

Issue Brief

Free to Lead: Autonomy in Highly Successful Charter Schools



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Autonomy is a key component of the charter school concept. By allowing charter schools to have autonomy over decisions concerning finance, personnel, scheduling, curriculum and instruction, states have enabled many of these schools to produce stellar results for their students.

Given the increasing interest in creating charter-like schools in some states and localities, as well as continued national momentum toward common standards, common assessments, statewide

data systems, and teacher and leader evaluation processes, it is crucial policymakers understand how charter school autonomy plays out in practice in order to preserve and strengthen it.

One way to see autonomy in action is to investigate how it works in highly successful charter schools, where students are achieving at levels dramatically higher than comparable charter or district schools. Understanding how high-performing charter schools use their

autonomy can help other school leaders make the most of theirs. And it can inform policymakers' decisions about how to advance school autonomy as they craft laws and regulations.

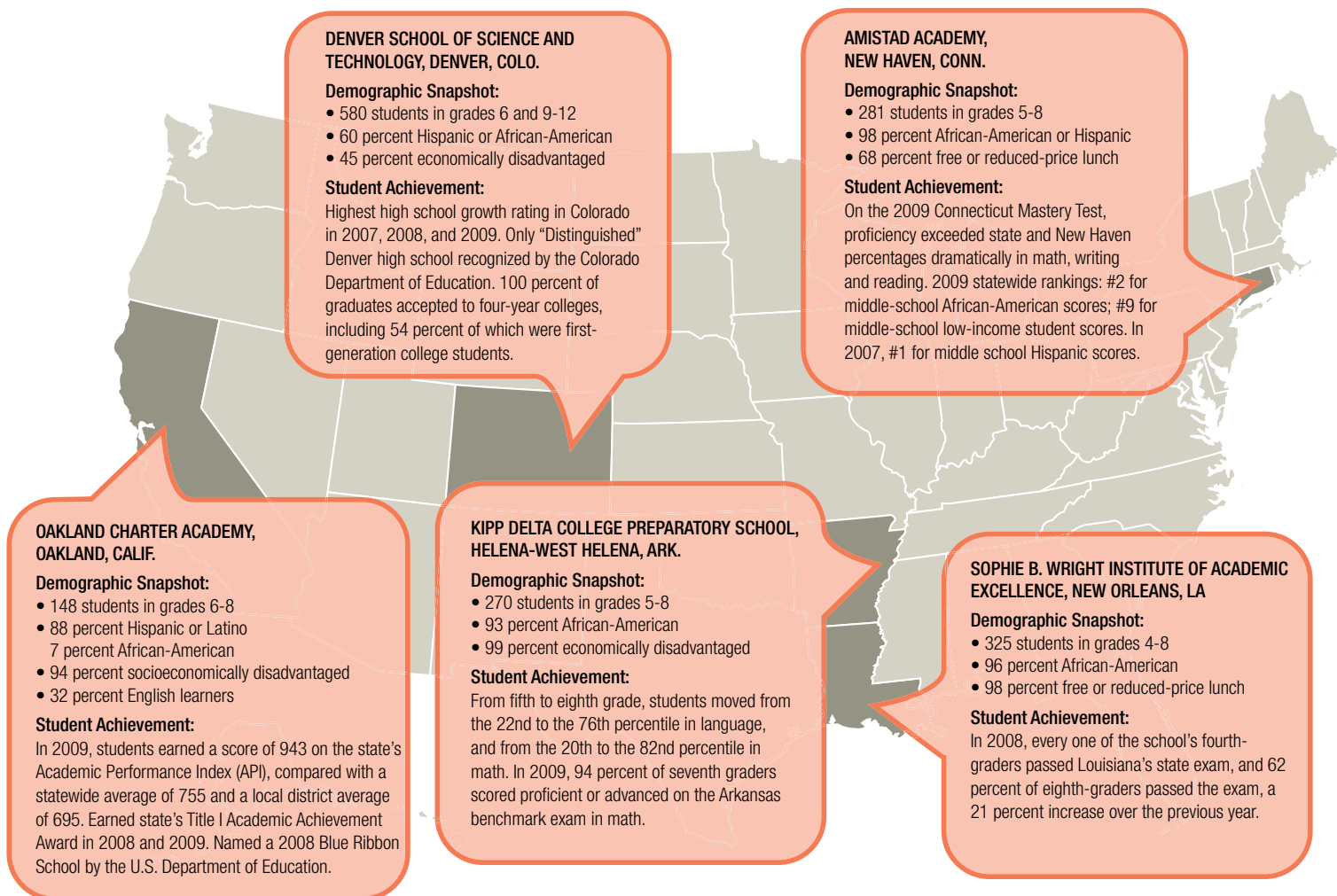
This issue brief explores autonomy at five excellent charter schools across the country. When interviewed, all five school leaders identified ways autonomy has enhanced their ability, and the ability of their teachers, to achieve high levels of student performance.

