

By Amber M. Northern and Michael J. Petrilli

It's often said that adding the word "charter" to a school's name doesn't prove that it is better or even different from district schools in the vicinity. The variation in quality within sectors is much larger than between them. What matters most for student learning and other important education outcomes is what happens inside the classroom—and any given curriculum, instructional strategy, or innovation could as easily be found in many a traditional public school as in a chartered one.

All that is true. Yet there is one important distinction between charter schools and those run by districts: their governance. Districts are almost everywhere overseen by elected school boards and operated as governmental agencies, while charter schools (like other nonprofit entities) are independently operated and overseen by a self-appointed, self-perpetuating board.

Charter opponents regularly make much of this difference, playing up the fact that charter boards are "private" entities rather than democratically controlled ones. Never mind that charter boards are accountable to public entities—the schools' authorizers—or that they must demonstrate key public outcomes (student learning, graduation, and so forth) and that they're open to the public (no picking and choosing of students allowed and no tuition charged).

Charter supporters sometimes find it difficult to counter the "lack of democracy" charge because their schools are, in fact, governed more like nonprofits than like municipal agencies with elected boards (just like many cherished organizations, including our universities and cultural institutions). But what if this turns out to be an asset rather than a liability? What if the boards that run charter schools are better run and more committed to academic excellence?

To determine whether that might be so, we went in search of empirical information on charter boards. Who serves on them? What are their qualifications and backgrounds? How do they spend their time, view their role, and potentially influence school quality?

These are important questions, to be sure, yet we found almost no information. Search for yourself. Aside from a handful of "best-practice" documents based on experience, anecdote, and conventional wisdom, there's a huge void in the research literature when it comes to board governance in schools of choice.<sup>1</sup> Along with special education, it is among the most neglected domains of education research.

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To be fair, there's not a whole lot more on elected school boards. We tried to help rectify that problem with *School Boards Circa 2010: Governance in the Accountability Era*, a report on a survey of district board members that we undertook in partnership with the National School Boards Association and Iowa School Boards Foundation. Our friend Rick Hess, director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, penned that analysis; he rightly noted then that "little empirical research on national board practices has been conducted since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001." Sadly, that's still largely the case.

That 2010 survey did, however, supply a peek at the characteristics and perceptions of school board members, how they approach their work, and the training they receive, among other topics.

A few years later (in 2014), we asked Arnold Schober and Michael Hartney (of Lawrence University and Lake Forest College, respectively) to match the 2010 school-board results with demographic and student-achievement data for those same districts. Their key (and, one might say, entirely appropriate) finding, as set forth in *Does School Board Leadership Matter?:* districts that are more academically successful have board members who assign high priority to improving student learning.

That got us wondering whether charter school boards matter too. Do the types of individuals who serve, the views they hold, and the practices they adopt have any bearing on school quality?

To help answer this critical question, we turned to Bellwether Education Partners, a smart ed-policy research shop led by über-reformer Andy Rotherham. We were fortunate to land two of Bellwether's savviest analysts to lead the study: Juliet Squire and Allison Crean Davis, both of whom serve on charter school boards.

Ultimately, we and our Bellwether colleagues chose Washington, D.C., as a case study. As explained more fully in the report, the nation's capital is a good place to study charter board governance, as it operates under a single set of laws and regulations, a single authorizer, and a uniform set of school-quality metrics. Further, its scale (sixty-two boards overseeing 112 campuses) provides a number sufficient for comparisons. What's more, not only do D.C. charters answer to a single authorizer, but it is an authorizer that values transparency; the accountability framework designed by the D.C. Public Charter School Board (DC PCSB) can be readily understood and leveraged for additional analyses.

