

THE 232-POINT INSPECTION: EXAMINING CHARTER SCHOOL QUALITY IN MICHIGAN

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Introduction

All engines require inspection and maintenance. Whether the engine is powering a vehicle or driving change, it is essential to periodically examine its performance and efficiency.

In the case of an automobile, it is not difficult to determine how well an engine is functioning. A mechanic can simply hook up the car to a computer and run a number of automated tests that scan for problems and provide immediate, quantifiable results.

It is less straightforward, but no less critical, that we do the same work for Michigan's charter public schools. After more than a decade in operation, we need to pull over and get out from behind the wheel. We must take an objective look at what's working, what needs to be fixed, and how we can assure Michigan taxpayers that this particular engine of school reform is ready to take us to the next level.

If you think of each of Michigan's 232 charter schools as the equivalent of a vehicle inspection point, we have all the information we need to keep this sector of public education in good running condition. Each of the schools currently in operation tells its own story and offers a unique vantage point to help us see what's needed to keep the whole system functioning smoothly. We need to connect with each of these points and pull all of the learning and data together to form a complete diagnostic picture.

Finding the Right Mechanic

As with any scheduled maintenance, it is important to begin with the right "mechanic"—someone who understands the engine, knows how to quickly and accurately identify common problems, and can implement cost-effective solutions. In the case of Michigan's charter school sector, it is natural to look to the authorizing community as a highly qualified supplier of necessary tools, resources, and expertise. This community is able to provide both high-level analysis, as well as on-the-ground recommendations for ensuring charter school quality on an individual and collective basis.

Let's spend a moment on this point in particular. As a profession, charter school authorizing is still relatively new and little understood. Some might think that providing high-quality oversight of charter public schools requires nothing more than a pencil and clipboard, but this is simply not the case. Nor does effective school authorizing occur when it is only a sideline institutional activity; rather, it requires the application of a wide array of professional disciplines (e.g., educational delivery, non-profit management, governmental leadership, and business operations). These disciplines must be balanced and carefully woven together in a manner that will ultimately foster and support each school's complete success. An effective authorizer actually serves as a knowledge/research center, management consultant, trainer and advisor, data analyst, and much more.

Charter public schools welcomed nearly 100,000 students across the state in the fall of 2006. In fact, many schools had more applicants than space, forcing hundreds of families—maybe more—onto waiting lists.

The wealth of experience accumulated by the Michigan authorizing community is of great value in conducting a comprehensive assessment of charter school quality. When it comes to selecting a mechanic, the choice seems clear.

Popping the Hood

Taking a cursory glance at Michigan's charter school sector, the strength of this particular engine is immediately evident. Charter public schools welcomed more than 100,000 students across the state in the fall of 2006. In fact, many schools had more applicants than space, forcing hundreds of families—maybe more—onto waiting lists. This continuing demand indicates that more students and families are accepting charter schools as viable alternatives to the conventional districts.

The existence of the charter alternative has also made a difference in the conventional K-12 community: studies have shown that schools across the state have responded to competition by improving the quality of their programs—something we've known for some time. For example, according to a 2001 study by Harvard professor Caroline Hoxby, Michigan's charter school law has accomplished significant change among traditional education systems:

Achievement improved in Michigan public schools faced with significant competition. Their scores climbed by 2.4 scale points more per year in 4th grade reading and 2.5 scale points more per year in 4th grade math (4th grade is the only elementary grade in which Michigan administers a state-wide test). These improvements are

above and beyond their achievement trends before they were subject to charter competition. Moreover, they are above and beyond the improvements made during the same period in public schools that did not factor charter competition. Just to give a sense of the magnitude of these improvements, one can compare Detroit (a district that did face competition) with one of its most affluent suburbs, Grosse Pointe (a district that did not face competition). If Detroit were to maintain its faster rate of improvement, it would close the achievement gap between its students and Grosse Pointe's students in just under two decades.

In addition, a 2001 study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education found that charter competition compelled conventional K-12 public schools to become more customer service oriented and/or implement new or improved educational programs.

These results echoed earlier results reported in 1999 by researchers from Western Michigan University, who found that conventional public schools in Michigan were responding to competition from charters by offering new programs, improving communications with parents, and placing greater emphasis on test scores. A Mackinac Center for Public Policy report issued in August 2000 observed that "school districts that respond to the needs and demands of students and parents will improve and thrive in a competitive environment, depending on the attitude and approach of school leaders."

Many schools have responded by initiating site-based management programs that allow school leaders to address student/family needs more immediately and effectively.

According to a 2000 study by Michael Mintrom:

The ripple effect shows up more clearly in the use of site-based management. While this is most prevalent among charters, a fair number of principals in urban schools reported its use. More importantly, in more than two-thirds of the cases, the principals of these schools said site-based management had been adopted after 1994, the year charters began to emerge in Michigan.

Ripple effects also show up in efforts to promote a family-like environment in the school, and in efforts to involve students in school decision-making and planning. In both cases, more than 40% of the urban principals reported adoption of these practices after 1994.

