appropriate to the specific stages of development." The petition does not, however, explain this model.), and

- A description of the special emphasis on expanded learning experiences for pupils who are identified as academically low achieving.

The educational program as it is presented in the petition is only part of what the law and the district guidelines require. The omission of a description of the Waldorf teaching methodology and of the developmental model which is the foundation of the method impairs the document's usefulness in many ways. The most important omission being that it does not provide a basis for fully or competently describing the program to any audience not already knowledgeable about the Waldorf program. It also interferes seriously with any effort to determine whether the program being executed at the school is an implementation of the intended Waldorf methodology.

Teachers express some of the concepts and teach some of the content that the petition describes.

The research team found numerous instances of the teaching of literature, art, music and drama, all of which are emphasized in the petition. There were also examples of memorization of times tables and of mental arithmetic, which match the content of the curriculum described in the petition. Teachers also expressed concepts, such as balancing "hearts, heads and hands," which is a statement reiterated in the petition. However, as said before, no in-depth data collection or observation was conducted to determine the degree to which teaching is consistent with the petition.

Standardized tests are driving significant adaptations in the educational program.

There was, during the first year of operation, a tendency by the staff to underestimate how seriously standardized test scores are taken in public school systems. As mentioned earlier, poor tests scores led to faculty's efforts to modify the curriculum and to broaden interest in using district-adopted textbooks and other instructional materials, particularly in the teaching of reading and mathematics. But this integration poses challenges to teachers who must decide how to integrate conventional standardized test information with Waldorf priorities and with what the teachers think is important to teach. As the findings indicate, a tension in the program – a tension possibly confronted by other charter schools – arises from an apparent contradiction between operating a non-conventional alternative school and conforming to district requirements. The district is looking for achievement data even though the information on the tests may be a very limited measure of what the school is trying to do.

Recommendations for Education Program Issues

1. The school should rewrite the charter petition to accomplish the following purposes:

- describe the measurement procedures used to assess pupil progress on an annual basis,
- provide a clear description of the teaching methods used in Waldorf education, and
- provide a clear description of the educational program, including elements of Waldorf education that will and will not be retained and aspects of the district's curriculum approaches and materials that will be adopted.

2. The school and district should have further discussions about the school's accountability for results on the district administered standardized tests (ASAT). (The proposed revisions of the district guidelines for the Implementation of the Charter Schools Act of 1992, dated January 16, 1996, address this issue in part.)

Governance

A strong, effective governance structure is the foundation of charter schools; they are likely to falter without it. School administrators and teachers are given freedom to experiment on the assumption that they will be responsible to a vigilant governance body that includes parents and provides firm guidance. But when governance councils run into trouble, as was the case at Tubman, they may not feel they have an outside support group to which they can turn, confidentially, for help without the risk of negative publicity. The end result can be poor decisionmaking which may or may not be revealed until the situation becomes much worse.

The Tubman Governance Council has been partially inhibited because its authority is not clearly delineated.

As mentioned in the earlier discussion of autonomy and accountability, clear division of responsibilities among governing bodies is an essential component of site-based governance efforts. Equally important is the clear delineation of responsibilities and authority at the school level, between the school's director and the governance council. The role of the Tubman governance council was not sufficiently defined, either in the petition or in practice during most of the two years of its operation, during which it has been the subject of embittered controversy. In particular, the council's authority to hire, evaluate and dismiss teaching personnel had been continually challenged by the former director, who claimed sole responsibility for personnel. Council members also had doubts about their authority to fire the director. This stalemate worsened because of the council's readiness to accept a hands-off policy toward overseeing teaching and instruction, despite the fact that these parts of the school program have been subject to widespread public criticism.

Governance council members have had to grapple with serious and complex issues, often without an experienced leader.

Tubman has been plagued by several types of administrative issues that remain unresolved. These types of administrative challenges are common for many charter schools, especially start-up charter schools.[8] Starting a new school, especially one located in a large urban school district, requires well developed skills. It is a challenging task even for the most experienced school administrator. Interviews with those within and outside the school largely attributed the administrative problems to the fact that the director lacked administrative experience in large public school districts. In addition to his lack of administrative experience, the director was operating under a compressed timeline and some – including himself – felt he had insufficient time to deal with administrative responsibilities. Many at the school reported that they were fortunate to obtain the services of a retired district principal during this time.

Members of Tubman's governance council also had minimal experience with the demanding responsibilities required of them and they were already busy people serving part-time. Yet, for most of their existence, they have confronted and struggled with controversial and complex challenges – a few of them, serious improprieties – without a clear sense of the best legal or administrative course of action to take. As the site-based governance literature underscores, the shortage of council members with the requisite financial and administrative skills, combined with the lack of an experienced leader, are two common pitfalls schools face when trying to govern themselves.[9]

The charter school legislation in California, by not including start-up funds to provide support and training to those starting up a school, seems not to acknowledge the skills and resources such a task requires – an undertaking that has often been described as being more difficult than starting a new business.[10]

Recommendations for Improved Governance

1) Given the unique circumstances of this case, the district should offer to assist the school in hiring an administrator with suitable administrative experience and/or continue to provide administrative assistance to the school.

