

Chapter Eight The Right People

It's a winnowing process. A teaching job is posted, and hundreds of resumes and cover letters flood in. Perhaps ten candidates receive a phone interview, and maybe two make it through to the next stage. They're invited to the school for an on-site interview and possibly a tour. Then, if these candidates are teaching in the area, they are observed at their posts: maybe one makes it through this round, and then he or she comes back to teach a sample lesson. When the lesson is finished, there is feedback—feedback from teachers, feedback from administrators, feedback from students. The candidate leaves, and his or her strengths and weaknesses are debated—their teaching experience and content knowledge, their ability to relate to students, a willingness to take on long hours. And, finally, the most important question is considered: “Would they fit into the culture of the school?”

This question of “fit” is a routine question asked at the five charter schools in our study, a question not only asked of teaching candidates and potential administrators, but also considered by prospective students and their families. And it is an important one. Research supports the premise that “people decisions” are crucial to the success of an organization (Drucker, 1990). Business researcher James Collins (2005) includes these types of decisions in his “principle[s] of greatness”: “Getting the Right People on the Bus within Social Sector Constraints.” He explains: “*The number-one resource for a great social sector organization is having enough of the right people willing to commit themselves to [the] mission* (pp. 16–17). Chapter 7 explains that a strong guiding mission unites stakeholders (Nadler & Tushman, 1977, 1980); education researchers underscore the importance of mission-driven teachers and administrators within a school (Achievement First, 2008; Carter, 2000; Education Trust, 2005; KIPP Foundation, 2007; Purkey & Smith, 1985) and find that involved or supportive parents also promote effective schools (Bauch & Goldring, 1995; Henderson & Berla, 1994).

As shown in the Charter School Coherence Model (CSCM) in chapter 6, a clear mission helps produce the coherence among people and practices that these five charter schools exhibit. As a teacher at Community Day describes, “From everything everybody does, more so than any school I’ve taught at before, everybody here is on the same page.” In this sense, then, it does “take a certain person,” as an administrator notes, a certain person who has knowingly, willingly, and enthusiastically bought in to the school’s mission. At Boston Collegiate, an administrator observes, “This is a school that . . . tries to be clear with all the stakeholders in terms of what we’re about, what our mission is, what we’re trying to do, what our expectations are.” Through actions and decisions, words and beliefs, stakeholders implement this mission on a daily basis: a school leader may envision future professional development workshops or plan a trip to visit colleges; a teacher may give feedback on an assignment or hand out a demerit; a parent may sign

a reading log or remember the stipulations of a home/school contract; and a student may finish a college essay or stay after school to attend a prep session for the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS).

Taken together, these studies and remarks suggest a key element of school effectiveness: an institution filled with people—leaders, teachers, students, and parents—who are deeply committed to their school’s educational philosophy and operating procedures. These people are vital to the school’s success, for they determine whether its mission will be fulfilled. While this factor—a deliberateness in making thoughtful “people decisions”—distinguishes these five schools, what is perhaps more interesting is that these schools do not always accomplish this objective in the same manner.

Leadership

Without a doubt, the leadership of an organization matters. So how do these schools choose their leaders? How are critical transitions at the top handled? These schools suggest a model that illustrates their deliberate approach to choosing their leaders, and, in turn, these leaders are deliberate in finding the “right” teachers and attracting the “right” families and students.

A Model of Leadership Succession

Research on charter school leaders is relatively scarce, with few empirical studies. Relatively recent research (Henig, Holyoke, Brown, & Lacireno-Paquet, 2005) examines the characteristics of people who found charter schools. They suggest that charters generally can be subdivided into “mission-oriented” and “market-oriented” categories, and that the leadership in each type is markedly distinct. Mission-oriented leadership resembles that of a nonprofit, while market-oriented leadership may have more in common with Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) that are operated as for-profit businesses. Within the five schools in this study, the emphasis lands squarely on mission-oriented leadership.

Because a leader’s primary responsibility is to support the mission of their organization (Drucker, 1990), it may seem obvious to argue that leadership stability—especially the continued presence of the founding leader(s)—is enormously important to a school. However, the literature is equivocal on the question of leadership stability. For example, one study of Pennsylvania charter schools concludes that leadership stability matters more than any other leadership characteristic and that stability is associated with higher math and reading test scores (Nelson & Miron, 2005). However, other leadership theorists, primarily those from the for-profit and nonprofit sectors, highlight the ossifying tendencies that stability can engender; for example, stability can stunt organizational growth (Churchill & Lewis, 1983; Terry, 1993). Still other studies have found that many charter schools have given little thought to leadership succession (Campbell, 2007).