SEVEN AUTONOMIES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Leaders of the five highly successful charter schools profiled here identified the top three areas in which autonomy has enabled their schools to achieve outstanding results. Then, in response to a battery of questions, leaders expressed

their opinions on the significance of several areas of autonomy to school success. These interviews revealed seven autonomies that made a difference and hold promise as part of broader reform strategies:

- Freedom to develop a great team
- Freedom to manage teachers as professionals
- Freedom to change (or not change) curriculum and classroom structure
- Autonomy in scheduling
- Financial freedom
- Board freedom to focus on education
- Freedom to define a unique school culture



THREE CRUCIAL AUTONOMIES AT EACH HIGH-PERFORMING PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL

DSST	Sophie B. Wright	OCA	KIPP Delta	Amistad
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Hiring and firing ■ Educational program ■ Finance (with some limits) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Consistency with curriculum ■ Hiring, firing, and monitoring ■ Finance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Curriculum structure ■ Hiring and firing ■ Discipline 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Waiver from teacher certification ■ Waiver from principal certification ■ Hiring and firing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Hiring and firing ■ Curriculum and scheduling (instructional minutes) ■ School culture

Freedom to Develop a Great Team

Without exception, school leaders interviewed for this project highlighted the value of autonomy in developing a strong team. This includes hiring, monitoring teacher performance and, when necessary, dismissing teachers. Denver School of Science and Technology (DSST) Head of School Bill Kurtz stressed that “education is, through and through, a human capital development enterprise,” so being able to create “a team that carries out that development and is aligned with the values, the vision and the mission of the organization is absolutely essential to the work [schools] do.”¹

Hiring

School leaders see immense value in being able to hire teachers early. Human resource systems in many districts do not support what one interviewee termed “agile hiring,” instead imposing timeframes and deadlines for internal and external posting of open positions, pushing the dates for teacher hiring late into the summer months. In extreme cases, teachers might not come on board until weeks or even days before the start of the new school year. For Kurtz, freedom in this area means that he and DSST can be in the market in December. Amistad Academy Middle School (Amistad) in Connecticut aims to have at least 75 percent of hiring completed by April or May.

Principals also value control over the hiring decision itself. Many districts have mechanisms built into their hiring processes for forcibly placing veteran teachers without jobs in schools, sometimes without considering the wishes of principals, teachers or parents.² Freedom in hiring is significant because it often includes exemptions from external controls like those that force principals to take on staff who may not be mission-aligned or even qualified, in principals’ eyes, for their positions.

A waiver from teacher certification requirements was the most important area of autonomy cited by Scott Shirey, the Executive Director at KIPP Delta College Preparatory School (KIPP Delta). Shirey cited the limited pool of qualified teachers in Helena, Ark. To him, it was crucial to be able to find talented people and bring them into the organization without the barriers presented by certification requirements. Shirey cited the example of an algebra teacher who applied to teach at district schools and was repeatedly passed over because he didn’t have the required paperwork. At KIPP Delta, this teacher has achieved great results—86 percent of his students earned “proficient” or “advanced” marks and 100 percent passed the end-of-course algebra exam.

KIPP Delta also hired a teacher through Teach For America (TFA) to teach 10th grade world history. After a great first year, Shirey moved her to an 11th grade English class. Her students earned the second highest scaled score in the state on the end-of-course literacy exam, and 91 percent rated “proficient” or “advanced.” Still, the state threatened to remove the teacher from the classroom because, under the state’s agreement with TFA, all TFA teachers were required to progress through the state’s certification process, which required that teachers stay in the same subject area for two straight years. Ultimately, KIPP Delta’s certification waiver allowed the school to prevent the teacher’s removal.

At DSST, Kurtz expressed a strong preference for having his teachers spend time training at the school instead of in an off-site certification program. Citing an absence of evidence that certification leads to improved student results, Kurtz insisted he was more than content with a staff of mostly uncertified teachers who learn on the job. Oakland Charter Academy (OCA) Principal Jorge Lopez agreed, suggesting that certification

and traditional routes to teaching do a particularly poor job preparing teachers to teach in inner city schools like OCA.

Kurtz, Lopez and others provided numerous examples of hiring from nontraditional sources enabled by freedoms from certification requirements, customary timelines and other hiring restrictions. DSST hired a physics teacher with a Ph.D. from Dartmouth and private school teaching experience. OCA posted a job on the online classified advertising site Craigslist, and hired a former NASA scientist. Amistad hired a 7th grade writing teacher from Australia. None of these teachers were certified or took traditional paths to teaching, but all have achieved excellent results for their students and their schools.

