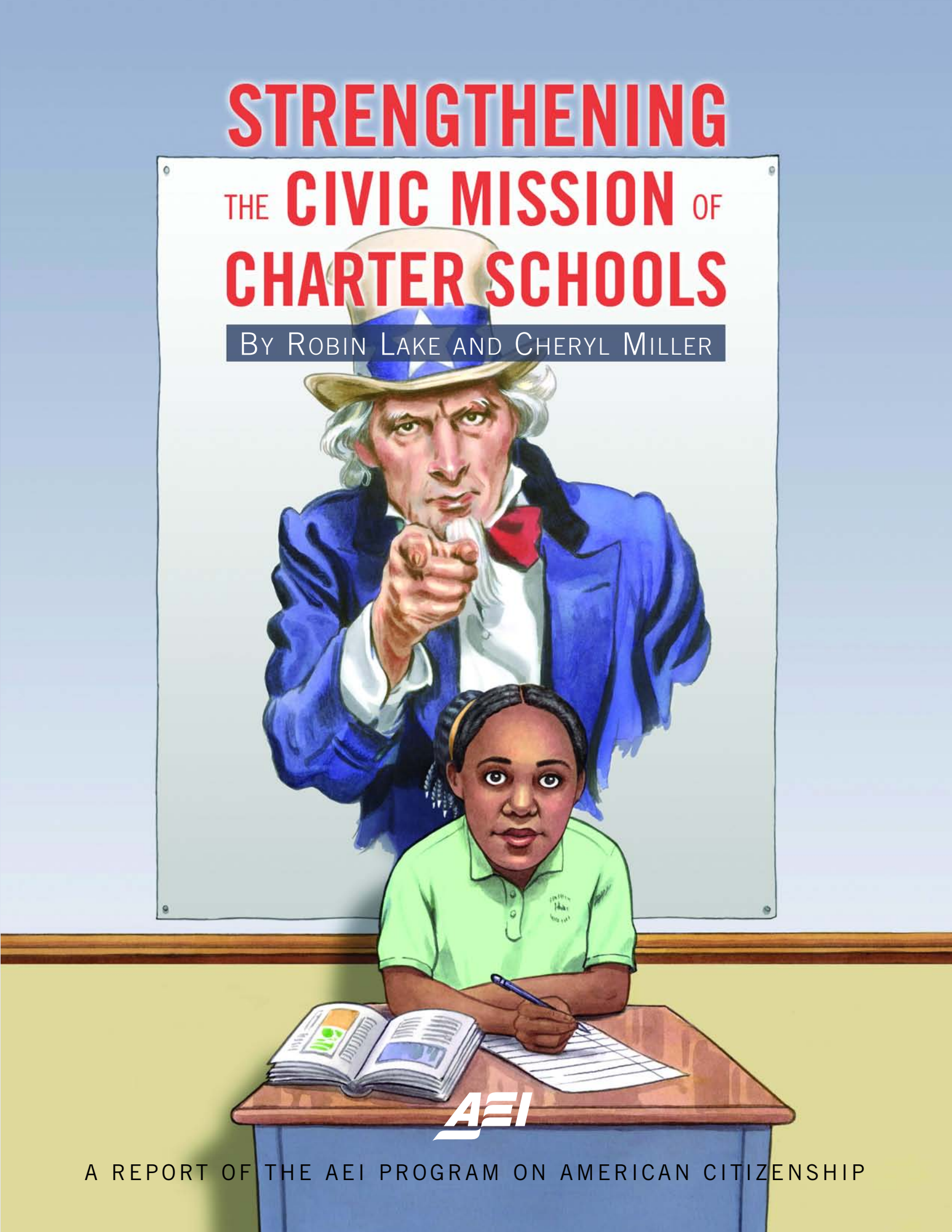
STRENGTHENING THE CIVIC MISSION OF CHARTER SCHOOLS

By Robin Lake and Cheryl Miller



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A REPORT OF THE AEI PROGRAM ON AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP

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A Missed Opportunity?

Charter schools provide an intriguing opportunity to rethink the role of public schools in preparing students to become informed and engaged participants in the American political system. As public schools of choice, charter schools are freed from many rules and regulations that can inhibit innovation and improvement. They can readily adopt best practices in civic education and encourage (or even mandate) extracurricular activities to enhance civic learning. With their decentralized approach to administration, they can allow parents and students a far greater role in school governance than they would have in traditional public schools.

In exchange for that flexibility, charter schools must define a clear mission and performance outcomes for themselves. In service of their chosen missions, high-performing charters seek to forge a transformative school culture for their students—expressed in slogans on hallway placards, banners, and T-shirts, and heard in chants, ceremonies, and codes of conduct. Successful charters create a culture in which everyone associated with the school is united around a common mission, enabling them to articulate goals and aspirations that might otherwise be hampered by constituency politics and parental objections. Charter school leaders can (and do) speak forthrightly about the need to teach students good social skills, instill among their pupils a sense of community, and encourage students to make positive change in the world.

This unique autonomy coupled with a strong mission orientation would seem to be a winning combination for civic education. Yet, even as charter schooling has been at the forefront of education reform efforts, we know remarkably little about how these schools approach this critical dimension of education. What have charter schools done with the opportunity to rethink civic education? Are there lessons to be learned? Are there challenges that impede their ability to teach citizenship?

In some respects, this lack of attention is hardly a surprise. Over the past couple of decades, the school reform movement has been largely focused on redressing deficiencies in basic skills such as reading and math and boosting graduation rates. At the federal level, civic education has been marginalized. Civics is not among the subjects tested under the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, nor is it part of the Obama administration's Race to the Top, which offers competitive grants to states that establish performance-based standards for teachers and adopt common "college- and career-ready" standards in reading and math.[1] More recently, the federal government has drastically cut back funding for civic education programs: the Teaching American History grant program,[2] the Presidential and Congressional Academies,[3] and the Center for Civic Education's "We the People" civics program are all ending or will see their activities significantly reduced.[4] Fewer than half of states test high school students in social studies or government (the traditional "home" for civics).[5]

The current focus on basic academic skills is hardly unreasonable; indeed, given the problems that mark American education today, it is absolutely essential. Yet an otherwise healthy emphasis has also dramatically narrowed our understanding of the purposes of education. By characterizing education primarily as the path to personal and professional advancement, reformers have (albeit unintentionally) redefined education as a private good, divorcing schooling from its historic role of instructing young people for citizenship.[6]

This trend is particularly lamentable in the case of charter schools, given their role as laboratories of

innovation—they can be public education's research and development (R&D) arm for civic education. Because they have greater autonomy and tend to attract innovative educators, charters can experiment with new methods and strategies that, if proven effective, can be adopted by the larger public school system. Charters have a potentially powerful role to play as trendsetters for civic learning and can remind educators and policymakers of the many purposes of the schoolhouse.

