

# **Triangular Relationship:** Charter Schools, Institutional Partners, and Boards of Trustees

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Charter schools' boards of trustees are the legal guardians of the charter school.

We use the term “institutional partner” (IP) to refer to the non-profit organizations, education management companies, and foundations that have linked with charter schools.

# Methodology

- Three-year qualitative study of charter schools in New York City, began in the 1999-2000 school year.
- Over these three years, our sample has consisted of twelve schools; six new charter schools, four conversion charter schools, and two start-up alternative public schools.
- Data drawn from monthly interviews with administrators and teachers, interviews with institutional partners, and attendance at planning committees, boards of trustees meetings, and school-related events.
- Six out of the twelve charter schools in our sample were partnered with non-profit or for-profit institutional partners.
- This presentation will focus on the four schools in our sample that were partnered with non-profit organizations.

# Quick facts about charter schools in New York

- Legislation was passed in December, 1998;
- Legislation allows for up to one hundred new charter schools and the conversion of an unlimited number of public schools to charter status;
- Charter schools receive less per pupil funding than traditional public schools;
- Of the 32 charter schools operating in New York State in October 2002, 26 joined with institutional partners. In New York City, 13 of the 17 operating charter schools joined with an institutional partner.

# Services provided by IPs

## *Money*

- Donated their own money to the schools.
- Raised additional private and public money for the school.
- Coordinated fund development activities.
- Involved in financial decision-making.

## *Facilities*

- Located and secured facilities.
- Acquired collateral.
- Coordinated fund raising for facilities.
- Provided financial and administrative support for leasing and renovation.

# Services provided by IPs

## *Operational Services*

- Assisted with applications.
- Helped schools comply with audits and reporting requirements to authorizers.
- Worked with authorizers during monitoring visits.
- Assumed managerial and business tasks, such as budgeting, payroll, and insurance.

## *Pedagogical services*

- Provided the educational philosophy on which the school was based.
- Made curriculum decisions.
- Arranged professional development for teachers.
- Hired private consultants for special education, psychological, and other student support services.

# Relationship between schools and IPs

- In 3 schools, the chair of the BOT was also a key official in the IP, in the fourth school, the IP approved the chair.
- IP's representatives compromised at least 30% of the BOT.
- There were no written contracts stating the provision of services by the IP, nor what the school should expect to give in return.
- Core operational and instructional school staff were employees of - and were housed at - the IP, not the school.

# **Autonomy: school-level authority and control**

- The dual authority structure of a board of trustees and an IP placed formal and informal limits on school administrators' authority and school-level decision-making.
- The school administrator was a voting member in just 1 school, and was an ex officio BOT member in 3 of our sample schools.
- Issues of control and autonomy were most salient in instances where institutional partners had different priorities than school administrators, and where there was no clear route to reconciling differences.

# Relationships between schools and their teaching staff

- Teachers were grateful for resources the institutional partner provided.
- Suspicious that decisions affecting their work were being made outside of the school.
- Frustrated by administrators' inability to make policy decisions, particularly regarding work hours, salary scale, and teacher placement.
- Ambiguous reporting structure. "It's unclear who we (teachers) work for. Do we work for the school or the [institutional partner]?"

# **Relationships between schools and parents**

- Disconnect between the school's educational philosophy and parents' expectations.
- Generally, schools responded by conceding to some requests, specifically those that would not fundamentally alter the nature of the school.

# Conclusion

- The reality of financing and managing a school has driven New York's charter schools to seek institutional partners to meet their fiscal, operational, and instructional needs.
- Ambiguous boundaries between the school, the IP, and the BOT can limit decision-making at the school level and complicate a school's relationships with teachers and parents.
- Creating transparent decision-making and authority structures can help alleviate tensions.