

# OPPORTUNITIES FOR INNOVATION IN INDIANAPOLIS MAYOR-SPONSORED CHARTER SCHOOLS

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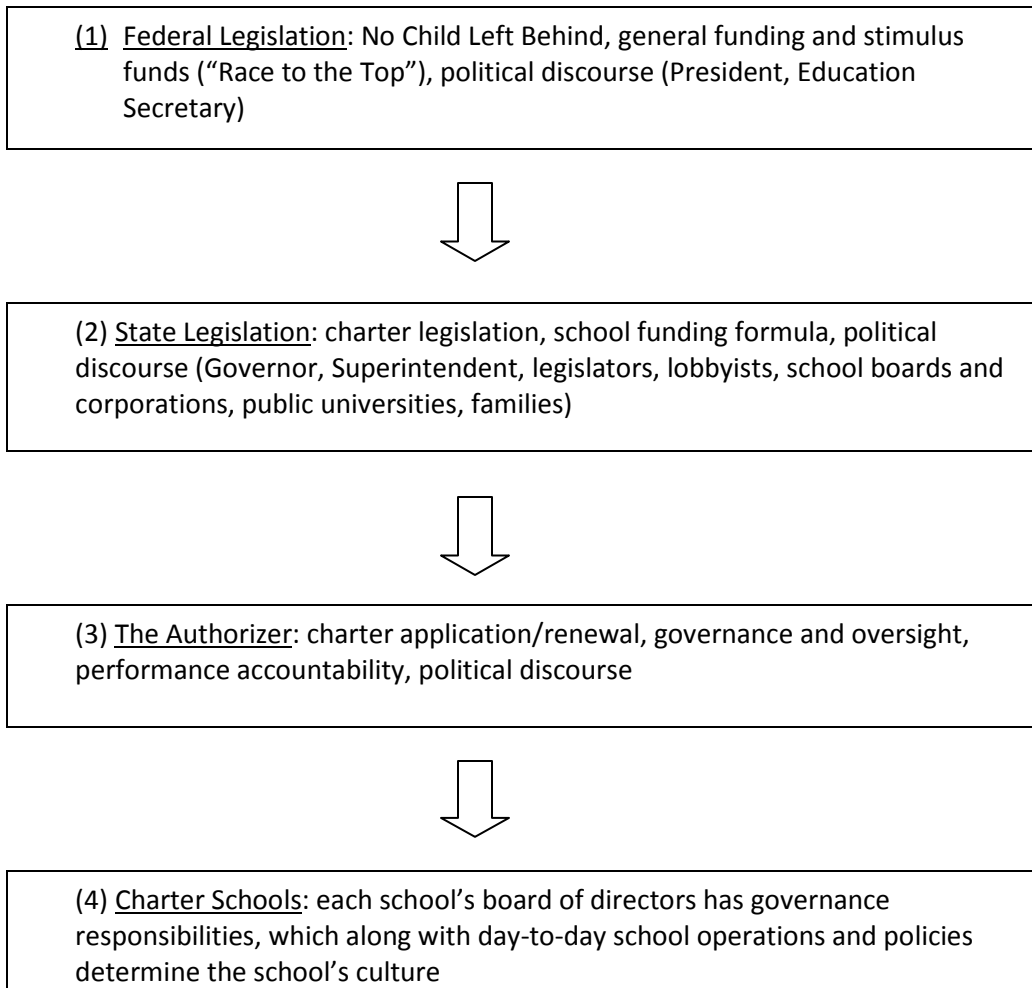
Introduction

In the State of Indiana, the explicit purpose of charter schools is “to provide innovative and autonomous programs” (Ind. Code §20-24-2-1). The expectation is that, as innovative entities, charter schools will construct a school culture conducive to student academic success. A number of elements, both internal and external, contribute to the culture of a school, and this paper will begin by exploring the external context in which the Indianapolis Mayor-sponsored charter schools operate and then shift to focus on how innovations in school organization and classroom practices contribute to the culture within these schools. The findings section of this paper will draw upon observational data collected from site visits conducted throughout the 2008-2009 school year at 13 out of 17 Indianapolis Mayor-sponsored charter schools. These observations focused on ascertaining data relevant the performance framework upon which all of the schools in the initiative are evaluated. Qualitative survey data, including the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE) from 7 out of the 8 high schools and staff and parent satisfaction surveys from 16 out of the 17 schools will also be used. This paper will conclude with a discussion of the survey findings and how these findings relate to the literature about charter schools.

