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# Renewing the Compact: A Statement by the Task Force on Charter School Quality and Accountability

National Alliance for Public Charter Schools  
Washington, DC



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Public Charter Schools

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**When the Charter School Leadership Council (now the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools) formally launched its activities at the National Press Club in January 2005, two major initiatives were featured. One was the release of a research paper documenting encouraging news about the growing strength of charter school achievement. The other was the appointment of a Task Force on Charter School Quality and Accountability.**

### **If the news was so good, why appoint a task force on quality?**

Because it is not in the nature of charter school educators to rest on their laurels. Chartering is about continuous improvement. It does not build monuments to what worked last year—it is restless and adventurous and moves forward to higher ground.

Yet charter schools have come under attack for what critics say is unimpressive academic performance. Some of these comments are motivated by politics or competitive self-interest, and when political animus or misunderstanding is at work, we should battle back with the plentiful evidence that shows charter schools working.

But sometimes the evidence paints a harsher picture. In these cases, we must make sure the charter model of accountability is working—that troubled schools close and promising schools get the support they need to improve.

That's why the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools asked a group of distinguished charter leaders and policy thinkers to help fashion a forward-looking strategy to realize the full promise of chartering. We're particularly grateful that the founders and leaders of excellent charter schools agreed to be part of this effort. Researchers, politicians and state auditors have all had their chance to opine about charter schools. This is a statement grounded firmly in the experience of charter educators themselves: leaders who have improved the life chances of thousands of young people.

**Nelson Smith**  
**President**  
**National Alliance for Public Charter Schools**

# RENEWING THE COMPACT:

## A Statement by the Task Force on Charter School Quality and Accountability

**Public charter schools embody a singular compact:** They are free from much traditional regulation and in exchange are held accountable for results. In the fourteen years that have elapsed since Minnesota passed the first charter law, this simple bargain has produced an extraordinary flowering of innovation and growth within public education. About one million children now attend 3400 public charter schools in 40 states and the District of Columbia. Those children are more often Latino and African-American than their counterparts in traditional public schools.

A growing body of research shows that the performance of most charter schools is strong and improving over time—with some achieving spectacular results.<sup>1</sup> Yet in looking forward and considering how chartering can expand to meet the needs of more families, this Task Force believes that the charter compact must be reaffirmed and reinvigorated. The freedom to innovate must be protected against re-regulation. Accountability for results must be clearer and more certain. And achievement must be the first priority.

When the charter model works as it should, there is a relentless focus on achievement, and the “system of schools” itself is actually shaped by the quality of its performance:

- ▶ Successful charter schools flourish. Their enrollment expands to serve more students, and their successful practices are replicated in other charters and disseminated in traditional school districts.

- ▶ Promising charter schools are given adequate resources and take advantage of their unique flexibility to pursue constant improvement. They are monitored conscientiously by the authorizer that granted their charter, and if trouble develops, they receive and respond to early feedback (and warnings) and take corrective action.

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## The most important audience for this statement is the charter community itself.

- ▶ Persistently low-achieving charter schools are closed, and students move to schools that will serve them more effectively.

When faithfully followed, this new model of public education works brilliantly. But too often, the charter compact is not being fully realized, and there is work to do on all levels: Shining models of high performance are ready for replication but constrained by legislated caps on growth and scarce facilities. Promising middle-tier schools do not have enough exposure to their higher-performing peers, and sometimes grow too complacent about current performance. And low-achieving schools are too rarely closed for academic reasons alone.

**To whom are we speaking?** The most important audience for this statement is the charter community itself, which must fully “own” the issue of how well its schools perform. Yes, there are external obstacles to our success, and some of this statement is directed at the problems in law and policy that impede charter school excellence. But this Task Force first challenges our own colleagues and supporters to embrace rigorous measures of quality and accountability for our schools’ success.

*We make this statement because a charter is a unique and scarce opportunity.* It frees skilled educators to serve the underserved in new ways. It allows parents and teachers to form a partnership welded by choice. Just as it is exhilarating to see the positive force of the charter, it is saddening to see its opportunity squandered. Schools that offer nothing better than the mediocrity of a neighboring district-run school do a disservice to our movement—but most of all, to the children and families who turn to them expecting excellence.

Some believe that the movement is still too young, and too vulnerable to political attack, to afford this kind of introspection. We do not share this view. It is precisely because charter schools are young and vital, and because the lives of a million children already depend on their success, that it becomes imperative to speak clearly.

As a Task Force composed mostly of charter educators, we know how tough it is to start a successful school, we also know how distorted a picture can be painted by “snapshots” that show charter achievement lagging because our schools have welcomed students failed by the traditional system.

However, if chartering is to thrive, and to play a central role in delivering public education, we must elevate quality to the highest priority. We must look inward at our schools, our authorizers, our state associations, and our own beliefs and habits of mind, so that nothing—*nothing*—gets in the way of pursuing higher student achievement. There are other issues, to be sure. We must redouble efforts to remove external impediments such as underfunding, and we must fight meritless lawsuits designed to distract us from our educational mission. But we must understand and acknowledge that nothing will affect charter schools’ future success more than our commitment to quality and the actions we are willing to take to ensure that charter schools take responsibility for their students’ success.