Strengthening civic education in charter schools may be all the more important given the student population served by many charters. Just as an achievement gap exists in reading and math, so too does a civic achievement gap. Harvard researcher Meira Levinson notes that "as early as fourth grade and continuing into the eighth and twelfth grades, poor, African-American, and Hispanic students perform significantly worse on the civics test of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) than white, Asian, and middle-class students."[7] Other studies have found that disadvantaged students have fewer opportunities to take civics courses and engage in civic activities.[8]

Charter schools serve exactly these students. According to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, charters serve a higher percentage of minority students and students from low-income families than other public schools.[9] Giving these students the knowledge, skills, and habits to participate in civic life would seem to be a key priority, deeply connected to the obviously important vocational and professional goals that charter schools have set for themselves.

Fortunately, a number of charter school leaders are giving serious thought to the question of civic education. Newer entrants to the charter school arena have made citizenship and civic education their organizing theme and mission, including Democracy Prep Public Schools (opened in August 2006), the United Neighborhood Organization (UNO) Charter School Network (2004), and the pioneering César Chávez Public Charter Schools for Public Policy (1998).[10] Prominent charter leaders, such as Mike Feinberg at KIPP, are speaking out about charter schools' civic mission and are working to introduce and enhance citizenship education curricula.[11]

To better understand and advance the efforts of charter schools to teach citizenship, the American Enterprise Institute's Program on American Citizenship and its Education Policy Studies Program convened a meeting of more than a dozen charter school educators and administrators in May 2011 in San Francisco. In a conversation that included representatives from KIPP, YES Prep, César Chávez, UNO, BASIS Schools, High Tech High, National Heritage Academies, and Democracy Prep, among others, participants spoke frankly about the need to do a better job of helping students develop as moral individuals and citizens.

Over a day's discussion, the following themes and tensions emerged:

- Many of the charter school educators we met with do not view civic education as a subject for social studies teachers alone to address. They see civics, broadly defined, as an important schoolwide task and seek ways for the whole school to engage.

- In their approaches to civic education, charter schools are more different than alike. The leaders we spoke with hold diverse, and sometimes conflicting, views on why civic preparation is important, what skills are most critical, and which teaching methods work best. In many cases, these differences stem from the types of students each school is targeting and what school leaders think will work best for those students.

- Charter leaders are generally united in some disdain for traditional civics textbooks and curricula. While they believe content has an important place, they generally feel that civic activism is a more effective way to help students, especially those from high-poverty backgrounds, understand how civics relates to their lives.

- There is no common definition of citizenship among charter school leaders. Some emphasize developing civic skills or cultivating civic dispositions; others, promoting activism and engagement; and still others, fostering attachment or a particular orientation to one's country. This is due, in part, to the multifaceted character of citizenship. This lack of consensus also reflects the broader (and often, ideological) debate in American society about the meaning of citizenship.

- The absence of a common definition is both an opportunity and an impediment for charter schools. As schools of choice, charters can make their distinctive civic vision an explicit part of their appeal so that supportive families can seek them out and others can go elsewhere. However, the lack of a common definition poses challenges for establishing common metrics for citizenship education and garnering greater support for citizenship education among charter authorizers, policymakers, and parents.

- Charter leaders believe the charter sector might be forging its own shackles by not including civic education in accountability metrics and by overemphasizing math and reading on high-stakes tests. At the same time, they have difficulty defining how approaches to civics should be measured.

- Questions of citizenship are peripheral when it comes to authorizing charter schools by their overseers. Currently, no charter authorizer meaningfully incorporates citizenship criteria into its decisions. This reluctance stems, in part, from a lack of good metrics for citizenship education. More critically, real, substantive disagreements exist over how to understand the civic mission of schooling, leading many authorizers to focus on less controversial standards, such as reading and math scores, to judge schools.

- Teachers in charter schools say they have trouble finding time, professional development programs, and resources to teach civics effectively to their particular students. Small school size, intensive student remediation needs, underfunding, and lack of access to district staff development workshops are all barriers that they seek to overcome.

What Do We Know?

Charter schools are growing fast and show no signs of slowing. There are approximately 5,277 public charter schools nationwide, with the number of new schools increasing by around 5 to 7 percent each year.[12] In many large metropolitan areas where public school systems have failed in their basic educational mission, charter schools are often seen as the only hope for young people to receive a good education. Charter schools now comprise more than 5 percent of all public schools, and the percentage is much higher in some cities.[13] In New Orleans, for example, charter schools now make up nearly 70 percent of all Recovery School District schools.[14]

Yet what we know about charter schools and their civic education mission is thin. Almost no published data exist on how charter schools fare on traditional measures of civics knowledge or how well they cultivate civic values among students. What little research there is, however, suggests that charter schools are neutral or even more conducive than traditional public schools when it comes to preparing students for the rigors of citizenship. In a study of charter schools in the Washington, DC, area, Jack Buckley (New York University) and Mark Schneider (Stony Brook University) found that charter school students report a higher amount of community participation and training in civic skills but have about the same degree of political tolerance as their district school peers.[15] Patrick J. Wolf (University of Arkansas College of Education and Health Professions) reviewed twenty-one quantitative studies regarding the effects of school choice on seven civic values (such as voluntarism and political tolerance) and found that schools of choice hold their own against or outperform traditional public schools on nearly all measures. However, only three of the studies reviewed presented specific results for students in charter or magnet schools.[16]

Using the results from the 2010 NAEP examination in civics, the Center for Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) analyzed the data to compare students at charter schools with those at other public schools. Overall, results suggest that charter school students score on par with other public school students in fourth grade, but charter school students have a slight but not statistically significant lead on the eighth-grade NAEP exam. However, minority students—especially Hispanic students—who attend charter schools appear to score quite a bit better than their traditional public school peers at the eighth-grade level. But the sample size here suggests caution in interpreting the data.[17]

What Are Charter Schools Teaching?