Clearly, the introduction of competition into the educational marketplace is having an impact on the way all schools do business, with the end result being that service to students and families improves. From a policy perspective, this is strong justification for the expansion of charter schools and other innovations that lead to parental choice.

We recognize, however, it is simply not enough to increase the number of charter public schools operating in Michigan.

First, we must work to ensure that the charter school sector does not simply mirror and re-create the existing K-12 system, but that it continues to provide important alternatives for schoolchildren everywhere.

Second, it is important to elevate school quality among charters, both for the students they serve directly *and* for the K-12 system as a whole. In other words, it is a matter not of overhauling the

engine, but of carefully refining its current performance.

With this central objective in mind, we recommend a few key policy recommendations relative to the Michigan charter school sector.

Create alternative sources of fuel: Reform teacher certification

Some observers have indicated that charter public schools have failed to provide educational opportunities that are innovative or different from the existing K-12 system.

In response to this argument, we say that it is difficult to achieve outcomes that are substantially different—or even marginally different—if the inputs remain the same. Thus, charter schools are ready to develop and use alternative sources of talent to ensure that teachers, staff members, and administrators with diverse educational philosophies and innovative instructional strategies can be brought into the classroom.

Why do we see this as a critical strategy for further improving charter schools? In his book *The Schools We Need*, prominent educational author and scholar E.D. Hirsch observes that, for more than 70 years, teacher preparation programs have been based on pedagogical strategies that are grounded in worldview assumptions not consistent with some views of teaching and learning.

We realize, of course, that not everyone agrees with Dr. Hirsch. However, we think an important part of the innovation promised through charter schools is realized in giving communities greater latitude to establish and develop alternative teacher preparation programs.

In order to achieve this kind of change, alternative pathways to teacher certification are needed. These alternatives will result in intellectual diversity and innovation in public education for charter—and conventional—public schools alike.

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Nationally, some charter public schools have taken the lead in designing and implementing solutions to the problem of teacher preparation. In San Diego, California, one of the nation's leading charter schools has established its own teacher credentialing system on campus. High Tech High now operates a single-subject teacher intern program that allows qualified candidates to begin teaching on campus immediately, while receiving the training, mentoring, and instruction they need to become fully qualified teachers at the end of a two-year period. To participate in the program, candidates must demonstrate their subject matter competency and be ready to hit the ground running. Once there, they gain practical experience and lasting knowledge that ensures their lasting value to the students and families they serve.

In Michigan, alternative certification procedures are worth exploring more thoroughly, particularly in charter schools that show promise of exceptional quality. We recommend considering site-based programs, similar to those implemented at High Tech High, that allow qualified individuals to enter the classroom immediately and achieve full certification through a combination of coursework and structured mentoring opportunities.

Re-engineer outdated models when necessary: Develop new methods of school and student assessment

Assessing school performance is a function that is both complex and politically charged. In today's educational marketplace, the results of student assessments help inform policymakers, communities, and families, and they can even determine the ultimate success or failure of an individual school.

On a large scale, there are two basic ways of assessing student progress in school. The first model is known as an achievement model, and it provides a snapshot of the results achieved by a particular group of students on a specific test on a given day.

But what do such assessments actually tell us? Not as much as we would like.

Achievement tests show one-time measurements in an absolute value sense. This allows for comparisons among school districts, but fails to account for important variables, such as prior learning, low socioeconomic background, and other important correlates of learning.

A second model of assessment, however, measures student growth. This methodology compares test scores at the beginning and end of the school year to determine how much learning the student gained between tests. In a statistical sense, the student becomes his or her own control, thereby eliminating the effects of known and unknown variables that researchers call "noise." Because this type of assessment measures annual gains, it is called "value added."

Value-added assessments measure growth by benchmarking the student's starting achievement level. Implemented effectively, teachers and administrators use the value-added model to predict the amount of progress a student is likely to make during a given time period (for example, a school year), based on his or her individual gains from previous grades. Once the time period has concluded, teachers could then determine how well the student did relative to expectations.

This methodology is powerful, in that it can be used on a collective basis to analyze overall school performance *and* on an individual basis to discern the unique needs of specific pupils.

In addition to what value-added assessment can tell us about individual student performance, a major advantage is that it recognizes the achievements of schools that enroll larger numbers of disadvantaged pupils who make great gains, even though their absolute test scores may not reflect this success.

We believe charter *and* conventional public schools across Michigan should adopt value-added assessment models to ensure that we are asking the proper questions about school quality and can more accurately and effectively evaluate the answers.

Switch from "visual inspection" to computer diagnostics: Let objective data drive decision-making

It is essential that Michigan's charter schools develop better ways of gathering, using, and presenting data, both internally and externally.

The best 232-point inspection will occur when more useful, accurate, and objective data are available.