# EYES ON THE PRIZE: FULFILLING THE PROMISE

**A quality education is the principal civil rights challenge of our day. For too many American children, particularly those of color and those in poverty, the promise of *Brown v. Board of Education* is slipping away.<sup>2</sup> The achievement gap continues to trouble our communities; according to the Urban Institute, “students from historically disadvantaged minority groups (American Indian, Hispanic, Black) have little more than a fifty-fifty chance of finishing high school with a diploma.”<sup>3</sup>**

This struggle has moved to the center of national concern in recent years. With the advent of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), results-driven standards-based reform has become the name of the game and academic growth has become the coin of the realm. Our movement began nearly a decade before passage of NCLB—and exerted a strong influence on its approach to accountability—but the Act has raised the stakes. Chartering is a “big tent” under which gather a wide variety of educational styles, from “back-to-basics” to experiential to career-focused. Whatever path a charter educator chooses, NCLB now demands a tight focus on a common goal: bringing all students to high levels of academic achievement, and in particular, closing the achievement gap between affluent and disadvantaged youngsters.

As public schools, charters are open to all. But they are gaining the strongest foothold in urban areas, and a growing body of research confirms the special promise of charter schools in serving disadvantaged students.<sup>4</sup> As a consequence, the demand for charter schools is outstripping the supply. Charter schools are central to reform strategies in New York, Chicago, and other big cities. New York City Public Schools Chancellor Joel Klein says he supports charter schools because they “bring in new blood. These are leaders and entrepreneurs who are not otherwise part of the system. They are people with ideas, with creativity, and who are willing to give their all for their students.”<sup>5</sup>

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**Most members of the Task Force have direct, personal experience that attests to the power of the charter model :**

- ▶ At North Star Academy in Newark, New Jersey, 91 percent of 8th graders were “proficient” on the state’s language arts test in 2004, compared to just 37 percent of schools with comparable student populations statewide. One hundred percent of North Star’s first two graduating classes are attending college.
- ▶ The Vaughn Next Century Learning Center in Los Angeles is a Blue Ribbon School that demonstrates how a conversion charter school can close the achievement gap and reward successful teachers with a robust merit pay program.
- ▶ The School of Arts and Sciences in Tallahassee prides itself on innovative instruction that produces better academic results than the rest of its district. Its interdisciplinary and hands-on approach has earned it straight “A” grades from the Florida Department of Education and the title of “Model School” from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.
- ▶ With a student body about 98 percent African-American or Latino and predominantly urban low-income, the Amistad Academy in New Haven, Connecticut, achieves mastery in reading and writing at rates far above the state average and on par with the state’s best suburban districts.

During our deliberations, the Task Force also visited other high-performing charter schools that use a variety of pedagogies but share a demanding, high-expectations approach to school culture. The Bronx Preparatory Charter School, for example, uses a KIPP-based curriculum model that it has tailored to its students’ needs. According to founder Kristen Kearns Jordan, “Our charter allows us the opportunity to create an atmosphere that sends the right message to the students about their promise and their future.” In Washington, D.C., the School for Arts In Learning charter school (SAIL) provides a uniquely stimulating learning environment that produces remarkable success for its many students with learning disabilities. The Ridge View Academy in Watkins, Colorado, is a year-round high school that works in partnership with Colorado’s juvenile adjudication services; it combines an excellent education, vocational training, an athletic regimen, community service placement and life counseling. Students not only do well academically, but also understand the deeper value of this life-changing institution.

All of these schools are making good on the promise of their charters. They are nimble operations that adjust to changing circumstances. Their leaders and teachers are driven and determined. They share a positive, productive school culture that begins with a relentless focus on academic achievement.

# THE WORK AHEAD

**Hard work lies ahead, however, because the charter model is not yet fulfilling its full promise.**

**A few successful schools have begun growing into regional and even national networks—but charter innovation is not yet having the expected transformative effects on host districts.**

**Academic performance is generally improving, with research showing charter achievement often gaining faster than that of other public schools.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the “average” is too often pulled down by charter schools that are not showing success in educating students. Some schools that fail are being closed—but most often for financial and operational rather than academic reasons. And because of “caps” that limit the number of charters and other constraints on growth, the closure of a charter school may send students back to the failed neighborhood schools from which they came—instead of offering a robust array of new and better choices.**

We do not join ill-informed critics in citing these difficulties to discredit the whole idea of charter schools. We know that charter schools work; more to the point, we know that *charters work*, because it has created space within public education “to allow the emergence of an “open sector” with a more hospitable environment for new and innovative schools.

In a decade and a half, our movement has learned enough hard lessons about the use and misuse of freedom, and about the presence and absence of real accountability, to be able to make some clear judgments about what we must do in the next decade.

The more familiar part of our challenge is external—getting action at long last on the litany of impediments that limit the scale and quality of charter schooling. In order to get off the ground, our movement made a certain number of bad bargains in its early days. In our quest of independence, we accepted laws that left



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gaping holes in the fabric of financial support, or that allowed districts to create charters-in-name-only, tethered to outmoded work rules and somnolent central-office services.

We are no longer a movement of church basements and storefronts, and a million kids now depend on us for a complete, well-rounded education. Laws that limit our independence, or deprive our students of needed resources, must be changed.

Our challenge is also internal: We must develop a deep sense of ownership, within the charter movement itself, for the quality of our product.

Let's be clear. We know that most charter educators would go to the ends of the earth to give their kids the best possible education. It's hard to find a charter teacher who keeps "regular" hours or a charter principal who doesn't live and breathe the well-being of kids at her school.