Monitoring Performance

Teacher evaluations in K-12 education have earned the label “drive-bys” due to their brevity and lack of substance.³ They are commonly pilloried as “capricious” or “meaningless” exercises.⁴ As American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten recently said, “Our system of evaluating teachers has never been adequate. For too long and too often, teacher evaluation—in both design and implementation—has failed to achieve what must be our goal: continuously improving and informing teaching so as to better educate all students.”⁵

Evaluations in some districts occur only once or twice a year and last no more than 30 minutes each.⁶ Evaluations themselves often include basic items, like “Room is safe,” “Starts on time,” “Lesson occupies students” or “Teacher is presentably dressed.”⁷

Few teachers receive negative ratings. Of 12 districts examined in a recent study, 99 percent of the teachers evaluated under binary systems (generally, “satisfactory” or “unsatisfactory”) received the higher mark. For those evaluated under systems using a

broader range of categories, 94 percent received one of the top two ratings, and less than 1 percent earned unsatisfactory ratings.⁸ In Chicago between 2003 and 2006, 93 percent of teachers received “superior” or “excellent” ratings, and only 0.3 percent were rated “unsatisfactory.” Eighty-seven percent of the city’s schools did not issue *any* unsatisfactory ratings.⁹

For these reasons, many education experts agree with the recent finding that “[a] teacher’s effectiveness” in the average district school “is not measured, recorded or used to inform decision-making in any meaningful way.”¹⁰ In contrast, several of the charter school leaders interviewed here pointed to teacher monitoring as one of their school’s strengths—as a meaningful and consequential part of teachers’ professional development. It is an area where autonomy made a significant difference to school management and operations and, by extension, to student performance.

At Sophie B. Wright Institute of Academic Excellence (“Wright”), three administrators, including Principal Sharon Clark, conduct formal and informal teacher observations. Classroom visits occur “every single day, all day long.”¹¹ Clark also teaches classes and models lessons. At Wright, evaluators spend significant time tying what they observe in classroom visits to student data, including test scores and other benchmark assessments.

Amistad monitors teacher performance using a variety of measures: (1) classroom observations, (2) student assessment scores throughout the academic year (not end-of-grade tests) and (3) teachers’ professional growth plans. Each teacher meets weekly with his or her instructional coach. Every teacher is also observed weekly, either for 20-30 minutes with a detailed e-mail follow-up or for a full class period

followed by a live debriefing. In addition to coaching and observations, teachers are in constant contact with their peers teaching the same material. At KIPP Delta, teachers are evaluated based on student test results, classroom observations, lesson plan reviews, the hours they are putting in, their effort and the extent to which they are either embracing the school culture or working against it.

Matt Taylor, the principal at Amistad, explains that autonomy is important because it allows Amistad to structure administrators’ jobs differently from the norm in district schools. Amistad administrators spend significant amounts of time in the classroom providing instructional leadership—evaluating and coaching teachers and modeling effective practices. This latitude lessens required paperwork and meetings, especially off-campus meetings, which in many district schools require a great deal of administrators’ time and energy, leaving little room for instructional leadership.

Another key difference between evaluations in typical district schools and the charter schools profiled here is that in these charter schools, evaluations carry significant consequences. The detailed, frequent observations at Amistad allow administrators to initiate teacher improvement plans quickly, sometimes as early as a few weeks into the school year. Where problems persist, the school typically intensifies its support, down to specific, detailed six-week plans that end either with marked teacher improvement or dismissal. Similarly, Wright prides itself on offering numerous resources to support and nurture individual teachers, but will dismiss teachers as a last resort after failed interventions.

Evaluations are the main tool for monitoring teacher performance. However, several leaders here described the “culture of accountability” at their

institutions, where monitoring extends beyond formal evaluations. At Wright, all students and teachers are held accountable for their performance, and as a result, they are sharply critical of anything that might inhibit their success. Students alert Clark to concerns with certain teachers or classes, and teachers notify Clark of factors inhibiting their success in the classroom, allowing her to take action.

Dismissal

Teacher dismissals are the exception, not the rule, at any of the schools profiled here. School leaders credit this to the time and energy invested in hiring, and the schools’ robust performance management systems. In a staff of 50-55 people, Clark has found that she needs to dismiss only one or two teachers per year. Amistad, DSST, and OCA engage small numbers of teachers in remedial efforts each year, and in some cases these efforts are unsuccessful, resulting in dismissal. At KIPP Delta, the school’s early years saw a few dismissals, but once teachers came to see termination as a real possibility, the dismissal rate declined.