Characteristics of the Mayor-Sponsored Charter Schools

In the Indianapolis Mayor-sponsored Charter Schools Initiative, charter schools are authorized by the Indianapolis Mayor, who was given authority through the Indiana State Legislature, which designed laws within a federal framework.

**Figure 1:** The External Context for Mayor-Sponsored Indianapolis Charter Schools



At the federal level, the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2001) has set standards for accountability that are based upon the performance of students on standardized tests; however, there is an increasing awareness that this type of accountability may be too restricted (Cohen, Pickeral, & McCloskey, 2009). The rhetoric of the federal government is now focused on innovation as the answer to addressing low-performing public schools. Although historically the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) has given significant autonomy to the individual states to enact charter school legislation, the current federal administration has underlined expanded policy proposals that are supported by billions of dollars designated for states and organizations that promise reform and innovation. One such proposal is the Title 1 section 1003g reforms. Among other initiatives, these reforms target closing failing public schools and reopening them as charter schools. The USDOE has emphasized that states should not overlook or

exclude charter schools if they want to be eligible for grants from the \$4.35 billion in Race to the Top funds (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

In an effort to receive stimulus dollars, Indiana has avoided adding new restrictions as well as lifting some of the existing restrictions on charter schools. Until recently, some Indiana legislators considered and supported changes to charter law that would put a moratorium on existing charters limiting their growth and capping the number of charters in operation (Proposed House Bill No. 1015, 2009). The funding formula used to calculate state grants for schools originally penalized growing schools and corporations while stimulating those schools and districts where the student population was in decline. Had it passed, the bill would have effectively closed many charter schools. However, after considering various factors, lawmakers created a state budget that supports charter schools. The legislation (House Enrolled Act No. 1001 2009) removed language about limiting the number of charter schools and their enrollment, provided funding for growing charter schools, created a virtual charter school pilot program, and offered access to federal grants for which charter schools previously did not qualify. Additionally, debt relief for initial start-up costs was provided.

In addition, both the Governor and State Superintendent of Public Instruction support charter schools. The Indiana Legislature is relatively divided with House and Senate Republicans strongly supporting charters, while House and Senate Democrats are divided. Democratic leadership within both assemblies remains strongly opposed to charters, as do many other stakeholders within the traditional public school system including some school boards and large (urban) school districts. Those opposed to charter schools want to see funding directed towards traditional public schools, while charter proponents want an equitable opportunity to serve a growing demand.

In the State of Indiana, the Indianapolis Mayor's Office is one of four authorizers (Ind. Code §20-24-3-15). Authorizers have a large degree of discretion regarding how charter schools are managed. It is the responsibility of the authorizer to define application requirements and accountability measures as well as to decide the role it will play in providing support, coordination, and resources. The Mayor's Office provides oversight of the efforts of charter schools without dictating how the charter school should be run on a day-to-day basis. Besides granting a charter, the Mayor's Office provides informational resources as they relate to compliance with state laws, the Mayor's Office's own rules, and opportunities for federal and state programs, but it does not directly provide resources or space to charter schools. The Mayor's Office also does advocacy work for the charter schools as needed.

During the 2008-2009 school year, there were seventeen schools within the network of the Indianapolis Mayor-sponsored Charter School Initiative. These schools are highly diverse, each with its own structure and mission. However, one characteristic that differentiates these schools in particular is whether the school is affiliated with a national curriculum model or not. There has been much discourse at the state and federal level related to the promise of replicating successful models in struggling schools. This discourse has gone so far as to suggest that struggling traditional schools should be replaced with privately managed companies that have demonstrated success in reforming schools. In fact, this is already happening in school corporations in various parts of the country. In the Indianapolis Mayor-sponsored Charter School Initiative, there is a balance between charter schools with locally developed curriculum that are not part of a national/regional model, and charter schools that are iterations of national models applied to the local setting. Of the current schools in the initiative, eight are associated with national educational management organizations.

There are a number of benefits to a national partnership including financial backing, pre-packaged curricula, administrative structures, culture guides, and many other parts of the school system that do not require a local agency to fully develop. With these pre-existing structures, these schools are able to develop stability relatively quickly, particularly when compared to schools without this connection. Yet, use of a national, set curriculum in schools in the local context can be challenging. The assumption that because a model has been successful in one setting, it can be equally applied in a range of settings is problematic. This approach ignores that communities, schools, and classrooms are socially dynamic places that require effective differentiation in order for the model to work. For example, it is possible for a national curriculum to fail to address Indiana state standards, leading student performance to suffer on the state standardized tests.