Yet we're concerned about attitudes and beliefs that have crept into some quarters of our movement—for example, that our job is simply to offer a different choice, and the market will sort out what parents want. Or that we can't be expected to produce real achievement because our budgets are strapped. Or—worst of all—that we can't succeed because “you don't know our kids.”

Those are the kinds of excuses we've heard for years from failing schools in traditional districts, and they have no place in the charter movement. We *do* know those kids, and we know their poverty, their prior educational failures, and challenges their families confront. And we've seen those kids do wonderfully in charter schools that are relentless in putting academic achievement first. Funding and facilities and dysfunctional families are problems, to be sure—but when you sign a charter you're accepting reality as it is. Once those kids enter your building, these are no longer *external* problems.

Building a new generation of high-quality charters requires supporting promising schools; providing them reasonable amount of time to prove themselves; measuring progress by multiple indicators including student-level gains; providing access to equitable funding and a thriving market for technical assistance; expanding truly successful schools; closing low-performing schools; and more. To achieve the promise of chartering, many things must occur at once.

This report presents a series of recommendations for achieving the goals of growth and quality simultaneously.

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# SEVEN PRINCIPLES OF QUALITY CHARTERING

- Quality is more important than quantity. Growth is not an end in itself.
  - The primary aim of charter schools is to pursue academic achievement for all students. Non-academic goals are important but do not by themselves justify charter renewal.
  - Charter schools must achieve at high levels—not just offering something marginally better than failing neighboring schools, but providing the kind of education that equips graduates for success in postsecondary education, fulfilling work in the 21st century economy, and responsible citizenship.
  - Charter accountability must be both internal and external. State mandated standardized tests are a necessary and appropriate condition of public accountability, but are not sufficient. Charter schools should embrace more frequent and expansive student assessment as a source of feedback that guides professional practice.
  - People make the difference. There is no foolproof “charter model” and a high priority must be placed on recruiting, mentoring, and evaluating those who lead and teach in charter schools.
  - Since charter schools are public schools, the students who attend them are entitled to the same level of financial support as students in other public schools.
  - Every kind of organization that supports or represents charter schools should be a force for quality, including authorizers, resource centers, state associations, lenders, and national advocacy groups.
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# A BLUEPRINT FOR GROWTH AND QUALITY

**The seven principles of quality chartering are a springboard for the following reflections and recommendations. Since the school itself is the front line of accountability we begin there, and work outward toward the environment of laws and policies that shape and support chartering.**

## Let Evidence Drive Operations

Charter schools are about outcomes. Our flexibility is not an end in itself, and must be informed by constant feedback about student achievement and operational performance. “Data-driven decisionmaking” is more than a mantra in our community. Schools that live or die by results need leaders, staff, and parents who monitor progress on many fronts and push for improvement where the evidence points.

The tools and capacity for data-driven-decision-making, however, seem regrettably scarce. This point is becoming increasingly evident as researchers and evaluators struggle to compile coherent pictures of performance across schools. Too few authorizers require schools to set measurable academic goals and to “backward map” or identify the steps that must be taken to reach those goals.

### Recommendations:

■ Charter schools must make data-driven-decision-making a central part of their instructional culture, and that requires going beyond the minimum reporting requirements of authorizers and state agencies. Every

**One striking example of data guiding practice can be found at North Kenwood-Oakland Charter School in Chicago. On one wall of the reading-resource room is a huge chart, with coded tags showing every student's progress—typically from way below to way ahead of grade level. When teachers come hunting books for their emerging scholars, they can see just where they are in relation to standards and decide exactly what's needed to challenge them further.**

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charter school administrator should be able to view key indicators of performance on a “data dashboard.”

These indicators should include not only standardized test scores as well as other measures of student growth (academic and non-academic); the effectiveness of

school culture (including attendance, extracurricular participation, parent involvement, and disciplinary incidents); staff performance; and operational viability (budget reports, performance against fundraising targets, and regulatory compliance).

## Frequent assessment is

the compass that keeps the entire operation on course toward higher achievement.

■ Don't forget parents, who are an integral part of the drive toward achievement. Schools should make sure that data on academic achievement is presented in user-friendly formats (translated into home languages, if necessary) that can help parents participate in their children's learning process.

■ Chartering agencies should do likewise. Many California charter schools are teaming up with the University of Southern California to build a comprehensive database that features multiple measures of school, staff, and student performance. Such a dashboard will be able to monitor progress, identify deficiencies and provide a compendium of charter schools' best practices.<sup>7</sup>

■ Charter support organizations should look for ways to pool technology demand. Because private corporations typically design their wares for large school systems, they are often out of reach for individual charter campuses. The charter sector must develop economies of scale in this area.

## Embrace Assessment

Assessment is essential to public accountability, and is equally essential to instruction, both as feedback on performance and as a tool for checking alignment between curriculum and standards. Frequent assessment is the compass that keeps the entire operation on course toward higher achievement.

Most charter professionals understand this, but a fraction of our community still recoils from assessment, rails at the testing requirements of NCLB, and looks for waivers and exceptions to public school accountability. Some argue that testing is an impediment to innovation.

They should visit the same schools we did in the course of this inquiry. Without exception, these schools monitor student progress frequently and make course corrections based on results. These high-scoring schools are full of engaged, exuberant students, hardly the denizens of test-driven boot camps portrayed by critics of high-stakes accountability. These kids are caught up in a culture of success, and they relish it.