The five charter schools in this study do not provide a clear answer to the question of leadership retention: turnover within leadership teams varies across these schools. At all of them, however, the founders tend to stay relatively present. The founding leaders at two of the schools still serve

in key leadership positions years after the schools' inaugurations; a third school's current head joined the leadership ranks early in the school's life; and other founders currently sit on their school's governing or advisory board. At Community Day, where the founder has served as the executive director since the school's beginning, a teacher observes, "We wouldn't be where we are at all without [the executive director]. I think that we . . . would have been really overwhelmed with MCAS. . . . [The executive director] has been the driving force." According to this perspective, stability in the top position has allowed the school to keep pace with—and even stay ahead of—the standards and accountability movement; the director's vision, provided over thirteen years and through a number of changes in other leadership and teaching positions, has enabled the school to remain committed to success on the MCAS and to their standards-based philosophy.

Beyond the founding leaders, however, these schools vary in the stability of their leadership teams, especially in positions directly below the executive director. MATCH, for example, has had only two principals in eight years, while Community Day has employed, by one staff member's count, four different heads of the Lower School and six different Upper School heads in thirteen years. These various leaders all brought different leadership styles, different approaches to the relationship between teachers and the administration, and different personalities—differences with very real, and sometimes difficult, consequences for those employed at Community Day. Eventually "they finally hired within," as one teacher explains: "They took [as head] a fifth-grade teacher who had been around. . . . He was here for three years . . . and he gave us some stability."

While these five schools vary in the *amount* of leadership turnover, they do offer a consistent model for *how* leadership succession, if necessary, should occur. It is a model of "homegrown" leadership in which leaders emerge from the ranks of the schools' teachers. Because leaders face so many decisions and activities that call on them to enforce and shape the school's culture—hiring and firing staff members, developing new procedures, interacting with teachers and students and families, conducting school assemblies and staff meetings—it is particularly important for a leader to know intimately, and even to embody, the school's culture. This knowledge can come from having served the school in different capacities over a number of years.

Currently, all five schools employ teachers-turned-leaders, and most have several. Homegrown leaders, one MATCH administrator notes, "know the culture of the school . . . know the students," and, as an Academy of the Pacific Rim administrator explains, there is an advantage to "continuity, familiarity with culture, knowing our expectations." This knowledge allows for a smooth transition between teaching and leading, as one teacher-turned-leader observes: "[I] just changed chairs . . . and had more responsibility, obviously."

Another advantage to the process of homegrown leadership is that the possibility of moving into leadership positions attracts teachers to these schools. A Boston Collegiate administrator explains:

Charter schools are quickly becoming known as schools where the transition between teacher and leader doesn't have to be this laborious process with a lot of red tape. So I think we are, as a charter school, attracting candidates who are interested in leadership.

The transition from teacher to leader is typically gradual and hands-on, characteristics that research finds make for a more effective changeover (Campbell, 2007). The progression from teacher to leader unfolds over years, as this Academy of the Pacific Rim leader describes:

I've been at the school for eight years. I started off as a tutor and basically [filled] in whenever I could, then worked my way up to the sixth-grade history position, eventually became the team leader for the sixth-grade team. Then there was a position for the deanship in the high school . . . [and] I went for it, and I've been here ever since.

A Roxbury Prep administrator describes how individuals are groomed for leadership roles:

So you know, [another current administrator] came here in the second year of the school, and I think [the school's founders] pretty quickly . . . figured out that he had the capacity for leadership and could be a good school leader, so they started giving him more responsibility. . . . Each department is facilitated by a department coach, each grade-level team is facilitated by a grade-level facilitator, and all of those people teach a full load and then take on these other duties, and we use that as training time, an indoctrinating time, so that when the time comes for new leadership, if you've worked very closely with the leadership of the school, you've shaped the leadership of the school.

It is through such purposeful mentoring that many of these schools develop specific teachers for leadership roles, thus ensuring smooth transitions when leaders leave the school and guaranteeing the continuity of the school's culture and functions.

However, internal hiring is not always a problem-free solution to finding strong leaders. Insiders can be perceived to have loyalties to particular staff members or a history of hostilities, and other internal candidates may harbor resentment, feeling overlooked or underappreciated (Hollander, 1978). Boston Collegiate is well aware of the potential tensions of hiring from within and takes steps to mitigate hurt feelings. An administrator explains:

We've become more formal in terms of . . . advertising our positions to the staff within, so that there is not . . . the idea of there being certain people who are hand picked. . . . That feels like a very important step for the institution . . . in [making] an effort to be as transparent as possible about how these positions work. You want that person in the leadership position . . . to be seen by the staff as having achieved that position legitimately, and I think that when there aren't many candidates from within, you need to look externally to have a healthy number of candidates.

Thus, a potential downside to homegrown administrators is that internal hiring can both limit the number of job candidates and cause resentment among others in the school. In addition, while internal hires may save precious time because there is no need for them to learn the

organization's structures and systems, this approach to choosing leaders only works if the school is successful in meeting its current goals and wishes to preserve the same priorities. If the outcome measures or mission should change, leaders from the outside, with new ideas and approaches, may be preferred.