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That said, the D.C. charter sector is not typical of much else. It is relatively large—enrolling nearly half of the city's public school students—and well regarded for its quality. Stanford University's CREDO has found that students in D.C. charters gained an extra 101 days in math and an extra seventy-two days in reading over the course of a year, as compared to their counterparts in the D.C. Public Schools (DCPS)—this even as DCPS is itself rapidly improving. A mature and high-performing charter sector, such as we find in the District of Columbia, also surely differs in other ways, both observable and not, from those that are less established and perhaps more fragile. We're mindful too that all charter schools in D.C. are urban and that suburban and rural charter schools—of which the country has thousands—are apt to have fundamental differences.

So we cannot and do not claim that our findings are generalizable beyond the nation's capital. Yet they paint a detailed and revealing portrait of what is occurring there—and that may be, could be, or should be occurring elsewhere. Our survey response rate was strong (over 50 percent), and although this work is descriptive (not causal), it reveals some tantalizing differences between board members of higher- and lower-performing schools, as well as a number of notable similarities—all of which raise questions and hypotheses worth exploring elsewhere.

You'll find much more in the executive summary and full report that follow. But here are five observations that struck us hard. The first two reflect commonalities across both of the board sectors.

## **1. Board membership provides a route by which the “best and the brightest” of the community have an opportunity to serve.**

We see in these data a picture of board members who are highly educated, successful, selfless, and civic-minded and who care enough about the education of children other than their own to devote themselves to trying to make schools better. (Indeed, the social capital on these boards would make James Coleman smile.) Earlier research found that some of these same characteristics are shared by many district board members as well. (Yet keep in mind these studies are vastly different in scope and sample.)

In both sectors, board members tend to be academically accomplished. In large school districts, 85 percent of board members hold a bachelor's degree and more than half have an advanced degree. In the D.C. charter sector, only 4 percent of board members have not graduated from a four-year institution, and a whopping 79 percent have advanced degrees.

Both groups are mostly well off financially. In large school districts in 2011, a majority of board members (54 percent) reported an annual household income of \$100,000 or more. The D.C. charter sector is wealthier still: 51 percent report household income greater than \$200,000 per year, and an additional 37 percent report between \$100,000 and \$200,000. Just 2 percent report income below \$50,000. (For comparison, the median household income in 2014 was \$54,000 annually; in D.C., it was \$91,000.)

Both groups are also reasonably informed about the schools they govern. Traditional board members possess accurate information about their districts, especially when it comes to school finance, teacher pay, class size, and collective bargaining. A similar pattern plays out with D.C. charter board members, who are equally well informed about the characteristics of their schools.

Finally, the same majority of both district and board members responded that they do not have school-aged children (62 percent).<sup>2</sup>

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By most observable characteristics, we see that citizens who choose to govern public schools, whether district or charter, are affluent, selfless, successful, civic-minded individuals. Board membership provides these “best and brightest” an opportunity to improve education in their local communities.

## **2. Boards (both district and charter) appear to benefit from training related to school governance.**

We’re well aware of the pitiful state of teacher professional development that educators often report (and that research tends to corroborate<sup>3</sup>) is a waste of time. So we were surprised to find a relationship between board training and school quality for both district and charter sectors. Could it be that boards benefit more from their professional development than teachers?

Our prior research shows that district boards with members who report particular work practices (including participating in professional development) are linked to better student-achievement outcomes than would be expected given the circumstances of their districts (that is, they “beat the odds”). The current study shows that charter board members of higher-quality schools are also more likely to participate in specific kinds of training. Unfortunately, we don’t know anything about the quality of that training—though we have an inkling of its content. We know, for instance, that most district boards overall and charter boards in higher-quality schools (versus lower-quality schools) tend to participate in training about developing and approving a school budget, as well as in how to comply with relevant legal and policy issues.

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Clearly we need to learn more about the quality, ideal amount, and substance of this training, given its association with school quality.

Now on to the differences . . .

## **3. Charter boards in D.C. differ from district boards around the country when it comes to race, age and ideology.**

In general, district school boards tend to have more white members (80 percent), though the largest districts (15,000-plus students) are comprised of boards that are 67 percent white, 22 percent black, and 6 percent Latino. D.C. charter board members are 53 percent white, 33 percent black, and 5 percent Hispanic.