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We embrace assessment, but we also know that it could be a more potent and less divisive implement if improvements were made in two areas:

- ▶ First, while knowing current levels of student achievement is important in evaluating school success, assessment should also measure student growth over time.
- ▶ Second, routinely augmenting standardized assessments with measures that show attainment of each charter school's specific *mission* would show more clearly the breadth of charter school performance.

### **The Growth Imperative**

What happens to schools that produce substantial improvement but still fall short of state performance targets? Under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) there is some needed latitude in the form of a “safe harbor” provision: Schools that lift at least ten percent of their student population, or a particular subgroup, to the “proficient” level can forestall NCLB sanctions. But as the bar for proficiency rises annually, charter schools that welcome students ill-served by traditional systems may make solid progress and still initially miss the standard.

Including measures of growth as a component of federal and state accountability would not only relieve the anxiety of those who educate the toughest cases, but also spur continuing improvement at the high end of the achievement spectrum. Accountability systems should include longitudinal, student-level data for all public schools—not just charters—and should report results that show the “value added” by schools, rather than the advantages and deficits of students when they entered.

Such measures should be tethered to standards. That is, they should show *growth toward the goal*—and should not let schools off the hook because their kids moved from the 9th to the 10th percentile. The Task Force is encouraged that US Education Secretary Margaret Spellings has convened a working group, including representation from the charter school community, to consider the role of growth models in the calculation of Adequate Yearly Progress under NCLB. The charter community will be watching this work closely and will also be prepared to address the question of growth measures in the reauthorization process for NCLB in 2007.

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## Measuring Mission

Because chartering is a broad label that describes many different pedagogies, including some that are highly experiential or that weave discrete subjects together, we sometimes hear another kind of comment: “Ours is really not the kind of curriculum that you can measure by tests.” Many charter schools are intensely mission-driven, aiming to equip students for careers in public service, or to develop fluency in high-tech—competencies not covered in mandated state assessments. These concerns are valid, up to a point: Every school’s success can be measured in terms of whether students have been taught the core academic knowledge and skills they will need to compete at the next level of education and out in the world.

That said, we need to value and honor the contributions of innovative schools. And if such schools want parents and taxpayers to understand their work in its full dimensions, then they must find ways to measure and describe it.

A review of state charter laws shows that developing new ways of evaluating student and school performance is a key goal in at least one-third of the chartering states.<sup>8</sup> Yet too many charter schools seem unprepared to measure and report “the things that make kids want to come to school,” as a member of the Task Force put it.

The Task Force saw a good example of non-standard evaluation at the Perspectives Charter School in Chicago. The school’s rigorous academic program is rooted in a strong and highly articulated school culture, known as “A Disciplined Life”—26 principles aimed at encouraging responsibility and productivity among the students. Working with the nonprofit Leadership for Quality Education, the school developed rubrics for measuring the attainment of the principles, which became part of the school’s accountability plan. Our student tour guides were able to give crisp explanations of how the principles operate in the life of the school.<sup>9</sup>

## Recommendations:

- Authorizers and charter school founders should make sure that when a new school is approved, its curriculum is well-aligned to state standards. Lack of alignment between what’s taught and what’s tested may account for far more test-score problems than is currently known.

- Within charter schools, assessment data must inform every process and decision—from classroom teaching to professional development to buying supplies. School leaders must train and engage their staff in

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the analysis and interpretation of data and in the presentation of that information to stakeholders.

■ Schools and authorizers should make necessary investments in data-warehouse systems that produce tailored, high-quality analyses with ease.

■ Authorizers, state and federal officials should encourage the use of value-added measures of student achievement to gauge school progress. The Task Force encourages the news media to report such measures in user-friendly ways that enable the average reader or viewer to make sound comparisons among schools.

## Spread Effective Practices

Nothing teaches so well as first-hand experience.

Indeed, members of the Task Force have gleaned important new lessons through campus visits in this project. Yet as one member remarked, “it seems like the same 23 charter schools are always visiting each other.”

It's not for lack of curiosity that leaders and teachers of middle-tier schools aren't on the same circuit. It takes time and money—and there's a burden on the host school as well.

### Recommendations:

■ Foundations, authorizers and state associations should help make it possible for charter staff to visit top-performing schools—not just for a quick hello but for a sustained experience of what makes that school tick. Mini-fellowships of a week or month can be far more productive for a host school than managing busloads of visitors.

■ Leadership organizations should create video libraries that can be used for professional development via the Internet, including online “visits” plus analytic commentary.

## Washington, D.C.'s two

authorizing agencies have joined forces to create "NCLB 4 D.C. Charters"

([www.nclb4dccharters.com](http://www.nclb4dccharters.com)). The program provides technical assistance to D.C.

charter schools so they can meet the new Title I requirements. The program educates the community about charter

schools and NCLB; provides school-based technical academic assistance for schools;

and offers systemic training and support for data-driven decision-making.

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■ State departments of education should fund and collaborate with charter school organizations to create working groups for heavily technical fields like special education and technology development. For example, the Minnesota Charter Schools Special Education Project (MCSSEP) is a unique collaborative between the Minnesota Department of Education and the Minnesota Association of Charter Schools that provides guidance, direction and support to charters throughout the state in developing and implementing a total special education system throughout the state.

■ Charter resource centers should provide technical assistance that reaches both freestanding and network affiliated charters on an equitable basis.