Clearly, a key factor in ensuring a mission-driven school's culture is for leaders to make careful and deliberate personnel decisions. As Collins (2005) notes, "Those who build great organizations make sure they have the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the key seats. . . . They always think *first* about 'who' and then about 'what.'" (p. 34). Given that a principal characteristic of the "right people" is their commitment to the mission (Collins, 2005), one of the most important jobs of charter school leaders is finding teachers who can do the everyday work of implementing the founding mission and then evolve into the next generation of school leadership. Accordingly, leaders approach the hiring, training, and even firing of teachers with careful attention and a deliberate strategy.

Teachers

With the school's mission stable and well defined, a leader's focus turns to those who will carry out this mission. Myriad papers, articles, and research document the importance of getting and keeping effective teachers in the education process (c.f. Darling-Hammond, Aness, & Ort, 2002; Miles, 2001; Miles & Darling-Hammond, 1998; Murnane & Phillips, 1981; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003; Rockoff, 2004). It is not surprising, then, that many participants in this study believe that their school's accomplishments are due to their teachers. When asked about the source of their success, a principal at Boston Collegiate simply replied, "Teachers, teachers, teachers," while a Community Day administrator named "committed teachers" as a success factor. A Roxbury Prep administrator drives home the point:

Hiring is the most important thing that [we] do. It's a huge, huge, huge luxury that cannot be overstated. . . . In my experience in a regular district school, it's very unlikely that I would have a lot of power over who I could hire [and] certainly over whom I could let go. So that's a huge advantage . . . [that] we [can] spend a significant amount of time on the hiring process. An administrator from MATCH similarly asserts that hiring is crucial "because a teacher who struggles here will really make or break the year. It has a huge impact on the students and on how the year goes. It's a very important decision that we make. . . . We don't want to just hire someone on the fly."

All five schools, without exception, focus on the teacher hiring process, although the nuances of the process, the details of induction procedures, the offer of retention incentives, and the frequency of firing differ among the schools. Once again, these schools have the same goal—"choosing the right people"—but they achieve this goal in different ways, which illustrate different values. Developing a complete understanding of these processes is important; as Robin Lake (2007) asserts, "To help charter schools improve and grow, we must learn more about how they can recruit and keep talented teachers" (p. 5).

Hiring: The Candidates and the Process

Across the five schools, recent hires look similar: they tend to be young, academically strong, and passionate—“a very idealistic, reform-minded, hard-working group,” according to a Community Day administrator. However, within the hiring process, the different missions and priorities of the schools emerge. For example, Community Day emphasizes a candidate’s commitment to standards-based accountability, asking questions like, “How do you feel about the MCAS? How do you feel about standards? Are you familiar with the Massachusetts standards?” At Roxbury Prep, administrators focus on candidates who have a “passion for their content,” tying this passion to the school’s mission of college preparation:

We look for a few things. One is that teachers are experts in their content area, . . . [that] if they weren’t here and they didn’t want to teach, they would be working at a high level in their field. . . . Another important factor is that they’ve had some proven experience with an urban population. . . . So [we seek] urban experience and then someone who is passionate about the mission and completely committed to making sure kids are prepared for college.

Emphasizing a slightly different element of the effective teacher equation, the Academy of the Pacific Rim and Boston Collegiate seem to highlight a candidate’s ability to form relationships with kids. Academy of the Pacific Rim looks for candidates who will “build relationships with our students.” A Boston Collegiate administrator explains what they seek:

High school is a hard time and kids can get very sullen. They can get pretty apathetic, and when your mission is to get them prepared for college . . . they need to be surrounded by love at the school. . . . If they’re not, then we’re in big trouble, so I’m eager to meet as many candidates as I can that are going to love our students.

Ideal candidates must also dedicate their full youthful energy to the school. MATCH wants an enthusiastically devoted teacher who is

pretty much ready to sell their soul to the devil, who’s not going to have any sort of private life at all—[or] a minimal one. Because when you come, you have to obviously devote yourself to at least twelve hours a day, and that doesn’t include weekends. [We] want someone who is very young and has a lot of energy.

However, youthful passion by itself may not be sufficient—it must be youthful devotion *channeled toward a particular end*, devotion to the mission that inspires working long hours and giving dedicated service to the school. As a Roxbury Prep administrator states, “I’m looking for people who are willing to do whatever it takes.” In sum, these schools want candidates who have a deep commitment to student success, who care about the students, and who are “passionate about the mission.”

Indeed, the hiring standards are high, and some cases have increased over the years. As one administrator explains:

I think we're really harsh, and we need to be because what we demand once you're here is so challenging. It's exhausting and it's heartbreaking, and we have gone through so many teachers over the years that we're at the point where we want to make absolutely sure that the person coming in here, that this is the best place for them, and so that the fit is right.

This rigorous process, then, ensures that hires will immediately and exactly fit the school's culture. Any hesitancy about the mission can spell a short tenure at the school. As a Community Day teacher comments, "Some of the people that were kind of hesitant to buying into [the mission], those are the people that don't stay around very often."