Charter schools that are developed locally are typically created by people who have a stake in the local community and are attentive to local needs, concerns, and opportunities. While the initial start-up for this type of charter can be extremely difficult financially, academically, and in terms of governance, locally run charter schools benefit from the freedom to innovate due to the lack of pre-existing structures.

### Innovation and the Culture of Charter Schools

While many different factors may play a role in improving educational outcomes, school culture is believed to have a direct impact on student achievement. This concept of school culture, also sometimes referred to as school climate, “is based on people’s experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures” (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009, p. 182). Insofar as charter schools benefit from increased autonomy and exist as innovative entities relative to the status quo, they may have the opportunity to create unique school cultures that foster distinctive conditions for student success.

As improving student achievement is a core goal of charter schools, adopting innovative, research-based instructional practices can be an effective method for ensuring that classroom practices support student achievement. As Harris notes, “if classrooms are to improve, then it requires teachers to have a better understanding of how learning and teaching can be most effective” (Harris, 2002, p. 81). While little research exists on the specific educational practices in charter schools, to the extent that charter school teachers are able to employ a wide range of instructional strategies, including cooperative learning, flexible grouping, and differentiated instruction, charter schools are likely to foster a school climate that is focused on individual student success. Furthermore, the small size of most charter schools may also help cultivate a school culture in which students are valued as individuals and receive instruction tailored to their individual needs and strengths.

In addition, charter schools have the opportunity to foster a school culture in which teachers feel they are valued as a part of a strong professional learning community. Research suggests that teacher professional development can directly contribute to an improved learning environment for students (Harris, 2002). Moreover, the innovative organizational structures frequently found in charter schools could potentially help promote an open school culture in which communication and collaboration between teachers, administrators, and other staff are emphasized and respected. A “positive and sustained” school climate not only has the potential to enable student success and development but also increases teacher retention, which in turn also contributes to student success (Cohen, Pickeral, & McCloskey, 2009).

Furthermore, because many charter schools essentially start from scratch, the founders are able to examine the current state of education and, from there, determine which voids their school will try to

fill. The mission of charter schools is particularly important since it serves as a road map for the development of the school. As innovative institutions, charter schools are in the unique position to create conditions for success in regards to school organization, teaching and learning, classroom management, and student support.

### Methodology

In spring 2009, high school students in seven of the Indianapolis Mayor-sponsored charter schools completed the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE), which asks students to respond to a range of questions related to their high school experience, including work, feelings, beliefs, and interactions with teachers and other students. Responses measure the level of student engagement along three dimensions: cognitive/intellectual/academic; social/behavior/participatory; and emotional. Out of a total of 894 charter high school students, 715 completed the HSSSE survey. These responses from students in the Indianapolis Mayor-sponsored charter schools were compared with all of the responses of students attending non-charter schools who took HSSSE, in order to provide a picture of how charter schools are performing in regards to fostering student engagement. The specific findings of the HSSSE Survey and what these findings suggest about how the Indianapolis Mayor-sponsored charter schools create conditions for student success through curricular practices, pedagogy, and preparation for post-secondary education are discussed below.

Parent and staff satisfaction surveys were also distributed in spring 2009 by the evaluation team at the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (CEEP). Paper and online surveys were distributed to 17 of the Mayor-sponsored charter schools. Although the survey was primarily distributed in English, schools could request the Spanish version of the survey on an as needed basis. The survey consisted primarily of Likert scale questions; however, at the end of the survey, space was left for comments on the strengths and areas for improvement at the charter schools. The survey results used in this paper reflect responses from 16 schools with a total of 1,895 parents and 327 staff members responding.

Site visits took place throughout the entire 2008-2009 school year. A three-member evaluation team, led by a staff member from CEEP, visited 13 of the Mayor-sponsored charter schools to review documents and other artifacts, observe classrooms, and conduct stakeholder focus groups. Depending on the charter school's year in the continuum of the performance framework, site visits ranged from 1-3 days long. Central to these site visits was the Performance Framework, an assessment rubric developed

by the Mayor's Office, which seeks to evaluate charter schools in the initiative based on a number of factors such as student academic performance, the school's financial health, parent satisfaction, effectiveness of school leadership, the facility, compliance with federal and state special education laws, the curriculum, the mission, preparation for post-secondary options, assessment, human resources, and the school climate.