## Build a High-Quality, Sustainable Teacher Force

Charter schools tend to employ teachers who attended more selective colleges, and who majored in academic content areas rather than education—but who are also younger and less experienced in the classroom. This provides a unique vibrancy to the charter sector's teacher corps, but at the same time leads to greater turnover.

As the movement grows, how can charter schools find enough of those relentless, achievement-driven teachers, the ones who work way past typical “contract” hours, and have the agility to keep refreshing and retooling their practices on the basis of evidence about results? And how do we keep them, well into their “prime”? Chartering can only work at scale if we have a sustainable teacher force.

The Task Force concludes that conventional teacher colleges are simply not prepared to fill this bill. Our position is grounded in experience and bolstered by a panel convened by the American Educational Research Association, finding that there is little evidence to link conventional teacher-education practices with positive impacts in the classroom.<sup>10</sup>

Are there new institutions that can serve charter schools' needs at scale? The example of Teach for America (TFA) is intriguing, not only because it recruits and deploys a cadre of graduates with excellent content credentials, but because it makes public school teaching “cool”—an admired and respected career choice among their peers. Apart from partnering in TFA's growth and hiring its candidates, how can the charter community capitalize more broadly on its success?

### Recommendations:

■ Higher education should become a more active partner in meeting the staffing needs of charter schools—but it's doubtful that the traditional “ed school” is the right model. One possibility is the creation of more “charter colleges”



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like that founded by Cal State University in 1995. With a degree of institutional autonomy roughly comparable to that of charter schools, this college has been able to create fresh programs and work with innovative schools, including charter schools such as the Accelerated School in Los Angeles.

■ Support in the critical first years of teaching could help reduce turnover. One approach that bears watching is the New Teachers Network of the University of Chicago's Center for Urban School Improvement, which provides a two-year program including a summer institute and a learning-oriented peer network. The program, which uses North Kenwood/Oakland Charter School as a professional development school, offers coaching in classroom management and use of assessment to inform instruction, as well as an opportunity to understand issues of race, class, and culture that affect the success of urban students.

■ States that require charter school teachers to be certified should follow the lead of Minnesota, whose legislature recently directed the State Board of Teaching to develop a new type of interdisciplinary teaching license applicable in innovative learning environments. Such a measure can help smooth the path for terrific but unconventional teachers.

■ Some of these ideas will take time, and one immediate suggestion is for national and state charter organizations to foster a more efficient marketplace for staff. While networks of schools have created impressive recruitment programs, smaller freestanding charters may lack ready access to a large pool of high-quality talent. A clearinghouse could match schools and staff on a nationwide basis. On a more local and regional level, resource centers can host job fairs for prospective charter teachers.

## Build High-Quality, Sustainable Charter Leadership

Ed-school programs to prepare public school principals are generally dismal, according to a recent report by Teachers College President Arthur Levine: "Their admission standards are among the lowest in American graduate schools. Their professoriate is ill-equipped to educate school leaders. Their programs pay insufficient

### The word "relentless"

often came up in Task Force discussions.

A memorable example was provided by Dale Chu, principal of Elm City College Preparatory Charter School, a new "sister school" to Amistad Academy in New Haven, Connecticut. When the Task Force visited Elm City, Chu reported that the school's early success relied on "good teachers, data analysis, a warm but strict approach to teaching, and making sure the students read for three hours each day."<sup>11</sup> When the first-year test scores were published, the school's 100 students had moved from 26 percent to 96 percent "proficient"—an astonishing gain. While others merely celebrated, Chu said: "We have 4 percent to go. We have four students who need to learn to read."

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attention to clinical education and mentorship by successful practitioners. The degrees they award are inappropriate to the needs of today's schools and school leaders."<sup>12</sup>

These programs seem particularly ill-suited to founders and leaders of charter schools. Charter leadership requires the skill sets of an MBA, a real-estate developer, a world-class coach, and a master educator combined.

Where do we get enough leaders to replicate success and sustain rapid growth? Some very effective charter principals have made the leap from traditional public schools, but it is not always easy. Given all the dimensions that must be present, where do we look for the next generation?

### **Recommendations:**

■ Teacher colleges are not the right place to look for charter school leaders en masse. Levine's report recommends an "MBA-like" program for school leaders. The Task Force would go one better and suggest that universities create charter leadership programs rooted more directly within their business or other nonprofit management programs. The Leadership for Educational Entrepreneurs program (LEE) at Arizona State University, for example, offers an interdisciplinary Masters degree that combines the academic content of an M.Ed with the business acumen of the MBA that is offered by the university's School of Global Management and leadership.

■ The charter community might take an even bolder step by creating a national academy for charter school leadership—a West Point to create the elite professional corps our schools need. Such an institution could combine world-class coursework with a national mentorship program providing the kind of collegial support now offered by groups such as Building Excellent Schools and New Leaders for New Schools.

## **The best leadership**

**preparation is working alongside an exemplary leader, and every charter leader should have an opportunity to spend several months in a top-quality charter school, absorbing not only the day-to-day details of management but also the corollary skills such as fundraising—and most important, imbibing the sense of unlimited possibility that is present in truly effective charter leadership.**

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## Develop the Capacity of Charter School Boards of Trustees

A competent board of trustees is critical to the success of every charter school. The need for effective trustee boards is growing as the number of charter campuses grows.