Thus, clearly articulating the school's mission and goals is essential to the entire process. A recent Boston Collegiate hire, when asked whether the school's mission was mentioned during the hiring process, responded, "Oh yeah. I mean, it was told to me maybe a hundred times. In fact, in the interview they ask what kinds of things you could contribute to [the mission] or how you would see yourself fulfilling that, how do you feel about that. . . . So I felt that I got the mission articulated to me." A Roxbury Prep teacher noted similarly, "I definitely had a good sense of the mission [during the interview process]. The mission is very, very clear."

Induction and Mentoring

A teacher's induction begins during the hiring process, as a candidate hears the mission and expresses their commitment to it. Once a member of the faculty, a new hire attends summer meetings with administrators or returning teachers who introduce him or her to the school's particular systems and structures. For example, at Roxbury Prep, teachers participate in role-plays focused on appropriate disciplinary actions and work together to set the year's curriculum and lesson plans. Boston Collegiate's summer orientation is a two-week session of "major acculturation," during which teachers, school alumni, students, and department heads are "teaching them about the culture." New teachers at the Academy of the Pacific Rim and Boston Collegiate receive detailed notebooks—the *Red Books* at Boston Collegiate and the *Culture, Instruction, and Operations Guidebooks* at the Academy—that not only outline school policies but also offer detailed suggestions about teaching practices.

In addition to these summer sessions and guidebooks, Boston Collegiate, the Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Community Day also offer longer-term mentoring of new teachers, a process that reflects their beliefs about teacher development. An administrator at the Academy of the Pacific Rim notes why this mentoring is important: "Certainly some of the new folks are struggling here . . . [because their] experience isn't necessarily translating into success in this environment." At Community Day, the similar expectation is that

brand new teachers aren't going to be really effective no matter where they come from. . . . It does take experience. . . . We're trying to understand about supporting teachers in their very early years and keeping them with us a bit longer, but also giving them the kind of help they need so they don't become discouraged.

The formality of the mentoring programs at these three schools varies to some degree, both within and across schools. At Boston Collegiate, for example, the mentoring relationship is typically “a pretty informal relationship,” although it can be more intensive—“more like a cooperating teacher relationship,” says one teacher—if the new teacher is also new to teaching. Academy of the Pacific Rim’s mentoring program consists of weekly meetings between the new teacher and his or her mentor:

Every new teacher at [the Academy of the Pacific Rim] has a mentor who they can meet with once a week. [The mentors are] either in your department or in your grade level, depending on your content experience: if you’re switching from third grade to sixth grade, we’ll probably put you with a sixth-grade teacher. . . . But if you’re new to teaching, we tend to put you with your department chair.

Even though Community Day uses a coteaching model in all kindergarten through sixth-grade classrooms, new teachers also are paired with another mentor from a different classroom. This mentoring program also recently increased from a one-year to a two-year program—a move suggesting growing attention to teacher retention.

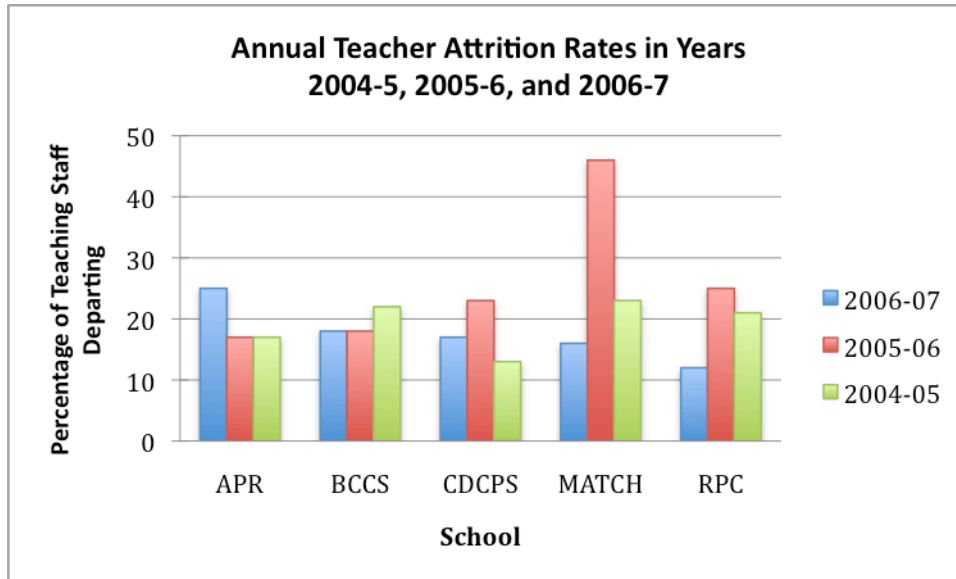
MATCH and Roxbury Prep do not have formal mentoring programs per se, although at Roxbury Prep, new hires can get assistance from Friday inquiry groups and through close contact with department heads and frequent observations by administrators. At MATCH, tutor support occurs as a by-product of their intense living accommodations and close supervision. Thus, the support for new teachers occurs at all of the schools, but the structure, formality, and intensity varies.