Wright’s Clark dislikes the term “firing.” Instead, she talks about “freeing up teachers’ futures.” When she frees up teachers’ futures at Wright, it is only after exhaustive efforts at remediation and an internal process through which the board considers Clark’s request to release the teacher. Likewise, at Amistad, when Taylor identifies “red flags” in a teacher’s performance, he might put that teacher on a six-week plan specifying exactly what the teacher needs to do remain employed and bolstering supports for that teacher. These measures serve as a system of internal checks and balances, providing support and opportunity for teacher improvement, but ultimately allowing dismissal of ineffective teachers free of the cumbersome restrictions

associated with typical tenure systems.

Interviews revealed the benefits of autonomy in the area of dismissal to be far more significant than the simple freedom to fire ineffective teachers. School leaders successfully leveraged their authority in this area into broader-based latitude to demand a lot of teachers from the outset, knowing that some would not measure up to the schools' high standards. When that did happen, leaders had both the tools and the authority to deal with inadequate performance promptly, without the expenditures of time and money often required to remove tenured teachers in district schools.

Autonomy in hiring, monitoring and dismissing teachers allowed principals to take an attitude toward staffing that many hope will become widespread in public schools: "Find talented people, give them an opportunity and let their work be the deciding factor in whether they continue to come back."¹²

Freedom to Manage Teachers as Professionals

School leaders saw significant value in their freedom to manage teachers like professionals in other fields. This area of autonomy includes the ability to differentiate pay based on performance or unique aspects of certain teaching positions; the extensive use of professional plans, mentoring and coaching, and evaluations in teacher training and development; and the inclusion of teachers in important classroom- and school-level decisions.

Differential Pay

Charter schools are generally able to set pay rates free from traditional state or district-mandated salary schedules. None of the schools profiled here were required to abide by such schedules, and three of the five schools viewed autonomy in this area as significant to their success.

OCA receives significantly less per-pupil funding than local district schools, yet offers its teachers significantly higher starting salaries. This arrangement is driven by necessity, according to Lopez. OCA is extremely demanding of its teachers' time and energy, and higher salaries compensate teachers for their heightened commitment.

Without the freedom to reconstruct the school budget to provide higher starting salaries, fewer exceptional teachers would choose to work at OCA.

DSST starts teachers near district pay levels, but rejects the "steps and lanes" of traditional salary schedules, instead giving teachers performance-based raises. The board approves a maximum percentage increase based on the budget, and allows administrators the discretion to award raises up to the maximum. Raises often range from 3-6 percent of teachers' salaries and are based on teachers' self-reports, peer input, administrators' evaluations and student data. DSST uses a formal process for aggregating data from these sources and generating a score for each teacher that is then used to determine the amount of the raise.

At Amistad, all teachers qualify for basic pay increases. In addition, discretionary raises allow teachers to earn more if they achieve high levels of student growth and achievement, make progress on their professional growth plans and receive high marks in classroom evaluations. Taylor stressed the significance of differential pay to Amistad's success. He says teachers at Amistad view themselves as professionals, and when they perform at peak levels, they want to be recognized for it. To Taylor, the dollar amount is important, but *any* merit-based raise is significant to teachers because it serves as a marker of excellence and a source of pride for those who receive it.

WHAT AUTONOMY LOOKS LIKE: FREEDOM TO DEVELOP A GREAT TEAM

- Principals have control over hiring decisions.
- Principals can hire teachers from non-traditional sources.
- Schools can hire new teachers well before the start of a new school year.
- Schools can obtain waivers from teacher and principal certification.
- Principals can conduct frequent, detailed classroom observations.
- Staff can monitor teacher performance using a variety of measures.
- Schools can structure administrators' jobs differently.
- Teachers understand that evaluations carry significant consequences.
- Schools can provide teacher training at the school site.
- Principals can deal with inadequate teacher performance promptly.

Autonomy in hiring, monitoring and dismissing teachers allowed principals to take an attitude toward staffing that many hope will become widespread in public schools: "Find talented people, give them an opportunity and let their work be the deciding factor in whether they continue to come back."

Professional Development

All the schools profiled here employ multifaceted programs to develop teachers' skills and abilities and improve their performance. Coaching and feedback, modeling lessons, peer input, self-reflection, classroom observations and the intensive use of professional development planning tools are just some of the ways schools encourage teachers' professional growth.

Professional development practices like these, of course, are not unique to high-performing charters. But in many districts, schools are required to send teachers to mandated district trainings or forced by budget line items to spend professional development dollars on low-priority activities. What's different in the high-performing charters, and why autonomy matters, is the schools' ability to tailor professional development to their unique operations and culture.

For example, DSST uses laptops and its wireless network to create interactive assignments and to use a "daily data system" to measure, track and address student progress.¹³ Professional development at the school involves training teachers to use this technology efficiently. New teachers at Amistad—even those with extensive teaching experience at other schools—receive significant support during their first year, an acknowledgement that the school's system of observations, test scores and professional growth plans is unique and requires significant training and ongoing support to master.