There are plenty of guides to good general “boardsmanship” that can be applied to charter schools, and given the scarcity of sound, charter-specific training, there's no question that charter support organizations should step up their efforts to see that every board is well-grounded in its responsibilities.

A tougher question is supply. Can charter schools cover all the bases that need covering, at every new campus? Strong boards require skills in law, finance, and education, along with diversity broadly reflecting the school's population, and if at all possible, direct experience on other nonprofit boards.

**A competent board of trustees is critical to the success of every charter school.**

Finding such a group is a tall order, especially for charter founders inundated by all the details of getting a school up and running.

### Recommendations:

The Task Force suggests three possible remedies addressing both growth and quality:

■ **Partner up.** Resource centers and other charter support organizations should act as emissaries to other fields, recruiting a pool of candidates that local charter schools can dip into when the need arises. The net should be cast wider than it is currently. In addition to educators and business people, the charter community should aggressively reach out to labor unions, whose members are deeply concerned about the educational opportunities available for their kids. Such is the case with Chicago's Architecture, Construction, and Engineering Technical Charter School (ACE Tech), whose board includes representation from the building trades.

■ **Tighten the rules.** Charter school authorizers must establish non-negotiable criteria for charter school board members in the application process. Each founding group must have the necessary core skills, and there should be a leadership development plan that maps its long term program for recruitment and continuing trustee education. Board candidates must receive a full orientation about their legal responsibilities.

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Trustees must know, for example, that although they do not run day-to-day operations, they are the legally liable stewards of a school's academic program. Like school administrators, trustees should have access to data dashboards that report on their schools' vital signs in “real-time.”

■ **Multiply excellence.** It is far better to have a single strong board overseeing multiple campuses than to have a weak or dysfunctional board at each. State laws that prohibit multi-campus chartering should be revisited.

## Strengthen authorizer competence and responsibility

In the charter movement's first decade, most law and policy focused on schools. The responsibilities of authorizers were largely overlooked. We now know that charter authorizing is central to school quality, and we know enough about this emerging field of education governance to insist on conscientious work. Charter approval should no longer be a “roll of the dice” and renewals must be grounded firmly in evidence of performance. Charters should be written (or revised) to serve as clear, comprehensible contracts for performance.

Regrettably, it is taking too long for some authorizers to learn their craft. Some are spread too thin, especially in traditional districts where authorizing is one among many responsibilities. Others focus exclusively on compliance details and miss the big picture about performance and accountability. (Indeed, in the experience of many Task Force members, bankers and bond underwriters have tended to ask more meaningful questions about school quality than authorizers.)

As researcher Katrina Bulkley writes, there are wide differences in “will and capacity” among charter authorizers. Noting the relatively small number of charter schools closed for failing to meet academic goals, she detects a conflict among good intentions: “Even if [authorizers] personally support the ideals of performance accountability, they may be hesitant to close schools because of fear that this will be seen as a failure of the general charter school ideal.”<sup>13</sup>

**Charter authorizers must close academically failing schools when a reasonable period of time has passed and the avenues of authorizer support and sanction are exhausted.**

We know that closing a school can be painful, and authorizers must be prepared for controversy. Parents who have chosen a charter school may vent their anger, and some community leaders may take advantage

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of the situation, even fomenting further discord through allegations of racism. Knowing that such trouble can ensue, authorizers must develop open, transparent review processes, with any shutdown decision governed by clear criteria and affording ample opportunity for parent and community input.

The interests of the students should be paramount. In the Task Force's view, the long-term success of the charter movement *demand*s performance accountability. Educators who chronically fail to serve their students should hand over the schoolhouse keys—whether they are in traditional district schools or charter schools.

### **The charter itself**

The relationship between school and authorizer is guided by the charter document. Some variation is to be expected (and welcomed) in the state-specific field of charter schooling. However, the content of charters is too hit-and-miss. Some are essentially an entire charter application, rubber stamped as submitted and practically useless as a guide to oversight. Others lack needed specificity about academic goals. Still others require acres of detail that violate the spirit of the charter enterprise and set the stage for nitpicking instead of constructive oversight.<sup>14</sup>

When a charter is too broad to enforce or too narrow to guide action, mischief can ensue. In outlining areas for oversight, it should not exceed the intent of the charter law. Whatever else it contains, the charter should say whom the school aims to serve, exactly what goals will be pursued, how they will be measured and reported, and what consequences will follow. When the time for charter renewal comes around, there should be little argument over the facts of the case: Did the school succeed or not?

### **Authorizer choice**

Mastering the new art of authorizing requires not only resources but focus. Yet very few authorizers do just one job. In fact, nearly 90 percent of today's charter authorizers are local and county education agencies.<sup>15</sup>

Some authorizing is shoddy because it's an unwanted job. In the Task Force's view, that's an invitation to failure. Just like the families who enlist at their schools, *charter authorizers should be in business by choice*. A recent proposal in the California legislature would give unwilling school districts a chance to opt-out, with the state board of education taking over its authorizing duties.

At the very least, there should be multiple authorizers available in every charter jurisdiction—so that every prospective charter operator has a solid chance to work with a competent, willing authorizer.