Charter schools, in just about every aspect, are more different than alike. A microcosm of American society, some charter schools serve inner-city students and must handle social problems like gang violence, teenage pregnancy, and drug use. Others operate in mainly rural or suburban areas and serve more affluent student populations. They are often organized around special themes, focusing on classic college prep, experiential learning, or an academic discipline such as the performing arts or science and technology.

While many charter leaders see civic education as a priority, many admit that, in practice, they cannot give it as much attention as they would like. In addition, charters appear to diverge widely in their basic philosophies and priorities when it comes to defining civic education. For this paper, we will focus on a select group of charter schools that have tried to make civic education, broadly understood, a priority.

Making Civics Relevant. While charter schools represent diverse views on what civic education means, the teachers and administrators we spoke to generally agree that civic knowledge, by itself, should not be a priority. Although the emphasis on historical facts and prescribed texts varies from school to school, most view civics content as secondary to cultivating civic skills and attitudes and argue that content must be engaging and deeply embedded in the goals a school hold for its graduates.[18]

For some charter educators, the issue is largely pragmatic. Many say that their students are not academically ready for more advanced civics curricula. As is true of many urban charter schools, students at YES Prep Public Schools, a network of eight middle and high schools in the Houston, Texas, area, often come to school four to five grade levels behind. School leaders Mark DiBella (director of YES Prep North Central) and Philip Wright (director of YES Prep Southeast) would like to focus more on civic education at their schools, but out of necessity, their current priority is teaching basic skills and remedial education.

That said, there is civic value in providing remedial education. Research by David E. Campbell (University of Notre Dame) suggests that private schools excel in civic education in part because they prioritize rigorous college prep as a first-order foundation for civic learning.[19] Similarly, Wolf writes, "Effective instruction itself likely promotes civic values, as better-educated citizens tend to be more knowledgeable about politics, more tolerant, and more active in their communities."[20] More intriguingly, Wolf suggests that school environment may also play a role. By providing a higher level of order and discipline than many traditional public schools (especially in urban areas), charter schools can boost students' feelings of security and confidence, perhaps better enabling them to tolerate dissenting ideas and take action in their communities.[21]

While giving students a strong understanding of American history, politics, and processes is important, charter leaders, particularly those who serve inner-city youth, argue that capturing students' interest and showing them that they can successfully engage in the democratic process must be the first step. When Seth Andrew founded the first Democracy Prep Public School in New York City, he envisioned civic engagement as a core part of his schools' mission and culture. He adopted the Center for Civic Education's "We the People" curriculum, a traditional civics program that helps students understand the history and principles behind the US Constitution and the Bill of Rights. However, many

Green Dot Public Schools: A Legacy of Activism

The Green Dot Public Schools network was born out of activism. In 1999, the network of nineteen charter high schools was started by Steve Barr, the cofounder of Rock the Vote, a grass-roots movement that has encouraged millions of young people to register to vote and stay informed about candidates and issues. Green Dot is best known for the transformation of Alain Leroy Locke Senior High School in South Central Los Angeles, one of the city's most troubled and chronically underperforming public high schools. Green Dot successfully mobilized the community to petition the Los Angeles Unified School District to transfer operational control of the school to Green Dot—the first time an outside organization had operated a traditional district school.

In 2000, Barr closed school on Election Day and took the kids around their neighborhoods to get out the vote. In that election, the neighborhood saw a 50 percent increase in turnout from the previous election. Green Dot hosts Obama clubs and Young Republican clubs, and students have mobilized around issues like the Dream Act and aid for victims of the Japanese tsunami. Green Dot's I AM movement encourages students to create social networks to advocate for education.

of his students (grades six–ten) arrived not knowing the three branches of government, and many read far below grade level. Andrew quickly abandoned "We the People." "It was the wrong curriculum for our students because of their reading and knowledge levels," he says.

This experience also demonstrated to him that content can cause more harm than good if it fails to engage students. Democracy Prep is now focused on finding nontraditional ways to teach civic education and helping students find issues they feel passionate about, Andrew says: "We're more interested in teaching dispositions than knowledge. What we want is authentic and applied citizenship—not civic education. We want students to advocate about the things they care about. . . . There is no canon at Democracy Prep. With bad civic content like student government, students can come to resent government as 'impotent, stupid, and dumb.' There's a right time for kids to buy into content and engage."

Charter leaders agree that civic engagement starts with passion, yet many of their students not only arrive ill prepared but also feel disempowered. It is counterproductive, they argue, to teach students about how a bill becomes law when they do not believe society values their views or that they can trust government to act in their interest. Instead, educators must first give students a sense of efficacy or ownership. Steve Barr, the founder of Green Dot Public Schools in Los Angeles, explains:

> When you're around poverty and injustice, citizenship has a different meaning. Just shaking hands and getting along is a big deal. If you want more, it requires building trust. . . . We tell students and parents that they've committed a revolutionary act just by leaving a public school for a charter. We give them a heavy dose of 'Do politics before it does you. Your situation won't change because we, whiteys, created a charter school for you.' We tell them they have to change things. Become leaders. Stand up for yourself and solve problems.

As a result, for many charters, civic education is centered on student activism. Just as charter leaders frequently make the case for charter schools in the language of social justice and rights—an obligation to give the disadvantaged the same kinds of education opportunities as the well-off—they justify the importance of civic education to their students in similar terms. "The civic skill we emphasize most is that of advocating for one's rights, beliefs, and community," writes Andrew.[22] Civics curricula are built around local and national issues (particularly education) that students care about and see as affecting their lives. Larry Rosenstock, CEO and founder of

High Tech High, a network of six charter schools in San Diego, California, uses landmark court cases about student rights—such as *Brown v. Board of Education* and *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*—to help students understand the real-world impact of civics. "Those cases are great because they deal with free speech and the Fourth Amendment—issues that the students deal with every day at school," Rosenstock says. Irasema Salcido, founder and CEO of César Chávez Public Charter Schools for Public Policy, a network of four middle and high school charters in Washington DC, agrees: "Who better than students to make the case for improving public education and other causes?"