Involvement in Classroom- and School-Level Decisions

Teachers at several of these highly successful charter schools are heavily involved in colleagues' performance reviews and as mentors or coaches to their peers. Many of these schools also involve teachers in high-level decisions regarding school operations and curriculum.

Amistad's teachers are currently immersed in an intensive process to map their entire curriculum, looking at best practices from other schools, aligning these with state curriculum requirements, developing their own scope and sequence and molding the resulting curriculum to fit their instructional approach and Amistad's unique needs. They were previously involved in developing Amistad's own math program. Teachers also helped reinvent the school's language arts curriculum, conducting more than a dozen site visits to a high-performing New York KIPP school, learning from that school's approach and modifying it to address Amistad's unique needs.

At Wright, teachers successfully used their authority to work *with* the principal to jointly make decisions about a new math program. Clark introduced the program, but teachers resisted using it except as a supplement to their existing program. The teachers asked Clark to allow them to choose how to use the new materials, agreeing to be held accountable for the results. Clark relented, and students went on to achieve a phenomenal 90 percent passage rate on the end-of-grade math test. Similarly, at OCA, when 8th grade teachers wanted a new algebra curriculum, the school approved it with the caveat that the teachers would be held accountable for the results, and the teachers delivered.

The other schools profiled offered similar anecdotes about teacher involvement in major school decisions. At DSST, teachers chose four school goals for 2009-10 from among seven options. OCA teachers added a pre-AP program in literature for 7th and 8th graders and a new algebra curriculum reputed to be far more challenging than the district's. KIPP Delta's curriculum is largely teacher-driven as well, and

veteran teachers are regularly rewarded with increased input in school-level decisions. At all these schools, teachers are involved in collaborative decision-making and have opportunities to take on leadership and advisory roles on matters that are integral to school culture and operations.

This devolution of authority works, OCA's Lopez explains, because once teachers understand the system and the authority they have under it, "they take ownership of it, and they [become] more and more demanding" of themselves and their students.¹⁴ KIPP Delta's Shirey suggests that anything other than teacher-led curriculum decisions is unhealthy for the organization. Speaking for OCA, Lopez agrees, "Their voices only make us better."¹⁵

Freedom to Change (or Not Change) Curriculum and Classroom Structure

Four of the five schools profiled here mentioned freedom in curricular decisions as one of the three most important autonomies they enjoy. The fifth also flagged this area as significant. Too often curriculum changes in district schools are top-down initiatives that leave teachers frustrated by their lack of input and fatigued by the seemingly unceasing waves of mandatory reforms that come with successive generations of district leaders. Charter schools often operate with few restrictions on the materials they select for their educational programs.

When administrators at these high-performing charter schools see that instructional programs aren't working, they have the authority to change them. At the same time, they are not required to abandon successful programs based on district-level policy mandates. Wright's math program, noted in the preceding section, illustrates both points. When

Clark saw the need for a new math program at Wright, she had freedom to initiate the change. But when her teachers successfully defended using elements of the existing program instead of the new program, autonomy allowed Clark the ability to make adjustments to incorporate their feedback. It is hard to imagine the end result—a successful teacher-led hybrid of old and new—arising out of the curriculum-setting processes in place in most districts.

Teacher involvement in classroom- and school-level decisions, discussed in the preceding section, is an important byproduct of having the freedom to change curriculum and classroom structure. While autonomy is vested at the school level, leaders see value in cascading the resulting authority over curriculum and classroom structure to the classroom level and allowing teachers to control their curricular destiny. Leaders stressed that preselected curricula can become an excuse (rightly or wrongly) for poor performance, hurting morale and inhibiting school success. By contrast, teachers who choose their own curriculum become invested in using that curriculum to produce results.

Charter schools have also used their latitude to alter traditional classroom structures in innovative ways. Clark instituted single-sex classrooms at Wright. Lopez moved OCA from a departmental structure where students rotated among classrooms and teachers, to self-contained classrooms. Amistad saw many 5th graders arriving at the school reading at 3rd grade levels and shifted the school day to include two reading classes and a writing class (210 minutes of language arts instruction per day). For similar reasons, OCA increased instructional time in math and language arts to 90 minutes each, per day, a change that Lopez pinpointed as an enormous benefit of autonomy to OCA.

Autonomy in Scheduling

Schools are generally bound to meet state minimum day or hour requirements, but most leaders noted few other restrictions to their authority over the school calendar. In addition to changes in how instructional minutes are used, most of the schools profiled here used autonomy to restructure their school days and years or to add programs on weeknights and weekends, all changes that are far more difficult—or in some cases impossible—to implement in district schools.

