Research Brief
District-run Public Charter High Schools: What Do We Know?

Questions: **What do districts consider when they establish a district-run charter school on the academy model? What is the success of such schools? What are examples of successful district-run charter schools?**

In a Nutshell

Successful district-run charter high schools, ones where there is a higher than expected achievement and graduation rate, share three characteristics: 1) a clearly articulated focus or mission for the school; 2) a rigorous academic curriculum for all students that emphasizes relevance, critical thinking, and problem-solving; 3) an emphasis on relationships and creating a sense of belonging for the students (Cotton, 1996; Gamoron, 1996; Nathan & Febey, 2001; Newmann, 2008).

There is little research on issues of student recruitment, expectations or curricular alternatives. There are, however, numerous examples of successful district-run charter high schools. These schools provide useful examples of policies addressing these issues.

Primary Considerations When Planning a District-run Charter High School
The charter school movement, begun in earnest in 1991, has stirred debate across the country and among both educators and policy-makers. The movement has "seen tremendous growth" as evidenced by the numbers of states enacting laws that allow charters (more than 40), the numbers of students served by them (a million nationwide), and the number of charter schools (at least 3500) established by chartering organizations, universities, and public school districts (Zimmer & Buddin, 2007, pp. 231-232). At the heart of the movement has been a desire not only to promote parental choice and improve schooling through market-driven competition, but also to allow innovative educators "to operate free from bureaucratic controls . . . and create new definitions of schooling" (Huerta & Zuckerman, 2009, p. 415). At the district level, this latter desire to create exemplars that serve as labs from which the entire district can learn has fueled charter initiatives in such large urban centers as New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia, and San Diego.

In fact, the charter school movement has yet to produce "large numbers of new, different, and better public schools" (Huerta & Zuckerman, 2009, p. 428). In theory, charter schools should enjoy autonomy and freedom to innovate on behalf of learning and the students they serve, to pursue the best ideas about educational practices and organizational design supported by respected research. Although they are encouraged to "challenge long-standing institutionalized patterns of teaching and learning," the reality seems to be that they are simultaneously "constrained by taken-for-granted institutional rules that have come to define legitimate schooling in the United States" (Huerta & Zuckerman, 2009, p. 415), things like the length of the school day, grade configuration, or grading and assessment practices.

Little is known about the specific "challenges and constraints" developers of charter schools face in creating new types of schools and ways of schooling (Huerta & Zuckerman, 2009, p. 415). Even less may be known, through empirical research studies, about how district-run charter schools that "are succeeding in "breaking the mold," have actually done so (Huerta & Zuckerman, 2009, p. 428). Researchers have focused instead on the issue of student achievement, and how students who attend charters fare in relationship to their counterparts in traditional public schools (TPS), or private or parochial schools (see discussion of achievement below). A first critical question, especially for the developers of district-run charters, may be: To what extent are we able to suspend "the picture in our heads" of what an effective school looks like and the usual rules by which we operate in order to allow a new school in our district to become a true "incubator for promising educational practices" (Zimmer & Buddin, 2007, p. 233)?

There are many challenges in creating new designs for schooling—whether they be charter schools, academies, schools-within-a-school, or a small school redesign. The following items suggest the extent of the challenge innovators face.

- A recent study by Zimmer & Buddin (2007) found that district-run charters are less likely to receive facilities from the district and more likely to have their liberties to innovate restricted by the district.
- Raywid (2002), in a study of high school magnets and the school-within-a-school design, determined that the structures and policies required to enable such schools to thrive have not yet been adopted, and that "the particular supports they need for success" are often denied them.
- In addition to administrative support at the highest levels up to and including the superintendent, Raywid cites a call by Linda Darling-Hammond, Jackie Ancess and others for the development and adoption of "new and different policies to govern the new schools" rather than the use of "'policy by exception'" marked by policy or contract waivers and exemptions that can be arbitrary, temporary, and set the new school up for criticism from the traditional schools in the district (Raywid, 2002, p. 50).
- For those planning to develop a district-run charter high school a critical factor is the strength of support and genuine commitment from the top. Such a commitment will be marked by the capacity and will to put into place the rules and policies that will enable the charter to follow its mission and to innovate.
- Yet another consideration in opening a district-run charter school is cost. Although it is commonly assumed that large schools are more cost effective than smaller schools, this is not necessarily the case (Cotton, 1996). It is possible to design a charter school to cost no more to operate than a TPS. One such example of a successful district-run charter school that was specifically designed to cost no more per pupil than the other schools in the district is the Minnesota School of Environmental Science (The "Zoo School") (http://www.district196.org/ses/), located at the Minneapolis Zoo. A study of New York City high schools that had been redesigned into smaller charter and magnet schools found that, although the operating cost per pupil appeared to be higher, when the **cost per graduate** was calculated, the smaller schools were ultimately "less expensive" to operate than the comprehensive high schools (Nathan & Febey, 2001). Stockard & Mayberry (in Cotton, 1996) suggest that the cost of "maintaining an orderly learning environment" within large, comprehensive high schools where there are far more behavior problems cancels out "any possible virtue" for operating on a larger scale.