Experiential learning is particularly well suited to helping disadvantaged youth understand their role in the democratic process, explains Samuel Casey Carter, former president of the National Heritage Academies (NHA) charter school network and author of *No Excuses: Lessons from 21 High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools*.[23] Given the freedom to pursue their passions, students become "active producers of knowledge"—not just passive consumers—an experience which not only empowers them to take action, but also more fully engages them in the learning process. As Andrew says, "We want students to *want* to read about the Constitution. If you force it on students, they will resent it."

Yet skills and attitudes are not so easily separated from factual knowledge. While Salcido believes that students should be actively engaged in public policy, not just reading textbooks, she also argues that asking students to become activists without equipping them with the necessary knowledge sets them up for failure: "Students can care about an issue a lot, but if they're just yelling about it, no one will listen. They have to be able to present effective arguments to persuade people."[24]

César Chávez Public Charter Schools for Public Policy: Teaching Skills Most Conducive to Democracy

César Chávez teachers work to develop the three primary skills they believe are most conducive to democratic citizenship. Instruction is project-based, grounded in real-world experience, and centered on controversial issues. All teachers incorporate civic lessons into their courses through course-specific units and interdisciplinary projects.

Analysis and Synthesis

- Research: "How do I investigate a public problem?"
- Quantitative Analysis and Synthesis: "How do I tell a story with numbers?"
- Reasoning and Evaluating: "How do I reach a conclusion on the best public policy solution?"

Influence

- Interpersonal Skills: "How do I relate to others and the world around me?"
- Personal Initiative: "How can I reach my goals?"
- Communication: "How do I persuade others?"

Constitutional Literacy

- Philosophical Foundations: "How can we narrow the gap between the promise of American ideals and the reality of our daily lives?"
- Policy Dynamics: "What role do different groups play in the creation of public policy? As a Chávez scholar, I can determine the interests of different stakeholders and their preferred tactics for shaping policies."

Certainly the ambitious activities charter leaders describe their students regularly participating in would seem to demand students have a fairly strong base of content knowledge if they are to be successful. At Democracy Prep, students testify in legislative hearings, meet with elected officials, write letters to the editor, and canvass neighborhood streets to promote their causes. In 2013, the school's first class of twelfth graders will be required to pass the US Citizenship and Naturalization test and the NAEP civics exam to graduate, which suggests a base floor for

civic knowledge.[25] At César Chávez, students participate in three-week fellowships at public policy institutions and, in their senior year, are required to write a fifteen- to twenty-page public policy thesis. At the end of every school year, students undertake an intensive, three-week Public Policy Capstone project, in which they research a problem in their community and craft a public policy solution. (Past projects have focused on the DREAM Act, lead in DC water, and sustainable building practices.[26]) Charter leaders may be dubious about the idea of having students memorize historical dates and facts—but content knowledge remains a critical part of their civic education curricula all the same.

Choice and Citizenship. Teaching citizenship is a multifaceted task. Students must understand basic knowledge about their nation's history and system of government and have certain civic dispositions (for example, respect for diverse opinions) and competencies (for example, problem solving). As David Castillo, principal at Oakland Unity High School in California, puts it, "Citizenship is a matter of hearts and minds."

Because citizenship education is so closely entwined with student behaviors and values, it is bound to create controversy. The public can be apprehensive about teachers bringing their own belief systems and values into the classroom, preferring schools to focus on more "neutral" items such as teaching historical facts and dates and promoting good work habits.[27] Yet while it may succeed in not offending student or parental sensibilities, apolitical civic education can also be uninspiring and dull.

High-performing charter schools enjoy more freedom than other public schools to explore divisive, emotionally charged issues and to promote a strong vision of citizenship for their students. By providing a safe environment and delivering academically, these schools can earn the parental trust they need to move aggressively on issues of citizenship and character. As Juan Rangel, founder of the Chicago charter school network UNO, says, "Parents who send their kids to our schools don't know that they want a strong civics education for their students. They come because they trust us." Moreover, as schools of choice, charters do not have a captive audience: parents can remove their children if they dislike a charter's civics curricula or emphasis. In turn, charter leaders are less beholden to parental complaints. "Parents don't always want their kids involved in politics or talking to strangers. But if they don't like what we're doing, I can point to a long wait list of other parents who want to be here," Andrew says.

Perhaps just as important as finding supportive parents is recruiting sympathetic educators who not only are willing to put in the longer hours many charter schools demand but also believe in the school's mission. Salcido notes that some Chávez teachers initially complained about the school's end-of-year Public Policy Capstone research and community action project. Salcido estimates that each Chávez teacher spends three to five hours a month to prepare for the three-week project—in addition to preparing for regular coursework. Now, Chávez schools highlight the demands of the project during the hiring process as a way to weed out less committed teachers. "It's relayed as extra work, but also as essential to the school culture and mission," Salcido says. Similarly, at many charters with a strong civic emphasis, teachers are expected not only to teach, but also to model civic engagement themselves by voting and participating in community projects.

Charter leaders agree that few parents choose a school for its civic mission. Yet perhaps the most compelling justification for school choice is not improved test scores—a claim for which the evidence is mixed—but the opportunity it affords parents to choose a school with educational premises and values consistent with their own. Given the diverse views among Americans about what it means to be a good citizen, the potential of charter schools to offer similarly diverse approaches to citizenship education—within the publicly financed school system—would seem to be a powerful advantage.[28] Moreover, as mission-oriented schools,

charters offer not only diverse, but *distinctive* approaches built around explicit educational principles and goals. When families and teachers are assigned to schools based on geographic residence or bureaucratic formulas, it becomes difficult to forge the kind of agreement needed to establish strong codes of conduct or a coherent vision of citizenship. Schools of choice, however, can bring together like-minded educators and families and create clear norms around conduct, learning, and pedagogy so that instruction on moral, political, and social issues can be done within classrooms of willing participants.