**Charter authorizers** should  
be in business by choice.

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**Recommendations:**

- The National Association of Charter School Authorizers' (NACSA) *Principles and Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing* is a peer-developed guide to best practice. NACSA is doing a good deal of training, but authorizers should visit the NACSA website ([www.charterauthorizers.org](http://www.charterauthorizers.org)) on their own and evaluate their own practice against the Principles. Likewise, state officials should use the Principles as an evaluation guide for authorizer performance.
- State legislatures should open the doors to multiple authorizers of charter schools, providing sound oversight for their performance and ensuring that all authorizers have dependable streams of revenue (to lessen dependence on school fees). Ideally, authorizing boards and staff should include substantial private-sector experience.
- Non-district authorizers must have sufficient authority to ensure adequate funds and technical assistance for the schools they approve.
- State resource organizations should set up peer-accountability networks for authorizers in order to generate internal pressure for improvement of practice. For example, in Minnesota, the MN Sponsors Assistance Network (MSAN) provides mandatory training sessions and on-call technical assistance for all of the state's charter school sponsors, helping them hold charter schools to high quality standards while facilitating sharing of best practices.
- Policymakers should weigh giving authorizers wider latitude to deal with failing schools. There's no question that failure should result in termination of a charter—but there may be ways of putting a charter school “under new management” with less disruption in the lives of children and families.

## Strengthen Charter School Accreditation

The school accreditation process is a great opportunity for reflection and improvement by both trustees and staff. But much traditional accreditation focuses on the presence of facilities and programs rather than student achievement. The Task Force believes that every charter school should seek accreditation, but not necessarily from conventional bodies wedded to old ways.

**Recommendations:**

- Every charter school should seek periodic, intensive quality review by an outside party, whether required by its contract or not. Associations should help schools find the most appropriate and credible third-party groups to perform this function.

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■ Mainline accrediting bodies should create distinct charter-oriented components. The charter-accrediting program of the American Academy for Liberal Education (AALE), which is grounded in principles of choice, output oriented accountability, value-added assessments and effective governance, is a useful guide.

■ More charter schools should consider applying for the US Department of Education's Blue Ribbon Schools award—not just for the chance of winning, but because the program requires an intensive, standards-based review.

■ State and national charter organizations should create a Gold Standard system that can attest to attainment of a broad-based, peer-driven industry standard. Criteria should be drawn from the experience of the nation's highest-performing charter schools, and provide a nationally recognized emblem of charter quality, with appropriate review and renewal. The Task Force itself stands ready to help launch this effort.

## State Associations Must Stand for Quality

Not every state has a charter law, and not every chartering state has an association with serious goals and a strategy for attaining them. As membership organizations, our state associations can find themselves in a precarious spot, having to represent everyone who pays dues but knowing that not every member will approve of policies that favor rigorous accountability.

Some state associations have taken bold steps toward focusing their missions on quality. The California Charter Schools Association sided with state officials in the closure of the California Charter Academy (CCA), citing weak district oversight and working to get roughly 80 percent of CCA's students placed in other charter schools. The New York State Charter Schools Association took a similarly firm stand when the State University of New York revoked the charter of a low-achieving school in Manhattan.

For newer or smaller organizations, it may take real backbone to challenge members who can withhold dues and other support. But state associations must be at the front lines in the battle for quality. Just like authorizers, they must understand that the long-term viability of our movement depends on supporting strong and promising schools, but also getting rid of schools that do not meet student achievement goals or properly steward public resources.

**“It is not enough** for charter schools to be merely as good (or as bad) as non-charter public schools, we must be better. We owe it to the students to be better.”  
—California Charter Schools Association  
**Quality Statements for Charter School Operators.**

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**Recommendations:**

■ State associations should adopt their own version of the “quality statements” found on the California Charter School Association's website ([www.charterassociation.org](http://www.charterassociation.org)). As part of its broader quality initiative, the Association requires each member to sign the statements and has already denied membership to more than a dozen schools on those grounds.

■ Associations should look for their own means of leveraging those statements, including denial of membership to schools that will not sign or live up to the them.

## Fully Fund Charter Schools

The current performance of charter schools is remarkable considering their financial disadvantages. A soon-to-be-released study by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation finds that in 26 of 27 jurisdictions surveyed, charters are underfunded from one thousand to five thousand dollars per pupil compared to other public schools.<sup>16</sup> Lacking public funding for their buildings, charter educators in many states must divert significant portions of operating dollars to bricks and mortar.

**There is no justification for telling Jasmine, who attends a charter school, that her education is worth only two-thirds that of Justine, who attends the district school up the street.**

We do not excuse poor performance on this basis—after all, this deficiency is known to anyone who applies for a charter. We are frustrated, however, by its impact on our schools and ultimately on our students' lives. Even supportive policymakers seem unaware of the gap because it is obscured by the array of loopholes and footnotes that constitute school finance laws.

Putting legal technicalities aside, there is no justification for telling Jasmine, who attends a charter school, that her education is worth only two-thirds that of Justine, who attends the district school up the street.

**Recommendations:**

■ It is time for each state law to contain unambiguous language that requires equitable funding for the operations and facilities of all public schools, including public charter schools.

■ We anticipate that the forthcoming study by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation will raise this issue to national prominence, but every state and chartering jurisdiction should then seize the opportunity to launch its own inquiry about equitable funding for charter schools.



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■ One place to start the discussion: Whatever state aid follows a child to a district school should also follow the child who attends a charter school. There must also be equitable provision for facilities aid because charters cannot levy property taxes.