http://www.educationpartnerships.org/

• Because charters ideally operate with a great deal more autonomy than traditional schools, and often require site-based and collaborative management of the school as part of their charter, the leadership skills of the charter school principal "may be even more important." Charter school principals not only serve as instructional leaders, but often must manage the operations and finances of the school to a much greater extent than principals in traditional public schools (Zimmer & Buddin, 2007, p. 246).

Do Charter Schools Work for Students?
Gathering data about the effectiveness of charter schools for students has been challenging, in large part because of the variety in both types of chartering agencies, and of charter designs, from "start up schools" to "conversion schools" to nonclassroom-based schools (e.g., museum-based schools). But "overall, the research on charter schools has revealed mixed results ranging from slightly positive, to no effect, to negative impacts" (Zimmer & Buddin, 2007, p. 231). One common positive result is the level of parental involvement which, as might be expected, is "consistently higher at all grade levels in charters than in traditional public schools" (Zimmer & Buddin, p. 240).

Research on the effectiveness of district-run charter schools has been conducted primarily in large urban centers. Those results have been promising. A recent study of Chicago charters found that students who attended charters were 7% more likely to graduate from high school, earned higher scores on college entrance exams, and 11% more likely to enroll in college. What's more, an examination of the demographic make-up of the charter student body reflected the demographic make-up of the district. A similar pattern of success for charter school students in Florida, both academically and demographically, also seems to be emerging (Viadero, 2008, p. 8). An earlier study (Gamoran, 1996) of 48 stand-alone urban magnet schools showed that "in public magnet schools, achievement was higher than that in public comprehensive schools in all four [core] subjects," and the differences in science, reading, and social studies were "statistically significant."

The results "strengthen the case" for creating specialized public school magnets or academies, and reveal the imperative of providing students with a "common mission" to which they can be committed and through which they can develop the "strong social ties" they may be lacking because of the erosion of both family and community networks in recent decades (Gamoran, p. 45).

Examples of District-run Charter Schools
There are exciting "case studies" of successful district-run charter schools that may serve as "incubators for promising educational practices."One such exemplar is High Tech High (http://www.hightechhigh.org/about/), an urban charter school operated by the San Diego public schools. From its small size (450 – 500 students) to its carefully crafted lottery system for admissions designed to insure equitable access to all students in the district, to its "design principles" of "Personalization, Adult World Connections, and Common Intellectual Mission," High Tech High is a district-run charter with a record of remarkable success. Although it serves a high percentage of poor and minority students, it is ranked among the top 10% of high schools on California's Academic Performance Index. The dropout rate is less than 0.5%, and 100% of HTH's graduates go on to college, 80% of them to four year institutions (Neumann, 2008, p. 61). Students are selected through a lottery pool based on district zip codes and "admissions are

allocated in proportion to student enrollment in public schools of the respective zip code areas" (p. 52). Because more male students than female students apply for admission, enrollment is also adjusted by gender to insure gender equity. All students have access only to a high quality curriculum and are grouped heterogeneously for learning. The success of this charter has prompted the district to open a second charter and to reorganize its "three large high schools into independent schools-within-schools, each with a distinctive academic focus" (Newmann, p. 61).

