



Morning meeting is a time to get motivated at KIPP Philadelphia Charter School.

Lessons From Charter Schools

Not all charter schools are rocking their AYP numbers, but the very best ones have much to teach us.

By Kate Rix

When Erica Amachi taught fifth grade at KIPP Philadelphia Charter School, she didn't start the year in a room full of new faces. She'd met each of her students before, though she'd never had any of them in class.

Like most teachers in charter schools, Amachi visits the family of each child who will be in her class before the school year begins.

"It's powerful," says Amachi, who now teaches first grade at KIPP Philadelphia Elementary Academy (KPEA). "You sit in the family's living room, and from that moment, you have a connection because they've had you in their home. They trusted me in a way I don't think they would have if we'd just met at back-to-school night."

The simple gesture of a home visit—where the focus will be on the child

and not on academics or classroom behavior—pays huge dividends, say teachers. A teacher who has met a student's parents in their home is better equipped to reach that child and keep him or her on track through the year.

"I can remember fifth graders who needed motivation, and I could say, 'Your mother told me how important it is to her for you to get a good education. Do I need to call her and revisit

that conversation?'" Amachi recalls.

For all of the tension between traditional and charter schools over issues like resources and collective bargaining—and these are very real issues in many districts—the question remains: Can traditional schools take a page from the playbook of successful charters? The answer: Perhaps, if given similar autonomy.

Home visits are common, if not

mandatory, in charter schools. By contrast, some school districts prohibit teachers from visiting students at home for liability or contractual reasons. This practice, conducted once or twice a year, is just one of many ways that successful charter schools have modified the learning and teaching experience, often with positive results.

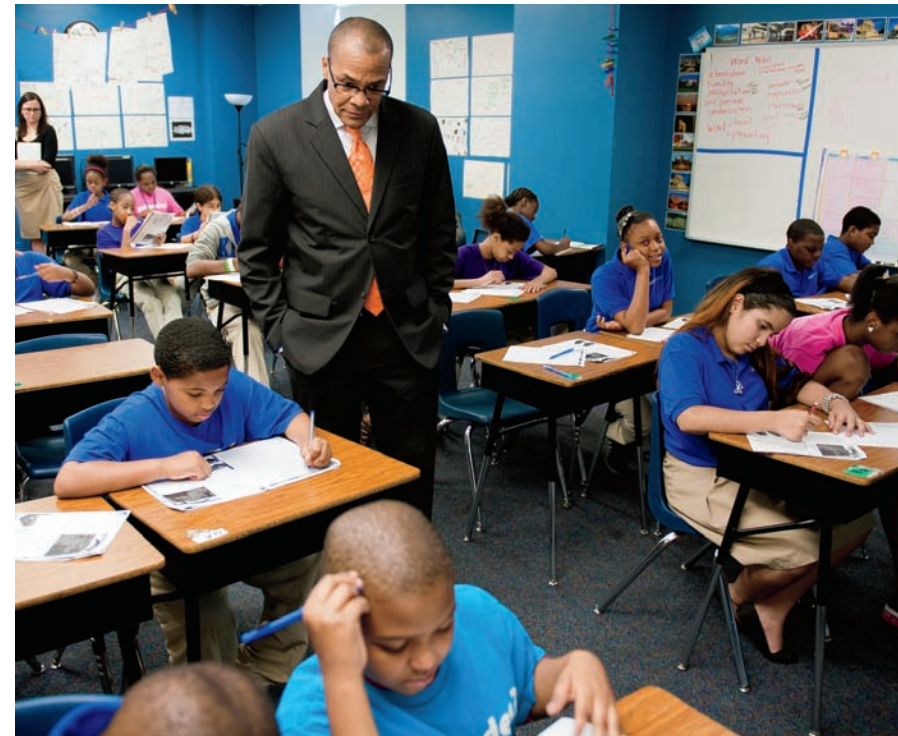
"What is different in a successful charter school is the whole pack-

PHOTOS: JEFF FUSCO

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HANDS-ON EDUCATION: KIPP encourages students to learn by doing, both in the science lab—where a seventh grader bravely dissects a frog—and in music class, where a student wears a shirt he earned for academic achievement and participation.