To be sure, school choice is not without its challenges for civic education. Many commentators have expressed concerns that this sort of school community may promote cultural or political separatism and fail to foster key democratic values such as tolerance. Authorizing agencies that oversee charters have a responsibility to ensure that charters meet certain educational standards and use public funds appropriately. In their volume *Educating Citizens: International Perspectives on Civic Values and School Choice*, editors Patrick J. Wolf and Stephen Macedo consider the experience of Europe and Canada in dealing with these issues. While cautioning that each nation's educational system reflects its own particular history and culture, the contributors describe how thoughtful oversight and regulation of choice-based schooling can help promote democratic values and social cohesion as well as accommodate the rich array of cultures, attitudes, and preferences of citizens.[29]

Character and Citizenship. Some charters have already found such a niche with character education curricula. Aside from touting their academic records, these schools position themselves as alternatives to conventional public schools that are less able to offer their students forthright character education. National Heritage Academies (NHA), founded in 1995 by Christian businessman J. C. Huizenga, is among the charters that include a strong focus on moral education. Each month, at every grade level (kindergarten–eight), NHA students focus on a character trait—such as respect, self-control, compassion, or perseverance—derived from one of the four Greek cardinal virtues: justice, prudence, fortitude, and temperance. Teachers are responsible for discussing these qualities with students, modeling the traits, and encouraging students to demonstrate them in their lives. NHA schools regularly hold "moral focus" assemblies where students are recognized for character building as well as for their academic accomplishments.

Character education and civic education overlap in many respects. The virtues NHA seeks to inculcate are integral to most people's understanding of good citizenship: as Aric Dershem, vice president of people development for NHA, says, "We think good citizens are people with character." Character-building activities can be also used to promote more expressly civic qualities, such as love of country. The NHA history curriculum, for instance, promises to place a strong emphasis on "the uniqueness of the history of the United States and the people who shaped this great country," adding that teachers will "model a respect for America and her heritage."[30] At the NHA-managed Southside Academy Charter School in Syracuse, New York, teachers have helped students practice the virtue of respect by having students recite the Pledge of Allegiance and sing the National Anthem at one of the thrice-weekly moral focus assemblies.[31]

Other charters—particularly the achievement-oriented, "no excuses" schools—take a different approach to their curricula, focusing on developing social competencies such as diligence, problem solving, and self-discipline that have little or no moral significance.[32] These schools promote socially desirable behaviors largely for the practical benefits they can bring to the individual student—an approach Frederick Hess, director of AEI's education policy studies, has called "vocational" or "transactional" citizenship.[33] Hess notes that while the goals of character development might enable one to be a better citizen of a community, they may not be sufficient for *democratic* citizenship. Vocational citizenship can foster some essential social values, but "it ignores others crucial to civic health," Hess says. "Learning

to shake hands firmly and be courteous is not the same thing as learning to question authority, understand the Bill of Rights, engage in public debates, or develop an emotional attachment to one's nation."[34] Some charter leaders worry that they are developing character skills at the expense of civic skills; one principal says that his school teaches students to be good citizens *within* the school—for example, by demanding that they raise their hands and walk quietly in school hallways—but he is not sure that if students are ready to be citizens *outside* the school.

E Pluribus Unum, or Pluribum? The United Neighborhood Organization (UNO), Chicago's largest Latino community organization and the largest single charter school operator in the state of Illinois, is similarly unabashed in its mission to create model American citizens. A network of eleven charter schools primarily serving recent Mexican immigrants in grades kindergarten–eight, UNO schools help students prepare for success in American society by providing a strong academic program as well as an intensive initiation into core American values, traditions, and political processes—an approach in keeping with the original mission of public schools to integrate new immigrants.

Community leader Juan Rangel joined UNO in 1992 and launched its citizenship program after an UNO-commissioned survey found that more than 142,000 Mexican immigrants in Chicago eligible for American citizenship were not pursuing it.[35] In his view, institutions that had once encouraged immigrants to assimilate—particularly, schools—were no longer able or willing to perform their civic function, to the detriment of the Hispanic community. The consequences of this failure include the nation's largest dropout rate and high levels of gang violence and teen pregnancy. If Hispanics are to succeed, Rangel writes, they must be "challenged to take full advantage of American possibilities through deep investments in family, civic involvement and, especially, in the education of its next generation."[36]

UNO's charter status allowed it to experiment and, in many cases, define itself against conventional thinking about how best to help disadvantaged minority students. America has "lost sight of what the public schools were intended to do and what we need to do to help students feel that they're part of a whole," explains Rangel. "We need to get back to what the purpose of a public school was intended to be. That's to create not just educated and engaged citizens, but educated and engaged *American* citizens."[37] Whereas public schools typically offer bilingual education, UNO schools favor English immersion, viewing English language skills as an essential foundation for successful careers and citizenry.[38] Like many charters, UNO promotes a "no excuses" school culture against the low expectations it sees society setting for its students. "Somehow with minority kids we don't feel we have to teach them how to tie a tie or how to speak politely," Rangel says. "But these are important skills for getting a job and for talking to public officials."

Even as they seek to empower students, UNO schools pointedly eschew what Rangel sees as a "politically correct" narrative of disenfranchisement and discrimination. This fight-the-power rhetoric is irrelevant to the needs of the Hispanic community, Rangel explained in an interview: "Is this community going to see itself as another victimized minority, or are they going to be the next successful immigrant group? There is an assumption that this community mimics the African American community—where it's been and where it's going. That's not the case at all. It has very little in common with the African American experience."[39]

Indeed, Rangel argues that such an approach can be detrimental to fostering a sense of national attachment or belonging among disaffected students. Encouraging students to solve social problems in their community can help them develop an interest in community life and contribute to a greater sense of political efficacy. However, an activism-centered approach can also imply a broad critique of the way American society is structured—that is, that students need to gain civic skills to later redress injustices in a nation that would otherwise deny them a civic voice or role. Rather than feeling

empowered to make a difference, students already distrustful of America may feel even more alienated from—or simply overwhelmed by—the demands of public life. This particularly concerns students focusing on structural ills such as urban poverty. "[Students] can get burned out," Greg Grossman, a California charter school teacher, notes. "We had a kid who went to two antiwar protests, and when the war didn't stop, he lost interest."