High Tech High's innovations were inspired by John Dewey's approaches to teaching and learning, including using the community as a site of powerful learning. In fact, several of the best examples of successful district-run charter schools are housed not in a traditional school building, but out in the community, for example, in zoos, museums, or malls. Boston Arts Academy (http://baa.learningnetworks.com/Pages/index) represents a collaboration between the Boston Public Schools and "six internationally known institutions" specializing in the arts. Nova High School in Seattle, Washington (http://www.seattleschools.org/area/main/ShowSchool?sid=023), whose focus is to prepare students to be "thoughtful, active citizens," partners with a variety of community organizations to provide internships and service learning opportunities to help educators accomplish these goals. Another example of a public school district that successfully redesigned its large high school into five autonomous academies is South Grand Prairie High near Dallas, Texas (http://sgphs.gpisd.org). Each academy offers a rigorous academic curriculum with an emphasis on real world relevance and career application (Nathan & Febey, 2001). (For a list of other innovative district-run charter schools and how to contact them, see the resources at the end of this brief.)

Recruitment
Although there appears to be no one best method for recruiting a diverse student population among these schools, or for retaining students through graduation, there are several common threads in the examples of successful district-run charter schools that should be noted. The first and most significant is the size of the school. Research on the impact of school size has consistently revealed many benefits for students who attend smaller schools, including higher achievement, better attendance, higher graduation rates, less violence, and better behavior. In fact, these benefits have been shown across the spectrum from rural to suburban to urban communities (Cotton, 1996; Gamoran, 1996; Nathan & Febey, 2001; Newmann, 2008). Research suggests that the upper limits in terms of school size for high schools should be 400 – 800 students (Cotton, 1996).

Summary
Educators interested in creating successful district-run charter schools should learn from others who have done so, keeping these characteristics in mind, and working to secure strong leadership support at the highest levels of the district, and the adoption of rules and policies that support innovation and autonomy. The challenge is great, but the benefits to students, even those most at risk for failure, are very promising.

District-run Charter Schools Cited in the Research:

High Tech High School, San Diego, CA: http://www.hightechhigh.org/about/ (Contact **Simi Rush,** Director, External Affairs srush@hightechhigh.org or 619-243-5036; or **Larry**

http://www.educationpartnerships.org/

Rosenstock, Chief Executive Officer, lrosenstock@hightechhigh.org
619-243-5000.)

El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice, Brooklyn, N. Y. http://www.elpuente.us/ (Contact Principal through the web or at 718-599-2895.)

Julia Richman Education Center, New York, N.Y. http://www.jrec.org/multiage.html Manhattan International High, Talent Unlimited High School, Urban Academy, Vanguard High School. (Contact Ann Cook, Julia Richman Complex, 212-570-5284.)

The Nova Project, Nova High School, Seattle,WA: http://www.seattleschools.org/area/main/ShowSchool?sid=023 (Contact Elaine Packard, Principal, via email through the web site or at 206-726-6730.)

Perspectives Charter School, Chicago, Ill. www.perspectivescs.org , 312-431-8770.

South Grand Prairie High, Grand Prairie, TX: http://sgphs.gpisd.org/

Minnesota School of Environmental Science, Apple Valley, MN: http://www.district196.org/ses/

References and Online Resources

Cotton, K. (1996). Affective and social benefits of small-scale schooling. ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Charleston, WV. Retrieved online 3/30/2010:
http://www.oceangateschool.net/Article_Consolidation_Does_Not_Work_for_Kids.pdf

Gamoran, A. (1996). Do magnet schools boost achievement? *Educational Leadership, 54*, pp 42 – 6.

Huerta, L. A. & Zuckerman, A. (2009). An institutional theory analysis of charter schools: Addressing institutional challenges to scale. *Peabody Journal of Education, 84*, pp. 414 – 431. Retrieved online 3/30/10:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~content=a913307134&db=all

Nathan, J. & Febey, K. (2001). Smaller, safer, saner, successful schools. National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities, Washington, D. C. Retrieved online 3/18/10:
http://eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/19/24/58.pdf

Neumann, R. (2008). Charter schools and innovation: The High Tech High model. *American Secondary Education, 36*. Retrieved online 3/18/10:
http://eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/custom/portlets/recordDetails/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_&ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=EJ809479&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=EJ809479

Raywid, M. A. (2002). The policy environment of small schools and schools-within-schools. *Educational Leadership*, *59*.

Viadero, D. (2008). Edge seen for Chicago charter high schools. *Education Week*, May 14, p. 8.

Zimmer, R. & Buddin, R. (2007). Getting inside the black box: Examining how the operation of charter schools affects performance. Peabody Journal of Education, 82, pp. 231 – 273. Retrieved online 3/25/10:

http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~content=a788017775&db=all

---

Submitted: Date: 4/6/10   By: Dr. Barbara Bleyaert, Eastern Michigan University

---

http://www.educationpartnerships.org/