Teacher Attrition

The emphasis on teacher hiring and support highlights another issue shared by these five schools, as well as other charter and traditional public schools nationwide: the dilemma of teacher turnover. At the national level, statistics about new teachers suggest that 30 percent leave within three years and nearly 50 percent leave within five years (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Ingersoll, 2001, 2002, 2004; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Most charter schools, including these five, employ teachers on a yearly contract; their teachers are not granted tenure, which typically is given to traditional public school teachers after three years of successful employment. Thus, charter school leaders have the opportunity to consider every year whether to rehire a teacher. This year-to-year arrangement enables schools to reshuffle their staff without the restrictions often imposed by union contracts in traditional schools.

As figure 1 reveals, annual turnover rates at these five schools ranged between 8 percent and 30 percent from 2004 to 2007, with a high of 46 percent for MATCH’s 2005-06 school year.¹

Figure 8.1. Annual Teacher Attrition Rates in Years 2004-05, 2005-06, and 2006-07



The implications of these statistics are not clear. Lake (2007), in her recent comprehensive review of charters, states, “We also do not know whether charter school turnover rates are high compared to schools serving similar populations or, for that matter, whether high turnover rates are actually a problem for charter schools” (p. 5). However, as Miron and Applegate (2007) assert,

Such extensive attrition [of new teachers] cannot be characterized as desirable. High attrition consumes resources of schools that must regularly provide pre- and in-service training to new teachers; it impedes schools’ efforts to build professional learning communities and positive and stable school cultures; and it is likely to undermine the legitimacy of the schools in the eyes of parents. (p. 2)

For a general comparison, in the Boston Public Schools, the estimated three-year teacher attrition rate is around 47 percent (Birkeland & Curtis, 2006), while the national charter school attrition rates are “between 20 and 25 percent [each year]; for new teachers, however, the attrition rate is close to 40 percent annually” (Miron & Applegate, 2007, p. 2).

Whether a teacher voluntarily decides to leave a school or an administrator deliberately chooses not to renew a teacher’s contract, the literature shows that high teacher turnover can disrupt school cohesion and impair performance (Ingersoll, 2004). Clearly, attrition can cost a small, cohesive charter school dearly.

Although average turnover rates across the five study schools are relatively similar, these schools approach the issue of teacher turnover and retention differently. Administrators at Roxbury Prep and MATCH indicate that teacher turnover is not necessarily a problem they feel the need to remedy. One administrator at Roxbury Prep notes that even though they may wish that effective

teachers stayed longer, there is an expectation that some teachers will leave within a couple of years:

[Do I wish that] everyone who's good, everyone who came and it worked out and was very effective, stayed for five to seven years? Sure, the school would be stronger. But when I interview, I think about what's going to be best for kids next year. There are plenty of people that are on the hallway now that I interviewed that I didn't think, either for personal or professional reasons, would stay beyond a year or two. . . . Some of them . . . have just defied my expectation and are still here. And others were great for [the] kids for the year or two and then decided they wanted to go to grad school, and ultimately, it's a fine exchange.

Instead of worrying excessively about attrition, Roxbury Prep accommodates turnover with carefully documented and easily accessible curricula and veteran teachers placed in key positions.

MATCH also views turnover as a trade-off they are willing to make. They accept the fact that the talented, hard-working recent college graduates they hire may not be looking for a career-long job—longevity is exchanged for youthful energy. And when staff members begin getting married or having families, MATCH administrators acknowledge that balancing personal and professional demands can cause a teacher to leave: “We lose teachers every year, when teaching staff have children or they get married—especially when they have children, it seems to be really challenging trying to balance both here. But we lose a few teachers every year . . . this just isn't the environment for them.”

In contrast, the Academy of the Pacific Rim and Boston Collegiate seem to prioritize retention by actively working to keep teachers. An administrator at Boston Collegiate explains:

I think the perception is that charter school work is harder and that there's more asked of teachers. And there is. But I think that one of the things that we're interested in is finding a balance for our staff so that we can be sustainable and replicable. If you can't work here and also have a family and manage your life and grow in a career, we're failing as a school. If we're just turning people over who are young and allowing them to leave as soon as they get married and have families, that's not acceptable and that's not the school we want to be.

At the Academy of the Pacific Rim, the cost of a teacher's departure is felt throughout the school: “Culturally it's devastating for students when teachers leave [because] it's such a small school, it's such a close-knit community.” Even leaving after three years can be too soon in the opinion of one Boston Collegiate administrator: “We don't want to be cycling through teachers every three years. There is something lost in the school culture, in the quality of the curriculum, when you are constantly bringing in new teachers and losing old [ones].”