OCA adds an extra month to its school year, compared with the local district calendar. Most OCA students stay at school until 6:00 p.m., Monday through Thursday, participating in academic programs or sports. OCA also offers Saturday tutoring, and between one-third and one-half of the student-population participates. As noted earlier in the brief, OCA was able to restructure its budget and compensation system to pay teachers for this more demanding schedule. KIPP Delta also boasts an extended school day, week and year, all of which give students more time in the classroom and for diverse extracurricular experiences. Amistad extends its school year by about a week for students, plus an additional week for veteran teacher training and an extra three weeks for intensive new teacher training.

Financial Freedom

Autonomy over financial matters was significant, but also a source of frustration for many school leaders. In general, charter schools are free to allocate their funds as they see fit, enabling many of the other autonomies noted here, such as authority to set salaries and make curriculum decisions. Clark notes that Wright operates with low overhead and administrative costs, compared to other schools. Beyond a 2 percent charter school administrative fee paid to the school district, she is free

WHAT AUTONOMY LOOKS LIKE: FREEDOM TO MANAGE TEACHERS AS PROFESSIONALS

- Schools set pay rates free from traditional state or district-mandated salary schedules.
- Teachers receive performance-based raises.
- Schools tailor professional development to their unique school operations and culture.
- Teachers act as mentors to their peers.
- Teachers are involved in major school decisions.

What's different in the high-performing charters, and why autonomy matters, is the schools' ability to tailor professional development to their unique operations and culture.

to allocate funds to teacher salaries and materials and resources that will directly impact students. Lopez points out the significant benefit to OCA of its freedom to construct a budget with starting salaries about \$10,000 higher than those of comparable district positions.

However, some school leaders' excitement over their financial autonomy is tempered because they still do not have complete financial freedom, and they only receive a fraction of regular per-pupil funding.¹⁶ At the root of their frustrations are state and district policies requiring charter schools to purchase district-provided services such as school meals, technology, transportation, nursing, teacher training and special education. Chagrined school leaders believe these services often cost far more than what the charter schools would spend obtaining higher quality services on the open market.

For example, Amistad recently gained authority over food service provision, and the school's students are now enjoying more nutritious meals because of it. Wright recently opted out of the high-cost local transportation system and purchased its own school buses. Several school leaders said they could provide higher-quality and more efficient special education services if freed from district requirements and intervention.

Required participation in state retirement systems can also create substantial limits on schools' budgetary autonomy. Amistad and KIPP Delta are required to use their states' retirement systems. DSST and OCA, by contrast, opt not to participate in their states' systems. DSST operates its own retirement system and is exempt from a retirement program fee charged by Denver Public Schools.¹⁷ According to Kurtz, DSST's freedom in this area enables the school to more fully fund other areas of curriculum and operations. To Lopez, OCA's

non-participation is significant because it allows the school to avoid a district fee for participation in the state retirement system, which would be a "major blow" to OCA's budget. Wright is not required to participate in its state's system but opts to do so.

Spending mandates can also spill over to restrict autonomy in other areas of school operations. For example, DSST is required to allocate money for a district-mandated IT provider that in turn restricts what they are able to do with their scheduling and student information systems. DSST would strongly prefer to spend their technology dollars elsewhere and receive access to products and services that align with their mission and technology needs.

Board Freedom to Focus on Education

Several of the profiled schools' leaders highlighted the critical importance of having boards free of elected public officials, enabling them to concentrate on education largely free of external politics. KIPP Delta has a nonprofit board, governed by bylaws, made up of bank executives, lawyers and executive directors of other organizations. Wright's board is also made up of community luminaries with varied backgrounds. KIPP Delta's Shirey and Wright's Clark see enormous benefit to their boards' operations not being influenced by members' prospects in the next election. Board members are able to focus on the school's well-being rather than voter perceptions, interest groups or the media.

Boards without elected officials attract little public attention, a fact Shirey credits for making KIPP Delta's board meetings, in his view, far less contentious than district school board meetings. Clark highlighted additional benefits of having a board focused on the mission of a single school instead of a diverse range of schools across a district. In Clark's view,

board members with this narrowness of focus come to their positions well-aligned with Wright's mission and goals, and can concentrate directly on the issues presented by that school's population, leadership and culture.

Freedom to Define a Unique School Culture

The final area of autonomy frequently cited as significant by interviewees was the freedom to define a unique school culture. This area reaches aspects of school operations such as control over the growth and development of the school itself, student discipline and parent involvement.