2) The district should help the school rewrite the governance council by-laws to clarify their spheres of authority, especially with regard to personnel and budget matters. The council's authority to review, hire/fire teaching personnel, as well as the school administrator, should be clearly-spelled out.

3) The school should retain outside consultants or use district resources to help train and advise council members regarding their responsibilities and help them hone their financial and legal decisionmaking skills and abilities.

4) The school should aggressively inform parents about opportunities to serve on the governance council and hold elections at convenient locations and times.

5) The school should review legal questions about the openness of all of its council sessions; publicize the times, agendas and minutes of all open meetings in the school newsletter; rotate meeting locations; and offer to arrange transportation for parents who need it.

Informed Parental Choice

The spirit of the movement dictates, and the legislation stipulates, that "no governing board of a school district shall *require* any pupil enrolled in the school district to attend a charter school" [emphasis added]. Charter schools and other choice programs count on parents being adequately informed about the choices available to them. This year, the district clearly provides parents at the Tubman charter school with a choice of schools on that site. However, when parents surveyed by WestEd were asked to list reasons they chose the Tubman charter school, almost one third of the parents (24 of the 74 who responded) believe they had little or no choice about sending their children to the charter school. It is therefore disconcerting that some parents still seem to be confused about whether they have real alternatives to sending their children to the Waldorf school.

The principles of choice may be compromised if parents are not fully knowledgeable about the nature of Tubman's program and their other options.

Interviews revealed that support for the school varies from an enthusiastic and familiar endorsement to passive acceptance and resentful dissatisfaction, but the vast majority of parents surveyed are positive toward the school. The contingent of parents with some level of college education, who constitute over half of those who returned survey questionnaires, tend to be "very satisfied" with the school. In particular, according to our interviews, some parents who are working in the field of education and/or have substantial college backgrounds, are very familiar with the Waldorf philosophy and program and also are "very satisfied."

On the other hand, survey and interview data suggest that those parents who reported less formal education tended not to understand or were uncertain about the purpose and philosophy of the school's program, even though in some cases the parents indicated that efforts had been made to explain the program. While only a few parents did not support the program, their criticisms were aimed at some basic elements in the Waldorf approach, such as the emphasis on gardening and knitting.

Because the school's approach is unique and may not fit all children, it would seem that parents who are considering this school need to be especially well-informed before they can make knowledgeable choices. As discussed before, Waldorf education is based on a complex philosophy, which may pose challenges to communicating its principles to parents and the community. Imparting Tubman's educational program to

parents is further complicated by the largely undocumented modifications and adaptations being made in the way Waldorf principles are being applied in this school.

In addition to the difficulty of communicating a unique program to a diverse body of parents, the principles of informed choice can be compromised when parents believe they are *required* to enroll their child. Thus, while in theory dissatisfied parents can simply withdraw their children, in practice this may not occur for several reasons, including non-programmatic ones: the friendships their children have formed, the difficulty of transferring to a school with a different curricular emphasis or timeline, or problems making new transportation or baby-sitting arrangements.

Recommendations for Parental Choice

1) The district and the school should jointly undertake a series of parent and community education and knowledge-building activities to ensure that parents understand the Tubman program, its distinctions from a regular school program and their other options. While the school has attempted to provide some of this information, a more intensive set of activities may be necessary, such as one-on-one sessions with targeted parents, to ensure that they have complete information to make genuine choices.

2) The school should especially target such activities to parents who are relatively unfamiliar with Waldorf-type approaches and who are dissatisfied with the school. The correlation between knowledge of Waldorf principles and satisfaction with the school suggests that it is particularly important to find more effective ways to reach this group of parents.

3) Materials distributed should be translated into languages represented in the school. A parent conjectured that a major reason many parents thought they had no option other than the Tubman charter school is that they had trouble understanding the printed notices distributed before the school opened. This was particularly true of the non-English speakers. Neighborhood forums and translations would likely remedy some of those problems.

4) The district should study the feasibility of removing Tubman from the busing overflow program. Some parents do not seem to understand or accept criteria used to assign students to overflow status. The district's decision to keep this charter school in its overflow program compounds the challenge of communicating to parents their real options.

Charter School Evaluations

The charter school law stipulates that sponsoring agencies may renew charters for five-year periods. It further states that a charter may be revoked for failing to meet conditions of the petition process, failing to meet or pursue the promised pupil outcomes, failing to meet generally accepted accounting standards, or violating the law. However, the law does not provide guidance about *when* or *how* sponsors should monitor charter schools, nor how soon it is reasonable to expect stated outcomes. Moreover, as discussed earlier, while the legislation seems to stipulate that districts should be monitoring charter schools, in so far as they are responsible for deciding whether or not to renew their charters, it does not provide guidelines for reconciling the monitoring function with a charter school's independence from the district structure.