To address the retention issue, Boston Collegiate has established a Teacher Retention Committee that meets on a regular basis to discuss these concerns. Community Day, Boston Collegiate, and

the Academy of the Pacific Rim also use incentive programs, including financial bonuses and leave for graduate study. Academy of the Pacific Rim, for example, offers a performance-based pay system that gives a bonus of \$2,000 to \$4,000; a portion of this bonus reflects individual incentives linked to indicators like attendance and collaborative effort, as well as a schoolwide component tied to MCAS scores. As an administrator noted, “We try to reward high-quality teachers through our performance-based salaries.” Boston Collegiate ties financial incentives more explicitly to longevity. Teachers receive a \$1,000 bonus as they enter their third year, \$2,000 at the beginning of their fifth year, and \$3,000 every two years thereafter. The Community Day administration does not use financial bonuses, but they find other ways to encourage teachers to stay, like paying for a teacher to attend graduate school at night or allowing a teacher to take a sabbatical to explore personal interests. Furthermore, this school links its two-year mentoring program to retaining teachers, noting that “it hurts when you have them for a year, you get them up to speed [and] doing well for you, and then they go someplace else. . . . One year doesn’t do it. You still have to mentor and follow along and continue their growth.”

All of the sample schools, however, will dismiss a teacher if their performance is subpar: no matter how rigorous the hiring (and mentoring) process, sometimes the system fails and a recent hire proves inadequate. Indeed, as important as it is to have “the right people on the bus,” it is just as necessary to get “the wrong people off the bus” (Collins, 2005, p. 14). The decision to replace a teacher is not taken lightly, however, and, one Academy of the Pacific Rim administrator notes that “there’s due process,” even if not required by a union. Expressing a slightly different view, one of the Roxbury Prep codirectors comments,

All of our contracts are at will, and the organization as a whole is committed to making sure it’s working. And it doesn’t happen often, but there are times where we’ve just made the wrong hire. . . . You know, we do everything we can, but we aren’t shy about things if it isn’t working for us.

Some administrators indicate that they have become more comfortable with letting teachers go as their schools have matured. Boston Collegiate, for example, has “gotten stronger and more confident in who we are as the years have gone by, and better able to assess whether the shortcomings are critical enough that the person shouldn’t be at this school.” The motivation for action as drastic as firing is clear: “We’d sacrifice a teacher before a student if the students aren’t learning.”

Clearly, the practices of hiring, mentoring, induction, and firing are jointly involved in the goal of getting the best possible teachers in the classrooms with the children. All of the schools want to get the right people; however, important differences exist in the approaches taken by these five schools. MATCH and Roxbury Prep seem to have adopted a philosophy of hiring that prioritizes a perfect match between a potential hire and the school, an ideal teacher who, at the moment of hiring, meets all qualifications that promise success at that school. As a MATCH tutor describes, candidates “have to have the *exact same* goal and the *exact same* drive with students”—a level of exactitude that requires an intensive hiring process that is, according to one Roxbury Prep teacher, “pretty scary and pretty intense . . . and [which] showed me they weren’t just going to

take anyone off the street.” Therefore, these two schools have less need for a formal mentoring program, perhaps due to the candidates’ immediate ability to fit. Retention issues also receive less formal attention, as teacher turnover is tolerated. The other three schools—Community Day, Academy of the Pacific Rim, and Boston Collegiate—take a different strategy. Like the administrator at Boston Collegiate who emphasizes that they look for “great people, not great teachers,” these schools invest more resources into training teachers to become ideal teachers.

However, it is important to note that, regardless of which approach the schools take, their turnover rates are not that disparate, suggesting, perhaps, that differing philosophies can yield similar results. No matter how these schools approach getting the right people, the process involves a complicated mix of hiring, induction, mentoring, retention, and firing practices—practices executed deliberately for the purpose of ensuring that the school’s teaching ranks are filled with people who are willing, and able, to fulfill the school’s mission.

Students and Families

A good fit between the school and administrators and teachers is not all that matters at these schools; they also work hard to establish a good fit between the school, the students, and their families. These schools approach the processes of attracting and preparing students and families with the same deliberate consideration they give to teacher hiring practices and the development of teachers and leaders. This attention parallels the teacher hiring process, in that getting the right people is dependent on both the recruitment process that matches a family with a school and the development process that occurs once a family has been accepted. The application and lottery promote an initial fit between school and family, while school structures ensure a family’s continued cooperation and buy-in.

Just as with administrators and teachers, the power and influence of choice are important to families. Charter schools *are* schools of choice—all require that families choose to have their children attend. Bosetti (2001), for example, stresses the influence of this choice in her study of charter schools in Alberta, Canada:

Parents select schools which reflect their own values and meet the learning needs of their children. . . . [Charter schools’] mandates, explicitly defined in their charter, help to define the choices available to parents. . . . The ultimate goal of choice is to provide the best fit between the educational process and the needs of the learner (Boyer, 1994). With charter schools, parents . . . determine the best fit between educational programs and their children’s learning needs. (p. 102)

Similarly, Lubienski and Lubienski (2006), in a study using data from the National Assessment of Education Progress to assess traditional public, charter, and private school performance, comment on the power of parental choice:

In private and charter school sectors, parents are positioned to select a school based on academic quality, and to choose another if their school fails to meet expectations. . . . Additionally, private and charter school parents, through the act of choosing, demonstrate

a commitment to their children’s education—a characteristic that goes beyond typical SES [socioeconomic status] measures and is associated with higher student achievement. (p. 7)

If too many students choose the same school, administrators use a random lottery to select the incoming class. While by law this lottery procedure does not permit schools to handpick their students, the process promotes buy-in from parents and students, as parents must know about a charter school, decide to enter the lottery, complete the necessary paperwork, and then participate in the lottery process.