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age,” says Betheny Gross, a senior research analyst at the University of Washington–Bothell’s Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE). “What you see is an organization that is oftentimes very focused on mission. Everyone is thinking about the same kind of instruction, and the professional development is thought about in the context of that mission.”

Gross led a four-year, federally funded initiative called Inside Charter Schools that examined practices at charters around the nation. The report concluded that the best charter schools make more effective use of instructors’ time and support them in their efforts to provide focused and differentiated programs for students.

Developing a Mission

Charter schools have two advantages over most traditional schools: autonomy and a mission. Having a focused mission or school philosophy and the autonomy to make the decisions to put that philosophy into practice is what

sets charter schools apart from regular public schools. However, traditional schools are gaining ground.

Peter Sherman is principal of Valdez Elementary School in Denver. Two years ago, he and a group of teachers were talking about things they would change about Valdez if they could, and the policies and rules that were in the way. Sherman mentioned the district was in fact rolling out a new program to give schools more autonomy.

“We spent three or four hours talking and came away pretty psyched,” Sherman recalls. After that, other teachers got excited, and some parents volunteered to help explore what

‘Charter schools have two advantages over most traditional schools: autonomy and a mission.’

Valdez would have to do to qualify for the program.

The plan that Valdez wrote as part of its application for Denver’s “innovation schools” program became the school’s mission and vision. Teachers voted to make certain changes, including the hiring of new faculty as “at-will” employees, in exchange for greater autonomy over assessments and curriculum development. The vision also includes enhanced teacher collaboration and leadership.

As an innovation school, Valdez exercised its right to opt out of the district’s teacher evaluation plan, which included observation by teachers from outside the school.

Teachers still wanted peer feedback, though. “Our teachers said, ‘We want our colleagues to observe us,’ so this year we instituted internal peer observation,” says Sherman. “My leadership style tends to be pretty collaborative. Now it’s even more transparent. Most people in the building know exactly what we’re working on.”

Knowing the Kids

It used to be that when a teacher visited a student’s family at home, it was because something was seriously wrong. Today, a growing number of teachers at non-charter schools are making appointments with families to get to know them in their homes. At charter schools, teacher visits are routine. Ideally, these visits send a clear message: that teachers take their work very seriously.

Some charter schools have opened in neighborhoods where the community feels let down or underserved by traditional schools. In such cases, visits can help to establish trust and build parent involvement.

The practice is gaining support at the district level as well. In Sacramento, California, nearly 50 public schools have implemented an optional home visit program, with the help of a local nonprofit.

“We didn’t invent home visits,” says Lisa Levasseur, local project director for the Sacramento-based Parent

Teacher Home Visit Project. “They’ve been happening for generations. Our project was started by parents who felt disengaged and teachers who felt the same way. There was a cycle of blame happening in our district.”

Thirteen states besides California have districts that receive training in conducting home visits. To ensure success, it’s essential that all involved parties—the union, district administrators, principals, teachers, and parents—agree the practice is important.

Levasseur says that the most successful home visit programs are voluntary. Some teachers aren’t comfortable doing them and some families decline the invitation. Also, she says, teachers should be compensated for the time required, either with a stipend or with professional development hours.

Having cleared those hurdles, teachers are encouraged to follow these guidelines: make an appointment to visit a family (never just show up); meet in the family home or elsewhere off-campus; and bring a small gift for

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the child (books work well).

“One year when I was teaching, I visited a Hmong family and ended up visiting them throughout the year,” Levasseur says. “I heard beautiful stories about the parents’ lives growing up. It’s a very oral culture, and the visits gave me some insight. It changed my way of doing things back in my third-grade classroom. We gave speeches and did a lot of recording stories and then writing them down.”