William Damon, a developmental psychologist at Stanford University, argues that students must invest in—and identify with—a community before they can begin to fruitfully engage with it: "Why would a student exert any effort to master the rules of a system that the student has no respect for and no interest in being part of? To acquire civic knowledge as well as civic virtue, students need to care about their country."[40] UNO schools, similarly, assume that for the Hispanic community to succeed in America, they must become invested in America. To that end, UNO schools seek to inspire patriotism in their charges by participating in American traditions, honoring national holidays, and celebrating American heroes. For Veterans Day 2010, UNO schools held a Veterans Naming Memorial Ceremony to dedicate seven classrooms in honor of noteworthy service men and women,[41] and on Flag Day every June, the organization hosts a naturalization ceremony in a school gym so that immigrants can take the oath of citizenship before an audience of students.[42]

Many charter leaders express discomfort at the idea that schools ought to play such an explicitly assimilative role. Salcido of César Chávez cautions, "It's essential that we give minority students the intellectual skills and knowledge to participate effectively in public life, but we have to be careful not to define good citizenship for them." Raeleen Kasinec, a history teacher from BASIS Scottsdale, prefers to teach students respect for democratic ideals—for example, liberty, individual rights, and equality—rather than love of country. "I want kids to be attached to the ideas behind the US, not to the country itself," she says. Others note that while the UNO approach may work for its particular community—immigrants who have chosen to come to America—it might be less suited to other groups, particularly those brought up in multigenerational poverty and alienated from the dominant culture.

Citizenship and the New Paternalism. In his book *Sweating the Small Stuff: Inner-City Schools and the New Paternalism*, David Whitman describes charter schools with a record of high performance with low-income students as acting essentially as foster parents for those students: the schools seek to replace street culture with a culture of academic achievement by setting and enforcing demanding academic standards and closely monitoring student behavior.[43]

Not surprisingly, many charter educators apply this same prescriptive rigor to civic education. Just as they demand that students develop the habits and skills necessary for college and career success, they also demand that students take an active interest in their community and the wider world. Green Dot, César Chávez, and Democracy Prep, among others, regularly take students on field trips to city and state government offices so students can see democracy at work firsthand—much in the way that charters take students to corporate offices to introduce them to workplace culture. Some charters seek to create what Andrew of Democracy Prep calls "an expectation of voting" by holding mock voter registrations and elections and participating in get-out-the-vote campaigns. Some develop civic skills and values through community service projects and volunteering. (Indeed, charter schools are more likely to require students to "volunteer" than traditional public schools.[44]) Teachers are encouraged to also take part to help model civic engagement to their students.

Charter educators readily concede that parents are often uninterested in civic education, and part of their purpose is to transform the civic culture—as well as the academic culture—in their neighborhoods. Affluent parents already know the importance of civic skills like debate, they say, but disadvantaged parents need to be educated. This effort to forge a culture of civic engagement can go well beyond simply touting

High Tech High: Modeling Civic Values through Equal Opportunity

According to Larry Rosenstock, chief executive officer and founding principal of High Tech High, a network of eleven charter schools in San Diego, California, "In public education today, we are less together and equal than we were before *Brown [vs. Board of Education]*." To address the fact of what he calls "apartheid schooling," High Tech High schools use a computerized lottery that chooses students randomly but factors in the student's zip code (recognizing San Diego's racially segregated housing patterns) to ensure that all students have an equal chance of getting into the schools.

the benefits of civic education to parents. Democracy Prep, for example, performed a study finding that only 9 percent of its parents regularly voted. Now, to register a child at the school, each parent must submit a voter registration card.

This paternalistic approach to civic education is not without tensions. Indeed, it would seem to run counter to the progressive civic educational philosophy many charter schools espouse with their emphasis on student engagement and dislike of teacher-directed instruction. While charter leaders see their ability to define a mission for themselves and their students as a strength, they also want to build student autonomy and promote tolerance for diverse views. Moreover, they are understandably concerned about imposing their own civic values and beliefs on their pupils. For the most part, charter educators seek to square this circle by encouraging students to choose their own issues to research and advocate for and refraining from expressing overtly partisan viewpoints to their students. (Whitman notes, too, that charters have rendered paternalism somewhat more palatable to liberals by promoting social activism, along with traditional values, to their students.[45]) Nonetheless, as one charter educator puts it, "We're preparing kids for democracy, but we are not a democracy."

What Barriers Do Charter Schools Face in Civic Education?

The charter schools we have described enjoy a number of advantages as schools of choice. They can assemble staff that will commit to the types of civic engagement and skill building they want for their students, they can develop their own metrics to measure those skills and hold students and staff accountable for doing their parts, and they can more easily use controversial topics to engage students without risk of angering school board members or parents. On the other hand, unconventional civics programs may invite parental attention and involvement in ways that can cause disruption, innovative civics programs may not relate to state standards and assessments, and small staffs may be stretched thin when civics programs are added on top of efforts to remediate basic skills for disadvantaged students.

Metrics and Lack of Consensus. The lack of consensus regarding the means and goals of civic education presents an opportunity for charter schools to experiment and innovate with their citizenship curricula. The potential of charters to offer diverse and distinctive approaches also makes it more likely that families and educators will find the school that is right for them. However, this lack of consensus can impede charters in their efforts to garner greater support for civic education and to establish common accountability metrics to gauge the school's performance.

Although they enjoy greater autonomy, charter schools are not immune from the pressures traditional public schools face. Charters are evaluated on how well students perform on standardized tests, which has focused their attention on reading and math at the expense of other untested subjects like citizenship.[46] Educators from YES Prep and KIPP were especially conflicted about how to balance core subject remediation with citizenship, but even schools like César Chávez have struggled to maintain their commitment to civic education while raising low test scores, which must remain a priority.[47] Tensions also exist between charter schools' desire to teach citizenship versus their need to compete in the marketplace by satisfying parents who may not rate citizenship among their top priorities for schools.