This level of choice can have academic returns. As a Community Day teacher explains, “So you have parents that are more interested, which research tells you [means] their kids are going to do better because parents are interested.” Indeed, this theory has a lot of research support. Several comprehensive studies document the positive influence of parental involvement on student achievement (Bauch & Goldring, 1995; Bryk, Lee, & Smith, 1990; Henderson & Berla, 1994). Parents who are “active choosers” deliberately select a school based on its reputation and mission and a perceived set of shared values; this choice represents a commitment to these beliefs, a commitment that engenders greater participation and, so the theory goes, heightened student achievement.

For charter schools, then, it is crucial that potential students and families are aware of the school’s mission, for this knowledge begins a positive cycle of commitment, participation, and achievement. A Roxbury Prep administrator explains:

The kids who have the most success here are not the kids who had the best grades [before coming here]. The kids who are most successful are the kids for whom the families, the teachers, and the administration are all working together and doing whatever it takes. . . . If the kid doesn’t buy in and the family doesn’t buy in, then it usually doesn’t happen.

An administrator at Community Day corroborates the importance of parental investment: “It’s about parent buy-in, because if a parent is going through the time and the effort to fill out the application, to meet due dates, they know about us. . . . They have bought in.”

Word of mouth and public announcements broadcast a school’s mission, and all of our schools publicize in a number of venues, including newspapers, local middle schools, and well-trafficked community sites. At this initial stage, a school’s reputation can also go a long way to ensure that the families applying to the school are aware and supportive of the school’s mission. Boston Collegiate, for example, has a strong reputation as a college-preparatory school, so families hoping to send their children to college may be more likely to enter that lottery. In fact, Boston Collegiate even changed its name to communicate their college focus more clearly. And it has worked: a recent parent survey confirmed that the school’s college-preparatory focus is one of the leading reasons why parents choose Boston Collegiate.

Achieving Family and Student Buy-In

Once the euphoria of “winning the lottery” has passed, the shared responsibilities of schools and parents begin in earnest: ongoing family support is critical to the operation of these schools. In many cases, parents and guardians will be responsible for transporting a student to and from school, often at very early or very late hours; for ensuring that lengthy homework assignments are completed and done well; for attending conferences and school events and engaging in consistent communication with teachers. Indeed, some of our schools view the relationship with parents as a crucial partnership. MATCH describes a relationship “tripod,” in which teachers, parents, and tutors jointly support a student. These tutors, as an administrator notes,

make our kids’ ties to the school stronger by building a relationship with them and pushing them. And also they’re the bridge to our parents. . . . They need to call [the parents] once a week, minimum. And they’re the ones who have the relationships with the parents and the kids. . . . They’re like little bridge-makers, really. The ways in which their work connects each student in the school to a caring adult are as critical as the academic content support.

At Community Day, the relationship between parent and teacher is strongly emphasized. A parent describes the relationship: “It’s a partnership [in which] the teachers have made a commitment and the parents have made a commitment. . . . It’s really a partnership [in which] they made a commitment towards the children, and the parents have made a commitment towards the teachers.” This mutual and explicit commitment to other stakeholders ensures accountability, as each is willing and able to enact their responsibilities on behalf of the students’ education.

Schools use a number of mechanisms to ensure parental cooperation. Starting with extensive and frequent communication between home and school in the form of routine phone calls, the reach of the school into the home is extended through regular newsletters, emails from teachers, and clearly communicated learning goals.

Some schools use even more explicit strategies to get families to participate from the moment of entry, including providing detailed family information sessions, holding interviews with prospective parents, and using contracts that outline parental responsibilities: As a Roxbury Prep administrator notes, “You may agree or disagree with the way that we do things, but we’re going to be really clear about it and that just is who we are.” Community Day administrators interview incoming families before accepting students in order to communicate their expectations of parents’ commitment to the school. One administrator explains:

I’ll actually do an interview with the parent and the student as we’re looking . . . at the top five in the lottery. And [we] talk to them about expectations, saying, “We expect [that] . . . you’ll partner with us. You’re here and you come in, you attend meetings. If you can, you come to one PAB [Parent Advisory Board meeting]. If you can, participate in a field trip.” We want parents to be able to be involved, and we try to educate them on ways that they can be involved.

Thus, when students finally enter Community Day, their families are well versed in their responsibilities. Boston Collegiate is currently entertaining the idea of conducting small group sessions with an administrator and a few parents and students who have been accepted in order to introduce families to the school, its culture, and its basic expectations. These kinds of policies may, in fact, serve a dual purpose: they provide information for parents and students and also set a norm of involvement.