## Public and Private Funders Help Bring Quality to Scale

Beyond state and local operating funds, the charter movement's growth has been facilitated by generous private philanthropy and a federal program that has enjoyed consistent bipartisan support. The Task Force is encouraged by indications that charter-supporting foundations are placing increasing stress on quality as the guide and goal of their giving—including both the schools and the “infrastructure” of organizations that support them. This is a trend that should accelerate. The charter movement is better served by adding a respectable number of high-quality schools each year than by “scaling” at breakneck pace and diluting quality.

To many charter school operators, particularly small free-standing schools, the language of investment capital is an alien tongue. But whether social or financial, investors look for return. This means charter operators must not only produce results that exceed state standards, but also learn to sell themselves as an engine for change in public education.

### The charter community

should cultivate local philanthropies, often the most influential and well-focused sources of support, by convening them around charter issues and making them welcome at the school site.

#### Recommendations:

- Resource centers should train charter schools on investment analysis and education marketing.
- Philanthropic groups should look for ways to support not only schools but also the “grid” of support structures that help maintain school performance. This includes authorizers, resource centers, and state associations, but should also include new programs for charter teachers and school leaders, as well as innovative remedies for deficits in school facilities and technology. While supporting this infrastructure, those who are investing in charter schools should also make it clear that the return they are seeking is improved student outcomes, such as increased student attendance and promotion, academic achievement, and college-going rates.

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■ The charter community should cultivate local philanthropies, often the most influential and well-focused sources of support, by convening them around charter issues and making them welcome at the school site.

■ As Congress prepares to re-authorize the federal Charter Schools Program, slated for 2007, the national charter movement should spur a re-thinking of the program's goals and practices. There should be more grant-making flexibility to allow effective dissemination and replication of quality charter models, while carrying on the program's vital commitment to growth of new schools.

## Charter School Laws Must be About Quality

Finally, the entire enterprise of quality chartering must rest on the foundation of a good charter law. In our view, a “strong” charter law is one that supports academic achievement, not just more charter schools.

In the movement's first decade, the emphasis was on growth: strong laws provided multiple authorizers, avoided “caps,” and steered equitable facility and student funding to the school site. These remain important objectives, and still must be pursued. But charter laws and state policies should also address the quality of authorizer oversight and sources of technical assistance, and should require authorizers to be clear about criteria for renewal.

As public schools, charter schools are open to all students, including those with disabilities. They are also fully liable for failure to serve these students according to federal law, unless they are part of a traditional school district. It is important that state laws allow charter schools discretion in hiring the best possible special education teachers, and not require them to accept whomever the district sends.

A quality-oriented law is the fundamental building block for the rest of the enterprise.

### Recommendations:

■ State legislatures and political advocates should revisit charter laws, asking whether they provide sufficient financial support, real freedom from regulatory burdens, and clarity about oversight responsibilities.

■ Caps on charter growth do nothing to enhance quality. But if caps remain, charter schools that have produced consistently strong performance on state accountability measures should still be eligible to receive additional charters. This is the approach taken in recent Ohio legislation, and it merits attention in other states.

**A “strong” charter law  
is one that supports academic achievement,  
not just more charter schools.**

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■ All charter schools—including those that are part of larger LEAs—should have the option of forming cooperatives or other kinds of shared-services arrangements in order to obtain quality special education services at reasonable cost.

■ Sometimes the problem isn't a law or state policy itself, but its misinterpretation. When charter operators go looking for reliable advice about compliance issues or regulatory matters, the response is too often a “hunch” rather than a ruling grounded in actual law or Board-approved policy. Officials charged with oversight of charter schools should know the law and implement it—and not substitute their own opinions.

■ Charters that open in response to NCLB sanctions should be germinated through a separate review and approval process that includes ample planning time. Ideally, this is part of a larger new-schools strategy that is routinely cultivating a pool of high-quality options that can be reviewed and adopted as demand arises.

## NCLB's “re-opened”

charters: Proceed with caution if a school fails to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for five consecutive years. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) instructs the district to select from a menu of restructuring options. One is to “re-open as a public charter school.” The Task Force is concerned that the term “conversion” has become shorthand for this process. The new charters should be “fresh starts” with true autonomy over budget, staff, and curriculum—and not enter life encumbered by the various constraints on conversion charters found in many state charter laws.

# CONCLUSION: ACTION THIS DAY

**The charter school movement is at a crossroads. Fourteen years into our endeavor we have achieved great success, enough to know that we can realize the charter school promise.**

The steps recommended in this report will not be easy. Some require concerted action. Some require collaboration where little has existed. Some require new resources. The only response is to begin now.

We have approached this work with urgency—the same urgency that causes thousands of our colleagues to work so tirelessly for the million children who attend their schools. Charter schools are founded and staffed by activists—parents, educators and other leaders who just cannot wait for conventional solutions. They know that a few years is a lifetime for a small child, and that a school only gets one chance with each student.

We are proud of our movement. We believe that it can grow to serve more millions of American children, leading them to higher achievement than ever before.

**We invite our colleagues in the charter community, and others who support this commitment to excellence, to join us by signing their names to this statement. Ours are on the next page.**

**Add yours at [www.PublicCharters.org](http://www.PublicCharters.org).**

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## **Acknowledgements**

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools and the Task Force thank those who shared their insights—and especially, those who welcomed the Task Force into their schools:

Glennese Ray, Assistant Principal, Perspectives Charter School, Chicago, Illinois

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Doug Lemov, School Performance

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