The board-member population of the District’s charter schools is also more balanced in age than traditional boards, with 30 percent between the ages of thirty-one and forty, 33 percent between ages forty-one and fifty, and 35 percent over the age of fifty. Our 2011 data for traditional boards show just 4 percent under the age of forty, 62 percent between forty and fifty-nine, and 34 percent sixty or older.

Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, district board members across the nation are much more likely to describe themselves as political moderates (47 percent) or conservatives (32 percent). The District’s charter board membership skews much more to the left: 56 percent are liberal, 34 percent moderate, and just 7 percent conservative. (Of course, the District of Columbia is among the bluest political jurisdictions in the country.)<sup>4</sup>

Another big difference is that charter board members do not have to run for election, which brings us to our next point.

#### **4. Not having elections allows the charter sector to tap a deeper pool of talent for board members.**

We can’t help but think that needing to run for election might discourage otherwise willing and capable individuals from serving on a board. Campaigning in today’s fraught political environment is no picnic, especially when your plate is already brimming with a full-time job and family. Besides the cost in dollars and effort, “pro-reform” board candidates often get skewered by local unions.

It’s not hard to see how serving on an appointed board of a nonunion school could be more appealing and perhaps more effectual, especially as members are free of the headaches of collective bargaining. There’s also a higher chance that principals and board members are likeminded and supportive of one another because, unlike superintendents and district school boards, their working relationship is not subject to the vagaries of the latest election returns.

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Finally, there are differences in how the two types of boards approach their work (below), which has implications for the types of individuals who are attracted to board service.

#### **5. One way to recruit and keep talented, busy professionals on charter school boards is to make the job doable.**

Part of the reason that D.C. charter boards can attract the best and brightest (other than the fact that there are lots of high-achieving professionals in D.C.) is that their workload on those boards is manageable. Many charter boards meet every six to eight weeks, and members spend an average of six hours per month on board service. Contrast that with district board members—42 percent of whom report spending twenty-five hours or more on board business a month and just 7 percent of whom report spending fewer than seven hours per month. They typically meet at least once, and often twice, per month.

Time is a precious commodity that charter boards tend to maximize, in part by approaching their work more strategically. Fully three-quarters of them say that their first or second top goal as a board member is ensuring that students achieve strong academic outcomes. Contrast that with district board members, who in 2011 showed little consensus on priorities in their districts. When queried about the most important objective of

schooling, most replied, “Preparing students for a satisfying and productive life and helping students fulfill their potential.” There’s nothing wrong with that, but figuring out what it means as well as how board members can hold themselves and the school leadership accountable for attaining it is nearly impossible.

When charter boards set for themselves a focused and measurable goal, it’s easy to see how that increases the odds of attaining it, especially as everyone pursues a shared purpose.

We should also acknowledge the importance of external organizations in recruiting talented professionals and providing training that helps them structure their jobs to maximize efficiency. Outfits like Charter Board Partners, BoardSource, and BoardOnTrack help build strong boards by assembling rosters of talented individuals whose skillsets are matched to particular schools and boards in need of them. They figure out who might best contribute to and mesh with existing school and board leadership and provide them with ongoing professional development. It appears that to a considerable extent they are succeeding in D.C.

Charter supporters and reform “harbormasters” in other cities should take note. Although such folks already have a lot on their hands, they should add “developing great charter boards” to their to-do lists and consider recruiting organizations such as those above to help them do it.



As you can see, our work on board governance paints a somewhat complicated picture of the similarities and differences between district boards around the country and charter board members in the District. Combined with other key findings (below), however, a more concrete narrative emerges.

Our research on both sectors shows that almost all D.C. charter board members give top priority to student achievement, and that’s also generally the case with district board members in high-performing districts.