Charter authorizers, the agencies that oversee charter performance, similarly focus on math and reading scores as the basis on which to close or renew schools. Greg Richmond, president of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, an organization that sets standards and provides guidance for charter authorizing and oversight agencies nationwide, says that even if civic education goals are written into a charter, they are usually ignored. Given the difficulties of closing a school, charter authorizers try to represent the public will and so focus on less controversial standards for school performance, such as reading and math progress. When César Chávez first drafted its charter, for example, the school sought to use its students' senior theses and capstone projects to provide a comprehensive measure of student civic engagement. The DC charter authorizing board, however, rejected the proposal as overly ambitious and instead settled on the less subjective NAEP civics exam. "When you can't agree what to measure, it's hard to focus on metrics," Richmond says. "There just isn't any public consensus about civics, so it gets overshadowed."

If citizenship education is to be seen by policymakers and the public as a priority, charter leaders agree that they need to articulate clear objectives and standards for civic education. Measuring civic knowledge is perhaps their most straightforward task. Many of the charters, including Democracy Prep, UNO, and César Chávez, use widely accepted

Democracy Prep: Measuring Whether Students Are Ready to Change the World

Democracy Prep Schools in Harlem, New York, have three goals for their students: Work hard. Go to college. Change the world. To meet their third goal, Democracy Prep students regularly testify at legislative hearings, meet with elected officials, and canvass streets to promote their causes. At the high school level, all students are required to take speech and debate and are encouraged to participate in state and national competitions. On election days, students walk their neighborhoods and pass out flyers that read, "I can't vote, but you can."

Are Democracy Prep students ready to make a difference after they graduate? The schools now are tracking the number of students who write a letter to the editor or participate in and win a debate. Founder Seth Andrew declares, "College success is not civic success. We want to build an intrinsic sense of motivation, to create a sense of commitment and passion."

assessment tools such as the NAEP civics exam and the US Citizenship and Naturalization test to evaluate and track student content knowledge. However, charter educators are aware that civic knowledge is only one component of active citizenship; civics skills and dispositions are far more difficult to capture.

Charters already have some experience devising creative metrics to gauge student mastery of noncognitive skills. Many charters utilize checklists and behavior contracts monitoring an individual student's behavior, such as raising one's hand, making eye contact, and sitting at attention (rather than slouching). KIPP schools issue a "Character Report Card," evaluating students on a scale of one to five on seven character strengths—such as grit and self-control—identified by psychologist Martin Seligman.[48] The Moral Focus curriculum at NHA evaluates students' moral, performance, and social character, assessing skills like communication, attendance, and responsibility. Other charter educators track students' civic actions: in addition to using teacher evaluations and student self-reports, one teacher measured student civic awareness by the number of students who had changed a public policy, attended a school meeting, or spoken publicly. Democracy Prep keeps similar records, tracking the number of students who publish a letter to the editor, testify before a public body, or win a debate. Students who demonstrate good behavior and civic involvement are awarded "Dream Dollars" (the acronym stands for Discipline, Respect, Enthusiasm, Accountability, and Maturity), which can be redeemed for special field trips (often with a civic theme) or college scholarship money. In the future, the school plans to enhance its civic success metrics by utilizing publicly available data on voting, philanthropic giving, jury service, military service, and political contributions.[49]

Despite these creative approaches to metrics, charter schools are using fairly subjective and school-specific measures of civic outcomes compared to some countries, like Canada, that require students at schools of choice to meet basic civics competencies.[50] Charter leaders are certainly interested in developing, and having access to, harder metrics to track civic outcomes—if only to demonstrate to parents and policymakers that civic education is as serious a subject as reading and math. Vague civic goals like "lifelong learning" and creating "global citizens" are unlikely to appeal to parents, cautions Richmond, who recalls how many public school officials used such buzzwords to excuse poor academic performance.

Additional standardized metrics might help win more support for civic education, but they would also come at some cost to school diversity. "We need a common language for metrics, but that means we give up some autonomy," principal David Castillo notes. While some educators might welcome the added structure and guidance for a subject as diffuse as citizenship, others worry about the potential loss of their professional prerogatives—namely autonomy, flexibility, and freedom to innovate. If civic education were included in state or national standards, charter schools might be forced to overstandardize or

neutralize their curricula, detracting from the special advantages they have to enliven civic education.

Staff Development. For charter leaders, having a "narrative" is more important than any one particular skill or approach to teaching. Given this perspective, charter leaders tend not to discuss civics "programs" so much as schoolwide strategies that every teacher will put into practice and model. At schools with a strong civic mission like Democracy Prep, UNO, and César Chávez, civic education is treated as a task for everyone—not just a subject for social studies teachers alone to address—and civic themes and issues are incorporated in every class.

To support their unique missions, charter schools often rely on nontraditional approaches to staff development, such as in-class instructional coaches, school culture "boot camps," and teacher mentors. These strategies generally work well for acculturating teachers in student behavior strategies, instructional techniques, and values. For schools with less of a civic identity, however, they offer little to a teacher who wants to find project-based history lessons or other innovative civics curricula.

Unlike school districts, most charter schools have little infrastructure to support and elevate a schoolwide, or even classroom-based, civics focus. And this challenge is worsening with the bad economy: in many schools, civic instruction is viewed as an extra and is quickly cut when budgets get tight. Urban charters, like YES Prep and KIPP, often focus on extensive remediation to prepare students for college enrollment, with the result that attention to civic education comes "too little, too late," in the words of one school administrator.

Charter schools are typically small, with limited staff and funding to take on special projects. Principal David Castillo says his school's biggest challenge in developing a strong civic program is finding time in an already packed school schedule. Likewise, teacher Greg Grossman of Gateway High School notes that block scheduling, which many charter schools employ, limits the times that he can bring interesting speakers to the classroom or arrange for students to shadow community leaders. Another instructor says that her school, like many other small charters, relies on teachers to act as generalists, covering multiple topic areas. They often struggle to fit in their many responsibilities. "I've got five jobs, and [service learning] is my fifth," she says. "This means service learning is what I do Sunday night."