Roxbury Prep, Boston Collegiate, MATCH, and the Academy of the Pacific Rim all have family contracts that specify the particular actions a family must take to uphold its responsibilities. For example, Boston Collegiate uses a “Family Accountability Contract” that families must sign to secure enrollment. The contract reads:

This Family Accountability Contract describes important responsibilities and school expectations that families accept once they choose to enroll at this school. . . . We know that the choice you made in coming here is a precious one and we want to make sure that you have a full and clear understanding of your responsibilities.

While Community Day does not have a formal contract describing a family’s obligations to support the school’s mission, each report card describes a student’s personal education goals (PEGs), which are based on a student’s target test score for the year. The PEG lists the steps the teacher, student, and parents will take to ensure that these goals are fulfilled, and the document is signed by the teacher, student, and parents as an indication of their commitment to these steps.

The schools also deliberately work to ensure that students fit the school, using summer orientation sessions and student handbooks to introduce students to school norms and policies. During the five-week MATCH Summer Academy, students attend a “culture class” to learn the school’s Code of Conduct and the expectations of the school. The MATCH Code of Conduct is explicit:

MATCH may not be the right fit for every student. No school is perfect for each individual. We are a “choice” school: parents and students choose to enter our lottery, and for that we are humbled and grateful. To honor our commitment to provide an environment where all students can and will learn, continued or serious misbehavior by a student means that MATCH is not the right fit for that particular student.

Should a student miss more than two days of Summer Academy or fail to meet MATCH’s behavioral or academic expectations, the student will be replaced with the next student on the waiting list. MATCH, then, is very clear that fit requires work and commitment on the part of students and families, and they only want those students who are “the right fit.”

Finally, it is also important to note that, just as these students and families buy-in to these schools and their missions, they also have the option of “buying-out,” that is, of transferring to their regularly assigned public school. It’s a take-it-or-leave-it situation: students and families are “active choosers,” but buy-in is required. Whether this buy-in is developed through clear

communication and family-school relationships or mandated by contracts and consequences, the buying-out option helps to ensure that only the most committed families and students remain.

Lessons for Replication

As mission-driven schools filled with students and teachers who choose to attend and work in them, these five charter schools take advantage of choice in a way that many traditional schools cannot. District personnel agreements, student assignment policies, and staff tenure practices can often limit the flexibility of regular public schools. However, there are some lessons from these five charters that even traditional schools operating under these constraints can adopt.

Take hiring, for example. Traditional schools could address an often limited hiring pool by making their application procedures more efficient and effective, thereby enabling more candidates to apply and be reviewed. Schools could also broaden their hiring criteria to focus on finding “great people,” again expanding the pool. Furthermore, during the hiring process, other staff members should be involved to provide input and feedback, and making the mission of the school explicit to candidates should be a priority.

Many traditional schools already employ mentoring programs for new teachers, and these programs could be expanded to focus simultaneously on the development of homegrown leaders. By purposefully placing long-serving teachers in these mentoring relationships, new teachers would learn the school’s philosophies and practices from veterans well versed in its culture, and some of these veteran teachers may eventually aspire to other leadership positions. Such purposeful placements would establish a means to develop internal leadership—a practice crucial to effective schools. Traditional schools could also work to develop other leadership skills, skills cultivated by communication with community stakeholders or by the creation and execution of professional development programs. Broadening and expanding the teachers’ roles to include leadership responsibilities can be a powerful force for creating a strong, engaged faculty. Then, as leadership positions open, there may be a number of potential internal hires with extensive school knowledge.

Finally, even within traditional districts, schools could develop and manage a reputation built on their mission. This reputation could attract potential students from across the district in areas where crossing enrollment zones is permitted. Schools could promote buy-in among incoming students and families through explicit information sessions, during which schools and families would enter into voluntary partnerships to support the education of students. Consistent home-school communication should accompany such agreements so that all stakeholders can be aware of and fulfill their responsibilities.

Conclusion

It is a simple principle—the success of an organization depends on the people within that organization—and these five charter schools deliberately and carefully manage the process of getting the right people. Each school has its own distinct approach, a unique mixture of screening, hiring, developing, and letting go, and while the processes are not all the same, they

share the same goal: ensuring that they have the most dedicated and informed leaders, teachers, students, and families. A good match between student and school, between family and educational program, helps make charter schools a viable educational opportunity for those who choose them. “It takes a certain person,” and these schools are deliberate in their quest to find these people.

Notes: Chapter 8

1. When asked to explain the spike in teacher attrition at MATCH in 2005–06, the founder stated that it “was just random chance. One had her husband relocate and followed him there. One became a full-time mom and has not worked since. One followed the ‘Teach For America’ profile of three years with TFA, then three years with a charter, then try something new, and so on.”

This document is part of a larger research document, *Purpose, People, and Planning: Inside Five High-Performing Urban Charter Schools* by Katherine K. Merseth, with Kristy Cooper, John Roberts, Mara Casey Tieken, Jon Valant, and Chris Wynne.

The content of this document was developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, CFDA #84.282N, Award #U282N060005. The content does not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and endorsement by the Federal government should not be assumed.