Meaningful Assessments, Master Teachers

In many districts, each school is required to use the same curricula. Under this approach, all teachers might, for example, use a reading curriculum that follows an explicit phonics and comprehension program.

Charter school advocates say their site-based autonomy allows teachers to be more creative and responsive.

“I feel really valued in what I know about teaching,” says KPEA’s Erica

Amachi. She recalls that at the traditional public school in Atlanta where she taught for five years, “we had a scripted reading instruction program that broke our students into groups for us, based on data that hadn’t been gathered in our classrooms.”

Amachi, who works with a co-teacher at KPEA, says that reading assessments there are conducted both school-wide and on a class-by-class basis. The assessments are given at regular intervals and look at all aspects of reading.

“This way we can help kids who haven’t met the baseline as well as push kids who have already mastered the skill,” Amachi says.

In Chicago’s UNO Charter Schools, every classroom or special subject teacher is assigned a master teacher. They meet at least once a week to discuss how students are doing and how the teacher can improve his or her craft.

Samantha Cleaver has 13 teachers under her supervision at UNO’s Carlos

Fuentes Charter School, a K–8 school on Chicago’s North Side. It’s an individualized approach. Cleaver will work with each teacher under her tutelage to identify strengths and areas that could use improvement. If, for example, a teacher wants to work on increasing student engagement during lessons, Cleaver might do some data collection to find out what the issues are.

“I will go observe and quantify engagement—E for engaged, W for working, P for passive or distracted,” Cleaver says. “I do that for five-minute intervals and get a few data points.”

Then, during a one-on-one, they interpret the data together and come up with strategies: Maybe the teacher could do more “cold calls,” or perhaps Cleaver could observe student discussion time to get more specific data.

“I think having master teachers who are in the classroom and able to develop professional working relationships with teachers is really valuable,” Cleaver says. “It’s the best part of our job to look at data and see those successes and celebrate together.”

It’s About Time

Charter school principals can make a number of decisions to tailor their schools to students’ needs. One of the most common is to lengthen the school day or year. In Chicago, school days are longer at UNO’s network of 11 charters than at the city’s public schools, to provide more instructional time. And by having master teachers on staff, kids don’t have to miss class time while teachers do in-service professional development. Over the course of the year, students at UNO schools are in class for 1,330 hours, compared with 977.5 hours for their counterparts in traditional public schools.

It’s worth noting that many of the best charter schools serve kids with higher instructional needs. Many of these children, say researchers, benefit from a longer school day.

“The idea is that kids, particularly kids below grade level, need more instructional time,” says Parker Baxter, senior legal analyst for CRPE. And in charters, they often get just that.

4 IDEAS TO TAKE BACK TO YOUR SCHOOL

Teachers in traditional public schools are using many of the strategies that work well in successful charters. With some initiative and support, these approaches can boost professional satisfaction and student performance in even the most tradition-bound schools.

1 Mission Building

Get together with your colleagues, and your principal, if you can. Talk about the things you would do or change at your school if you could shoot for the stars. This is the first step to building a common vision, and with some support from higher up, it could lead to positive change.

2 Home Visits

Teachers in many traditional public schools have the option of visiting families of prospective children before the school year begins. Find out whether your district allows home visits. If so, consider contacting the Parent Teacher Home Visit Project (pthvp.org) for information about trainings and details about how to set up a program.

3 Homegrown Data

Some traditional schools are following the lead of charters and developing their own assessments. When teachers have more control over how they assess students, they are more likely to reap meaningful insights. Find out whether there is interest at your school for site-based assessment development.

4 In-House Professional Development

Charter schools often don’t send teachers out for professional development. Instead, master teachers are on staff to provide ongoing feedback every day. At the very least, teachers in traditional schools can benefit from this approach by stepping up internal observation and assessment. This could take the form of sharing challenges and providing real-world tips to improve practice. □



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