Some Michigan authorizers have developed sophisticated systems for tracking data regarding student achievement and compliance, as well as data about financial and operational areas. The Center for Charter Schools at Central Michigan University, for example, developed such a software system used by authorizers around the country. Another example can be observed at Grand Valley State University, where charter school officials can access a data portal that allows them to see, at a glance, how their school is doing relative to the standards established by law and in their charter contracts, as well as how they compare with other GVSU authorized schools. Clear, objective results like these help foster better decision-making at the school level and allow for clearer accountability and oversight for all.

This kind of efficiency depends on quality information systems. Expanding the number of these systems will help ensure that charter school officials and authorizers have the data they need to drive outstanding performance.

Schools and authorizers must also have a clear commitment to using these data to make decisions that will improve quality and foster lasting change across the state. It is not enough to make pretty graphs: Accurate, timely information is not simply a depiction of last year's results—as with Michigan's current system of statewide assessment—it is a motivating force that can be harnessed to drive real time improvements in schools.

In addition to what value-added assessment can tell us about individual student performance, a major advantage is that it recognizes the achievements of schools that start out with higher numbers of disadvantaged pupils who make great gains, even though their absolute test scores may not reflect this success.

While these situations are never easy, past experience has shown that it is better to dissolve the school rather than allow students to continue languishing in what amounts to a third-rate educational experience.

Junk the lemons: Close schools that do not deliver on their performance goals

In a few instances, both anecdotal evidence and data from formal assessments reveal a particular school simply not hitting the mark. While these situations are never easy, past experience has shown that it is better to dissolve the school rather than allow students to continue languishing in what amounts to a third-rate educational experience.

Michigan's authorizers have valuable experience with school closures. To date, they've closed approximately two dozen charter schools due the school's failure to meet expectations regarding financial, management, or academic performance. In every instance where such failures have occurred, despite some negative reporting in the press, the school's authorizer made a strong case that the school failed its obligations to the public.

Dissolving a school is a bold step and never undertaken lightly. Authorizers work hard to avoid closing a school, but in the end, if it is unavoidable, they prepare the community, provide information and resources to parents, and dissolve the institution as smoothly as possible. While effecting a closure is difficult for everyone involved, the truth is that eliminating poor-performing schools clears the way for high-performing ones. In the end, it is children who benefit.

Of all the contributions made by the charter community to date, this particular type of work is perhaps the most significant. Where quality is concerned, there is no

more powerful outcome than simple school closure. The reason this is the case is that no conventional K-12 public school in Michigan was ever closed for poor performance or mismanagement, despite evidence indicating that some should. In this respect, charter authorizers have incubated a best practice and will continue to develop it.

Support performance on and off the track: Reward quality schools

For some time, Michigan charter advocates have proposed removing the artificial restraint limiting the number of charter schools. Why consider this issue again?

Changing state law to allow more charter schools would create an incentive for strong performance by individual charter schools and authorizers. For example, if a particular charter school achieves a certain level of progress according to a value-added assessment model, it could essentially "earn its way out" from under the statutory limitation, freeing up another spot for an additional charter program to be piloted.

This reward could be even more effective if it were also coupled with other policy changes. For example, the Legislature could grant some freedom from regulation for the entire K-12 community of Michigan public schools. Under this proposal, any school that met certain performance standards could ask for, and receive, regulation waivers from the Michigan Department of Education and/or its authorizer, if applicable.

Charter and conventional public schools alike could benefit under such a plan, if implemented effectively.

These and other non-monetary incentives for rewarding high-performing schools merit consideration to help boost quality across the board.

Driving It Home

Charter public schools are adding a new dimension to public education in Michigan and, as such, they merit regular inspection and maintenance. The ideas presented here should help frame a discussion of the possibilities surrounding charter school quality, both from the perspective of necessary inputs and, of course, end results.

We hope this monograph leads to a more thorough review of barriers to, and support of, charter school quality, and we look forward to participating in an ongoing public dialogue on this important issue.



About the Author

Stephanie Van Koevering serves as founding executive director of the Michigan Council of Charter School Authorizers. She has extensive experience in Michigan's charter school community, having served as a charter school board president and professional writer, researcher and advisor to organizations working to advance charter schools in Michigan, as well as nationally.



Prior to joining the Council in May 2006, Ms. Van Koevering served as an independent consultant working with an array of clients, including many of Michigan's major charter school organizations and interests. In this capacity, she offered public relations support and assistance with key programs and initiatives. Previously, Ms. Van Koevering spent four years with the Michigan Department of Treasury, where she assisted in the management of Treasury-related issues and provided policy and research support to the Treasurer in his role as Special Education Policy Advisor to Governor John Engler.

Before joining Treasury, Ms. Van Koevering was an investment banking associate with First of America Securities, Inc. She also has served as a communications specialist for the Michigan House of Representatives. Ms. Van Koevering holds a B.A. from Hope College in Holland, Michigan.

For more information on Michigan authorizers, and the profession of charter school authorizing, we invite you to visit the following websites:

www.mccsa.us

www.charterauthorizers.org

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