Within the D.C. charter sector, stronger schools tend to have board members who also are more knowledgeable about their schools, particularly relative to their school’s performance rating, demographics, and financial outlook. Those board members are also more likely to participate in training, engage in strategic planning, and meet monthly (rather than more or less frequently). They’re also more apt to evaluate their school’s leader and use staff satisfaction as a factor in such evaluations.

We’re left with the impression that good board members are good board members in any sector of education—and in other organizations, too. They set the right priorities, they do their homework, they monitor performance, and they evaluate the organization’s leadership.

But the opportunity to be a good board member is so much greater in the charter sector; therefore, it seems likely that the kinds of people who are apt to be good board members will find service on charter boards more appealing and perhaps more rewarding than service on district boards. You don’t have to run for election. You don’t have to bargain with an antagonistic union. You have much greater say about budgets and personnel. You

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don't spend endless hours every week on school business. We can't be sure that charters beyond D.C. also do a great job of attracting top-notch talent; this is important to investigate going forward. But based on what we've been able to learn from this study and comparing it with national analyses of district board members—which, we reiterate, are not fully comparable—we conclude that education-minded, child-centered civic leaders who want to engage directly with public education may find service on charter boards to be a terrific option.



One final thought: we're compelled to put in a plug for the oft-derided "Washington elite." According to today's populist politics, those of us who inhabit the nation's capital are mostly self-serving and possibly corrupt careerists. Maybe that's true in some corners, but the fine men and women who have volunteered to serve on the city's charter boards don't fit that stereotype. They are selfless, committed, and competent—and are likely one part, perhaps a vital part, of the reason why D.C.'s charter sector is so high-performing.

In fact, Washington's charter boards appear to mirror the vision that progressive reformers had for elected school boards over a century ago—that they be filled by the best and brightest of the community, who stand for the common good and place the interests of children ahead of their own interests or those of adult groups.

Such civic-minded citizens can be found on elected boards as well. So to opponents of charter schools and their "unelected" boards, we ask this: Do you want our schools to rise above crass politics, as the progressives of a century ago sought for public education? If so, we respectfully suggest that you embrace charter schools and applaud those who serve on their boards.

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# Acknowledgments

This report was made possible through the generous support of the Walton Family Foundation and our sister organization, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation.

We are especially grateful to authors Juliet Squire and Allison Crean Davis, who thoughtfully conducted the research and authored this report; to Carolyn Chuong, who assisted in developing and administering the survey and analyzing data; and to Andy Smarick, who provided valuable input at critical junctures in the project. Tom Nida, Anne Wallestad, Michael Hartney, Michael Ford, Carrie Irvin, and Simmons Lettre also provided valuable feedback on earlier drafts of the survey instrument and report. Their thoughtful comments strengthened our analysis, though any remaining shortcomings are the responsibilities of the authors alone.

On Fordham's side, we extend thanks to research manager Victoria Sears, who helped oversee the project, provided input on drafts, and shepherded the final product across the finish line. We also thank Chester E. Finn Jr. for thoughtfully reviewing drafts, Yasmine Rana for handling funder and media relations, and Alyssa Schwenk for managing the report's dissemination. We also thank Fordham interns Andrew Scanlan and Darien Wynn for the diligent research and administrative assistance they provided throughout this project and Jonathan Lutton, who adeptly ushered the report through design and production. Finally, we thank Pamela Tatz, who copyedited the report; Edward Alton, who designed the report's layout; and Booblgum of Getty Images, from whom our cover design originated.

Last, though certainly not least, we extend gratitude to the District of Columbia's charter school board members for participating in our survey and to our colleagues at Charter Board Partners, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, D.C. Public Charter School Board, and Friends of Choice in Urban Schools for their support throughout the project.



Tens of thousands of individuals across the United States volunteer their time, energy, and expertise to the governance of charter schools. These board members make key financial and operational decisions about their schools and have legal and moral responsibilities for the education of children in their communities—who are often poor and of ethnic minority groups. As the charter sector grows, board members are likely to play an increasingly prominent role in discussions of public education, particularly in cities where charters serve a significant proportion of the student population.