At Amistad, it was significant that the school was able to start small, adding one or two grade levels at a time, with a small number of students in each new grade. This process allowed the school to expand while keeping all members of the school community united in a single vision for the school. At Amistad, as at all of the highly successful charters profiled here, the ability to define elements of school culture and hold teachers accountable for embracing that culture as the school has grown in size and stature has played a significant role in enabling the school's remarkable success.

Though charter schools may be subject to restrictions on expelling, suspending and disciplining students, several leaders cited the ability to set their own basic disciplinary codes as an important contributor to their success. Nowhere is this view more strongly held than at OCA, where Lopez calls the school's strict discipline policies the "backbone" of the school and a key element of OCA's unique school culture. To Lopez, the school's strict disciplinary measures have provided OCA students the heightened structure they need to succeed. In Lopez's view, requiring students to run laps, sit on the floor, or wash school walls (or, conversely, paying them for

completing homework assignments) develops their work ethic and instills respect for authority. Such tactics fly in the face of most traditional district policies, and are not employed even at most charters. But autonomy in this area has enabled Lopez to institute his admittedly tough discipline policy, and on his watch OCA has seen remarkable student achievement. As a result, the school's discipline policy has become a key part of its reputation and a factor that families consider in selecting OCA for their children.¹⁸

Defining school culture for some schools reaches beyond the school walls and into the students' homes. At Wright, for example, when parents choose to register their children at the school, Clark can hold their feet to the fire and demand a level of involvement she couldn't when Wright was a district school. While she can't make a student's continuation at the school dependent on parent involvement, she can create a level of pressure on parents that is hard to match in the district setting. As a result, since becoming a charter, Wright has enjoyed strong parent involvement, from both mothers and fathers, at school events and in day-to-day school operations. OCA has a parent on the school's board, ensuring parents a strong voice in school operations and management.

CONCLUSION

The seven freedoms examined in this issue brief reveal areas where loosening state and local legal and policy constraints were helpful to five highly successful charter schools. Autonomy has enabled these schools' leaders—principals, teachers and board members—to act in ways that have led to excellent student results. In the process, autonomy has become essential to these schools' identities, defining key aspects of their culture and operations.

More research is needed, however, to more deeply explore and quantify the effects of autonomy on school performance. Nevertheless, for policymakers aiming to provide schools with broader autonomy, our seven autonomies can offer specific guidance. The five schools studied here point strongly to the paramount importance of freedom to develop a great team—in hiring, performance measurement, and dismissal. Related to this, waivers from certification requirements can be a major boon, especially for hard-to-staff schools.

Other areas of autonomy most frequently highlighted as significant include freedom in curriculum development and financial freedom, especially when it comes to purchasing services and choosing retirement systems. All of the autonomies discussed here played significant roles in the success of one or more of the five highly successful charter schools in this study, and all may have important roles to play in future efforts to extend the benefits of autonomy to more schools—in the charter sector and beyond.

WHAT AUTONOMY LOOKS LIKE: FREEDOM TO MANAGE CHANGE (OR NOT CHANGE) CURRICULUM AND CLASSROOM STRUCTURE

- Schools decide what will be taught in their classrooms and how.
- Schools are not required to abandon successful programs based on district-level policy mandates.
- Schools can alter traditional classroom structures in innovative ways.

Policymakers should remember that one-size-fits-all requirements can foreclose the strategic use of autonomy to enable school success.



Policymakers need to pay special attention to the value of these freedoms during this time of significant potential education policy shifts at the national and state levels. As interest grows in common standards, common assessments, statewide data systems, statewide teacher and leader evaluation systems, and other far-reaching reforms, policymakers should remember that one-size-fits-all requirements can foreclose the strategic use of autonomy to enable school success. While national and state reforms can usefully establish a “floor” for these systems, policymakers should leave space for schools like the ones profiled here to innovate and achieve excellence.

DESCRIPTIONS OF SCHOOLS AND THEIR SUCCESSES

Sophie B. Wright Institute of Academic Excellence, New Orleans, Louisiana (“Wright”)

Southern University of New Orleans partnered with Wright in July 2005, making it the first charter school in the nation launched by a historically black university. The school is open to all students and currently serves 400 kids in grades six through 10. An army of volunteers, including parents, community members and more than 125 college students from nearby Tulane University, aids Wright’s staff of 50-55 educators.