WestEd's preliminary survey of plans by other California school districts to provide oversight of charter schools they are sponsoring suggests most districts have not yet confronted the oversight problem as forthrightly as the SDCS district. As a front-runner, the district has shouldered the responsibility of pursuing a monitoring process without the guidance of previous experience.

WestEd considers the current study part of an ongoing developmental process from which other charter schools and their sponsoring agencies will likely learn valuable lessons. In designing this study, the goals were to conduct a comprehensive review to meet some of the district's monitoring information needs while at the same time providing selected program improvement information to support the school. The research team has developed some instruments and tested some processes that can be adapted for purposes of studying other charter schools in the district. In addition, however, there are several existing instruments developed for other school program review processes (e.g., WASC (Western Association of Schools and Colleges) Review, SB1274 Protocol, Program Quality Review) available as tools for gathering information or as models.

Districts and charter schools need to look at multiple indicators of success and pursue a variety of methods for collecting information about the progress of their students and their program as a whole. Some review methods can be self-initiated by the *school*. Others can be initiated by the *sponsoring agency*. Either type can be conducted *internally* or by *an external agent* or some *combination* of both. Moreover, any of these approaches to program review can focus on, or include, different purposes, ranging *from periodic audits and compliance monitoring* to *continuous self-improvement studies*. A viable review and evaluation program would consist of a portfolio of all of these approaches.

Recommendations for Future Evaluations

1) The district should conduct or commission compliance audits of all its charter schools on a regular basis (annually or every few years) to satisfy its statutory responsibility to ensure that provisions of the charter and relevant laws are being met.

2) The school should commission program improvement studies (annually or every few years) with the primary objectives of receiving feedback about its progress toward meeting goals outlined in their petition and of helping them to set a course for what they need to do. In addition, the school should design a self-evaluation process to determine accomplishments on an annual basis.

3) These audits and studies should begin during the first year of operation and results should be used to provide the school with timely feedback on what is consistent with its plan and what is not.

4) In addition to standardized outcome data now collected districtwide (e.g., test and parent satisfaction survey data), schools and the district should decide upon a set of indicators to guide the collection of data on a regular basis.

5) The district should provide assistance for charter schools, or broker assistance with an outside agency, when reviews identify problems or potential problem areas.

6) The district, in conjunction with existing charter schools in the district, should carefully review state legislative requirements, district guidelines and the goals in each school's petition and collectively establish districtwide, common outcomes applicable to all charter schools. These outcomes can then be used as baseline data to be collected over time. Also, if individual charter petitions do not delineate flexible indicators specific to each school, these should be negotiated and included in the document.

7) The district should establish appropriate milestones for making critical decisions, and withhold judgment on many provisions until after the third year of implementation, provided the school seems to be making progress and/or is striving to make necessary mid-course corrections.

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[1] In California, one charter school currently in operation in Twin Ridges is basing its educational program on Waldorf principles. Two other schools are not yet in operation: one, a charter school in Novato and the other, a federally funded public school in Oakridge, near Sacramento.

[2] Anthroposophy is based on a spiritualist philosophy promulgated by 19th Century European scholars.

[3] Little Hoover Commission. (1996). *The Charter movement: Education reform school by school.* Sacramento, CA: State of California.

[4] Charter Schools Act of 1992 took effect on January 1, 1993. The following charter schools have been approved by the San Diego City School Board: The Charter School of San Diego (approved July 13, 1993); Darnell E Campus (approved October 13, 1993); Harriet Tubman Village School (approved November 2, 1993); O'Farrell Community School (approved January 4, 1994); The Museum School (approved February 7, 1995; scheduled to open September); The Johnson/Urban League Charter School (approved February 21, 1995), School of Success Kindergarten Academy (approved September 12, 1995); and Memorial Academy for International Baccalaureate Preparation (approved September 19, 1995).

[5] Corwin, R.G. and Flaherty, J.F. (1995). *Freedom and Innovation in California's Charter Schools*. Los Alamitos, CA: WestEd. and Finn, C. E., Jr.; Bierlein, L.A., and Manno, B.V. (1996). *Charter Schools in Action: A First Look*. Washington D.C.: Hudson Institute.
[6] For an overview of this literature see: Hannaway, Jane & Carnoy, Martin (Eds.) (1993). *Decentralization and School Improvement: Can We Fulfill the Promise?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
[7] Dianda, M.R., and Corwin, R.G. (1994) *Vision and Reality: A First Year Look at California's Charter Schools*, Los Alamitos, CA: SWRL (WestEd); Little Hoover Commission, op cit.
[8] Dianda, M.R., and Corwin, R.G., op cit.
Hudson Institute, op cit.
Little Hoover Commission, op cit.
[9] For a recent study that outlines the importance of leadership in site-based managed schools, see: Miller, Edward. (1995). Shared Decision Making By Itself Doesn't Make for Better Decisions. *The Harvard Education Letter*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.
[10] Dianda, M.R., and Corwin, R.G., op cit.
Little Hoover Commission, op cit.