Yet we know remarkably little about this group. Who serves on charter school boards? What is the relationship, if any, between the characteristics and practices of those boards and the quality of the schools for which they are responsible? With few exceptions, most of what we know (or think we know) about charter school boards is based on anecdotes and lived experience. The present analysis, although limited in scope, is one of the first to use quantitative survey data to explore the connections between charter school boards and school quality.

We surveyed charter school board members in Washington, D.C., a city with one of the highest percentages of public charter school students in the nation. We sought answers to two primary questions:

1. Who serves on charter school boards in the District of Columbia?
2. Which board characteristics and practices are associated with school quality?

Our survey explored numerous topics, including board members' backgrounds and characteristics, motivations to serve, understanding of the board's role, and challenges as board members. We had an impressive response rate of 51 percent. Though we can provide only correlational findings, not cause and effect, our research aptly represents the D.C. charter school board population; widens the heretofore narrow domain of research on charter school boards; and functions as an empirical flashlight for charter sectors beyond the nation's capital.

## Who serves on D.C.'s charter school boards?

Charter school board members in D.C. tend to be affluent, highly educated individuals with moderate or liberal political leanings. Three-quarters of them have served fewer than four years on their board, and half of them have served for two years or less. A slight majority is white, and one-third are African American. They are fairly evenly distributed by age and have a wide range of occupational and professional backgrounds, although almost one-third work or have worked in education.

# Which board characteristics and practices are linked to school quality?

In order to identify relationships between board practices and characteristics on the one hand and school quality on the other, we analyzed survey data alongside school-quality data from the D.C. Public Charter School Board (DC PCSB). We found several significant differences between high- and low-quality schools.

## **FINDING 1:**

### **Board members of high-quality schools are more knowledgeable about their schools.**

These board members are more likely to know their school's quality rating from the DC PCSB and more accurately report their school's poverty population and whether the school recently had a budget deficit.

In light of this, we suggest that charter advocates and other sector leaders intentionally recruit board members who demonstrate the interest and ability to be informed and engaged. They might also encourage school leaders to effectively and consistently communicate key information about the school to their boards.

## **FINDING 2:**

### **Board members of high-quality schools are more likely to participate in training, engage in strategic planning, and meet monthly.**

In particular, board members at high-performing schools are more likely to have received training in developing the school budget, strategic planning, and legal and policy issues.

In charting their own course for continuous improvement, board members in other cities may find it useful to imitate these practices.

## **FINDING 3:**

### **Board members of high-quality schools are significantly more likely to evaluate their school leaders and use staff satisfaction as a factor in such evaluations.**

Our analysis lends some support to the view that evaluating the school leader is one of the board's key functions. Board members, support organizations, and others should consider investing in boards' capacity to fulfill this responsibility with relevant data, measures, and goals.

#### **FINDING 4:**

### **Regardless of school quality, charter school board members in D.C. have much in common, including board makeup and shared beliefs about education, school-finance practices, and their role and responsibilities.**

Our analysis shows that members of charter school boards in D.C. have similar demographic and professional backgrounds, regardless of school quality. Members share the belief that academic achievement is the primary goal of a quality education, have similar practices in stewarding public funds, and understand that their role is to govern the school, not get involved in its operations.

Interestingly, charter school board members in D.C. also share some misunderstandings about the board's role in relation to the authorizer. For instance, one in four members indicate that the DC PCSB is responsible for assisting the school leader in school operations, which would overstep the DC PCSB's oversight role, and one in three indicate that it is *not* their responsibility to close underperforming schools, although that is indeed one of the DC PCSB's primary obligations as an authorizer—and an action that it sometimes undertakes.



Charter school boards play an important role in school choice, and their responsibility for educating the next generation of American children merits greater attention from public officials, charter-sector leaders, and analysts. What's more, we should not forget that charter school boards represent a phenomenon unique to American democracy in which voluntarism plays a significant role in cultivating civil society and shaping the common good.