Wright has a unique history. Prior to becoming a charter school in 2005, Wright operated as a public school under the leadership of Principal Sharon Clark. In 2004-05, a paltry 17 percent of the school’s eighth graders scored at the “basic” achievement level or above on the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) in English, with only 24 percent reaching the “basic” level in math.¹⁹ That summer, the school received its charter and reopened as Wright, but

Clark stayed on as principal. By 2007-08, 62 percent of eighth graders passed LEAP in English and math, a 21 percent gain over the previous year. Even more impressive, in 2007-08, 100 percent of Wright’s fourth graders passed LEAP.²⁰

Interviewee: Sharon Clark, Principal

Denver School of Science and Technology, Denver, Colorado (“DSST”)

DSST was Denver’s highest performing public school in 2008-09.²¹ An open enrollment school serving grades six through twelve, DSST enrolls 63 percent non-white students and 45 percent students receiving free or reduced-price lunch. DSST boasts a 100 percent college acceptance rate for its first three graduating classes, including, most recently, the Class of 2010.²² The school’s first and second graduating classes had more minority and low-income students attending four-year colleges and universities than any other school in the state. Between 43 percent and 50 percent of DSST’s graduates are first-generation college students.

In his testimony before Congress in 2007, Microsoft founder Bill Gates touted DSST’s successful high school math and science program, highlighting the school’s benefits for students from groups traditionally underrepresented in math and science.²³ Overall, 43 percent of DSST graduates are pursuing careers in science and technology, about three times the national average.²⁴

Interviewee: Bill Kurtz, Head of School

Amistad Academy, New Haven, Connecticut (“Amistad”)

Amistad opened in 1999 and now serves 289 students in grades 5-8, selected by lottery. The student population is 64 percent African-American and 33 percent Hispanic and includes 84 percent low-income students.

On the 2009 Connecticut Mastery Test, 90 percent of Amistad’s eighth

graders scored at or above proficiency in math, reading and writing, besting the state average of 83 percent and outperforming their peers in New Haven by 28 percentage points. In 2009, Amistad ranked second, statewide, for middle school African-American student test scores, and ninth for middle school low-income students.²⁵ In 2007, Amistad ranked first, statewide, for middle school Hispanic student performance, fourth for middle school African-American student performance, and eighth for middle school low-income student performance. In 2006, the school achieved the highest performance gains of any middle school in Connecticut, and was recognized as Connecticut’s Title I Distinguished School. Amistad is the flagship school for Achievement First, which operates a network of charter schools in Connecticut and New York.

Interviewee: Matt Taylor, Principal

KIPP Delta College Preparatory School, Helena-West Helena, Arkansas (“KIPP Delta”)

KIPP Delta opened in 2002 for fifth graders and currently serves 270 students in grades five through eight. Part of the national KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) network of charter schools, KIPP Delta was one of just three Arkansas schools named a 2008 Blue Ribbon School by the United States Department of Education. That year, students in all grades significantly outperformed their peers on the state’s Benchmark Exams in math and literacy. In 2008, 82 percent of eighth graders scored proficient or advanced on the Arkansas Benchmark Exam in literacy, compared with 67 percent statewide, and just 36 percent in the Helena-West Helena School District. On the math exam, 86 percent scored proficient or advanced, compared with 56 percent statewide and 23 percent in Helena-West Helena.

Interviewee: Scott Shirey, School Director

Oakland Charter Academy, Oakland, California (“OCA”)

OCA opened in 1993 as the 14th charter school in California and the first in Oakland. Currently, OCA serves 148 students in grades six through eight. The student population is 88 percent Hispanic or Latino, seven percent African-American, and three point five percent Asian-American. Ninety-four percent of OCA’s students are socioeconomically disadvantaged and 32 percent are English language learners.

In 2008, only 16 of the 139 schools in Oakland Unified School District met the target score of 800 (out of 1000) on the state’s Academic Performance Index (API). The average for Oakland Unified was 676; the statewide average was 741. OCA scored 902. OCA was named a 2008 Blue Ribbon School by the United States Department of Education, only the second public school in Oakland (district or charter) to earn the honor. In 2009, OCA’s API scores rose even further, to 943, compared with an average of 695 in Oakland Unified and 755 statewide. California awarded the school the Title I Academic Achievement Award in 2008 and 2009. OCA also operates a high school, now in its third year of operation. In 2008-09, the school’s API score of 955 made it the highest performing high school in Oakland.

Interviewee: Jorge Lopez, Principal

Acknowledgement: *This issue brief was written by Joe Ableidinger and Bryan C. Hassel of Public Impact. The authors would like to thank interviewees Sharon Clark, Bill Kurtz, Jorge Lopez, Scott Shirey, and Matt Taylor for sharing their time and professional insights. The authors would also like to thank Nelson Smith, Todd Ziebarth and Anna Nicotera of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools for their helpful guidance and comments on the issue brief.*

WHAT AUTONOMY LOOKS LIKE: FREEDOM TO DEFINE A UNIQUE SCHOOL CULTURE

- Schools can manage growth while keeping members of the school community united in a common vision.
- Schools define key elements of school culture and teachers are accountable for embracing that culture.
- Schools may set their own student discipline systems.
- Parents are deeply involved in ways that support the school’s mission.



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