

## A Reflection on the Challenges for Minnesota's Charter School Movement

### **PART 1 – Identifying the Potential Threats**

The purpose of a Board of Directors retreat is to take time to reflect on where an organization is at, where it wants to go, or to think about ideas and issues bigger than the institution and the challenges ahead. In June, the MACS Board of Directors held its annual retreat and chose to look at issues bigger than the Association and the challenges ahead for Minnesota's charter school movement.

The focus was on *the Potential Internal and External Threats to the growth and sustainability of Minnesota's charter school movement.*

So what are some of the potential external and internal threats to Minnesota's charter school movement?

**External threats include:** *the growing funding disparity between funding for charter school students and those in traditional districts; increasing legislative and regulatory requirements vs autonomy and outcomes; covert and overt political opposition to chartering; automatic school closure laws based only on standardized tests; accusations that charters are re-segregating public schools; the adequacy and availability of facilities and financing for facilities; one size assessment of schools with no differentiation of the population the school serves; lack of other recognized performance measures or data to evaluate school success; perception that charters not adequately serving special needs students on one-hand and on the other the charters are over-accommodating with no concern for costs; the corporatization of chartering and efforts to privatize public education; increased tension between charters and traditional districts for students ... and there probably more that the board did not discuss.*

**Internal threats include:** *ineffective board governance; authorizing capacity, quantity and quality; lack of administrative leadership and/or capacity; the Founder's Syndrome and its impact on school success; lack of political engagement by the charter community; poor personnel management and practices; inadequate or systematic documentation of innovation; limited awareness and understanding of the chartering concept within the charter community; design of schools that lead to racially, culturally or ethnically isolated schools; limited mutual support among schools and understanding that individual schools are part of a bigger movement ... there are probably more.*

After discussing the potential threats board members participated in an exercise to identify what they perceived to be the most significant threats. Human nature, such as it is, normally leads first to the identification of external threats. External threats can be more simply assigned or blamed on others, and it is almost always easier to rally and mobilize people against an external verses an internal threat.



With these realities one might have expected the board to have identified some of the external threats as the most significant ones.

The board however, looked beyond the simple answers and focused on the fact that it is normally the internal threats that do the most to undermine a movement, given that it is unaddressed internal threats that often provide energy and life to the external threats.

### **So what did the board see as the most significant threats to Minnesota's charter school movement?**

#### **First, the Capacity and Effectiveness of Board Governance**

Autonomy is not the absent of governance, that is anarchy. Autonomy is rather the ability and the responsibility to make decisions, or govern oneself, instead of decisions being made by others and imposed externally. Effective governance of schools is a critical element in the success of individual charter schools as well as the overall charter movement.

Ineffective board governance, whether as a result of poor recruitment, inadequate training or education, a lack of commitment, feeble decision-making processes, or weak leadership, creates demands for more external controls, restraints, restrictions, regulations and reports on charters. The external requirements employed to address ineffective board governance not only undermines one of the basic concepts of chartering, it undermines the quality of education provided to students.

#### **Second, the Management Capacity and/or Leadership of School Administration**

Leadership is often defined in terms of position, but positional leadership is only one dimension of leadership. There are also at least two other dimensions: competence – having the knowledge and skills to do the job; and personal integrity and authenticity – having the credibility to motivate, facilitate, and direct action. All institutions, including charter schools, need leadership, but they also need management. Leadership and management are often seen as two sides of the same coin – but each one has a different face and focus.

If a school does not have enough administrative capacity due to the size of the school, or a lack of understanding of the scope of administrative requirements by the board; or if it hires individuals for administrative positions who are not a good fit relative to the school culture, or do not have the skills or competences needed given the school's development or history; or a school does not have a plan for leadership succession, which results in chaos, when a leader departs there will be an impact on the operation of the school and student learning. When any of these leadership circumstances occur the result is often, especially when they make the headlines, the result is often a call for tighter state regulation of personnel in leadership positions, which makes it harder for schools to move forward in fulfilling their potential and for the movement to maintain the ideals of the chartering concept.

#### **Third, the Capacity, Quality, and Quantity of Authorizing**

While some people argue whether a school needs the ongoing oversight of an authorizer once it reaches a certain point, schools having an authorizer is a fundamental component of the chartering concept. Effective



authorizing is the safety value for ensuring that those who have been given a “*franchise to operate a public school*” fulfill their mission and contract obligations, and maintain the trust of the public.

Without an increase in the quantity (number) or capacity (number of schools) of authorizers, the charter school movement will soon reach a self-imposed limitation on growth. Without a common understanding of the role and responsibilities of authorizers, there will continue to be confusion, missteps, miscalculations, and an uneven quality of assessment, evaluation, and oversight of schools. Without every school taking the charter contract seriously, and every authorizer holding schools accountable for those contracts in a professional manner, there will be more proposed legislation to require more oversight of authorizers.

**Fourth, the Level of Political Engagement by the Charter School Community**

Whether people want to acknowledge it or not education is political. While education within a particular school may not be political (and that is doubtful), education on the broader stage is political, as it is about philosophy, policy, and the public purse. The low level of political engagement of the charter school community has its consequences, including being on the defensive most of the time, and allowing others (special interests, foundations, and non-friendly politicians) to set the agenda and destiny of the movement and individual schools, rather than educators and parents.

While there is no doubt that there are other significant threats, the Board sees these four threats as the foundation for addressing all other threats, whether internal or external. So, effective board governance, school leadership and management, authorizing capacity and political engagement are the areas, where the Association will continue to expand its work and efforts going forward.

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