Unless they are part of a larger network, each school has to ask teachers to invent curricula if they decide standard textbooks are ineffective. When asked how she gets access to civics-oriented staff development, one history teacher said, "It's just me and Google." Unfortunately, good online civic education resources, according to the teachers we spoke with, are hard to find, leaving teachers at charter schools to navigate the Web to find materials to build their own curriculum during limited planning periods or on their own time.

César Chávez: Guiding Teachers toward Schoolwide Civics Goals

César Chávez schools invest heavily in civics-related professional development for their teachers:

- The network of schools has a director of public policy who provides advice and professional development for teachers.
- A fifty-four-page public policy manual for teachers outlines specific grade-level civics outcomes teachers and students are expected to meet, provides guidelines for assessing whether students have met those goals, and outlines NAEP civics standards and practice questions for use in the classroom.
- The schools have established scoring rubrics so that teachers' grading is normed to promote schoolwide values such as persistence, professionalism, and credibility.

Conclusion

Clearly, the schools highlighted in this paper do not represent the full spectrum of charter schools across the country. What they do provide is an opportunity to understand what happens when we encourage schools to innovate, experiment, and adopt clear priorities on behalf of their students.

It is reasonable to ask why charter schools should be any different from other public schools when it comes to civic education—and, indeed, given the resource constraints many face and the problems associated with addressing the remediation needs of many of their students, it is understandable that citizenship is not given a higher priority. That said, charter schools' flexibility in defining their own missions, choosing their own staff, and controlling what and how they teach clearly allows them greater discretion for grappling with this missing element of modern American public education. Choice can interact with citizenship education in potentially powerful ways by allowing public schools to promote a strong definition of good citizenship and families to choose schools that align with their civic values and beliefs. Moreover, *because* charter schools often have student populations that see themselves and their families as outsiders or disenfranchised, a sound, sensible civic education is even more important—after all, the American public school system was in good measure established to address precisely this issue.

Of course, no easy solutions exist for the issues charter school leaders raise, but progress is possible, and even necessary, if charter schools are to have a hand in helping renew American civic education.

- **Charter schools that have made citizenship their core mission need to be studied, examined, and emulated—just as we do for successful practices and pedagogy in reading and math. Particular attention should be paid to ways that these schools track and measure their performance.** There is scant research now on civics in general and almost none on outcomes such as civic values, skills, and knowledge in charter schools. We need more sector-to-sector research of the kind that David E. Campbell has conducted comparing private schools to public schools, qualitative work that produces case studies framing different types of approaches to civics and a taxonomy of civics instruction, and longitudinal quantitative studies that analyze civics-oriented outcomes.

- **Charter funders have an important role to play in elevating civic learning as an education priority and encouraging charter schools to embrace their civic mission.** In recent decades, as education has come to be seen as the path to personal and professional success, education about citizenship has been shifted to the periphery. It is vital that we devote more time, energy, and resources to understanding how we can productively respond to these pressures to marginalize civic education. Funders can help lead the way by promoting charter schools that are effectively preparing their students for active citizenship and investing in research to devise metrics that can more fully reflect those efforts. They can also support innovative ways to use technology to scale up high-quality civics programs and curricula across multiple charter schools.

- **Charter school authorizers should ask themselves how can they encourage and support charter schools in developing appropriate metrics to track and measure civic outcomes.** Authorizers can emphasize the importance of citizenship in charter schools by asking questions during the application process about whether and how civic education will be offered and putting out requests for proposals for schools that can act as local demonstration sites for civic education. They can also ask charters "with distinction" to focus on civic outcomes for renewal, encouraging high-achieving schools to continue to stretch and improve without risking overstandardization.

- **More attention should be paid to helping charter schools with weaker civic missions, particularly those that serve disadvantaged students.** There is no reason that individual charter schools should agree on a common definition of the model American citizen or even on a desirable approach to civic education. The diversity of approaches in the charter sector is its strength. It is well worth asking, however, whether a charter school that has been successful in closing academic gaps can also find a way to work civic preparation into its coursework and set schoolwide goals for graduates' civic competencies so that teachers are less isolated and civics lessons are less scattershot. We should think seriously about the cost of a weak civic education to students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds and who may be further disadvantaged without a strong preparation for taking an informed role in civic life.

- **Charter advocates should encourage charters to focus not just on math and reading scores, but also to take seriously their civic mission. But just as we cannot let academic achievement overshadow civic education, a school's strong civic mission cannot replace rigorous academic performance.** National charter school support organizations, such as the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, and state associations could do a lot more in conferences and online resource offerings to emphasize the importance of civics in charter schools, provide examples of how and why to fit civics curriculum and activities into lean schedules, and highlight schools that are exemplars in innovative and effective civic education. State and national associations can also help with professional development and dissemination by creating virtual networks of schools and teachers who are focused on civics.

  Advocates have the opportunity to counter fears that charter schools will not be as public as other schools by demonstrating that charters can actually help lead public schools to set a higher bar for civic education, especially for minority students.

- **School district and charter school leaders should share ideas and models for improving civic education across sectors and sharing professional development.** As traditional schools and districts wrestle with how to help reverse the decline in national civic skills and knowledge, they should pay attention to charters that are leading in this area and see if there are ways to either emulate or cooperate with them. District schools operate under different constraints in teacher selection and family choice, so lessons are not always directly transferable. But those differences alone could spark interesting discussions among leaders of both types of schools.

Notes

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18. This emphasis on skills and dispositions over facts is not unique to charter school educators. In a 2010 AEI survey of high school social studies teachers on civic education, the vast majority of teachers at both public and private schools ranked instilling "core values like tolerance and equality" and "promoting civic behaviors such as voting or community service" as their first or second priorities for teaching citizenship. Just 38 percent gave top billing to "understanding the key principles of American government." Teaching historical facts and dates was the lowest priority for social studies teachers at both public and private schools. See Gary J. Schmitt et al., *High Schools, Civics, and Citizenship: What Social Studies Teachers Think and Do* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2010), 5, www.aei.org/papers/society-and-culture/citizenship/high-schools-civics-and-citizenship/.

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