### Findings

As discussed earlier in this paper, school culture is comprised of numerous elements. This section will discuss the following components of the Indianapolis Mayor-sponsored charter schools: school organization; teaching and learning; classroom management; student support; staff development and satisfaction; and clarity of mission. The culture within a school can be seen and understood using a number of different methods, such as focus groups, observation, interviews, and surveys (Cohen, Pickeral, & McCloskey, 2009). The following findings have been derived using such tools, and they paint a picture of the culture within the selected charter schools authorized by the Mayor.

#### *School Organization*

In 2008-2009, the Indianapolis Mayor-sponsored charter schools had, on average, approximately 5 more instructional days (186.18 versus 181.74) than the Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) as well as an average of 15 additional teaching days (205.65 versus 190.86) (Indiana Department of Education, 2006). Moreover, the Indianapolis Mayor-sponsored charter schools, on average, had more instructional time per day than for primary grades (grades 1-5) and secondary grades (grades 6-8) but slightly less instructional time for high school (grades 9-12). For primary grades, the Mayor-sponsored charter schools dedicated, on average, 6.88 instructional hours per day as compared to 6.09 hours at IPS (Indiana Department of Education, 2006). Furthermore, for secondary grades, these charter schools yielded 7.14 instructional hours in contrast to 6.49 hours in IPS (Indiana Department of Education, 2006). For high schools, the numbers were fairly similar with 6.73 instructional hours in IPS and 6.41 hours in the charter schools (Indiana Department of Education, 2006).

Parent and staff surveys sought to determine how parents felt about the unique configuration of charter schools, which included longer school days and an extended academic calendar. There was a significant difference between staff and parent levels of satisfaction with the length of the school day and of the school year. Only 35% of staff were very satisfied and 31% were somewhat satisfied with the length of

the school day. Similarly for the length of the school year, 37% of staff said they were very satisfied and 29% said they were somewhat satisfied. On the other hand, 64% and 61% of parents said they were very satisfied, as well as 25% and 26% somewhat satisfied, with the length of school day and school year, respectively.

Surveys showed that both parents (60% very satisfied, 26% somewhat satisfied) and staff (51% very satisfied, 31% somewhat satisfied) were predominantly satisfied with the class size. Additionally, parents were also quite satisfied with the school size (63% very satisfied, 25% somewhat satisfied), as were staff (57% very satisfied, 32% somewhat satisfied). Data showed that the Mayor-sponsored charter schools, on average, had a slightly lower student to teacher ratio of 17.14, in contrast to IPS which had an average of 20.92.

The surveys also revealed that parents expressed more satisfaction with the quality of the schools' teachers (62% very satisfied, 27% somewhat satisfied) than did the school administration (56% very satisfied, 28% somewhat satisfied).

### *Teaching and Learning*

According to the HSSSE data, high school students in the Indianapolis Mayor-sponsored charter schools reported higher levels of intellectual and cognitive engagement in the classroom than those students in non-charter schools. Charter school students were significantly more likely to report that they were excited about their classes, with approximately 19.3% of charter school students and approximately 11.9% of overall students strongly agreeing and 48.3% of charter school students and 43.5% of students overall agreeing. Charter school students were also more likely to agree that their classes are challenging. While 23% of charter school students reported that all of their classes challenge them academically, only 14.6% of students overall agreed that all of their classes challenge them academically.

HSSSE results also showed students in the Mayor-sponsored schools were more satisfied with the support they received than high school students overall. For example, charter school students were significantly more likely to strongly agree that adults in their school want them to succeed (38.7% versus 25.3%). Nearly 47% of charter school students reported that all of their teachers want them to do the best work they can; among students overall, only 35.3% reported that this was true. Moreover, 47.6%

of charter school students and 34.6% of students overall agreed that all of their teachers believe they can do excellent work.

In their satisfaction surveys, parents expressed high levels of satisfaction with quality of the curriculum, the academic standards, the teaching, and the individual attention given to their children. Of the parents in the schools surveyed, 88% reported feeling very (60%) or somewhat (28%) satisfied with the curriculum/academic program in the school. They also articulated high satisfaction levels with the academic standards for students, with 90% being either very (64%) or somewhat (26%) satisfied. In terms of the quality of teaching, 88% of parents were very (60%) or somewhat (28%) satisfied. Finally, 87% said that they were very satisfied (64%) or somewhat satisfied (23%) with the level of individual attention given to their child.

In addition to measuring satisfaction with teaching and learning through surveys, evaluators also conducted classroom observations in 9 of the Mayor-sponsored charter schools during the 2008-2009 school year. These observations focused on the extent to which students participated actively in class, as well as the attention students paid to the instructional activity. In 54% of classes observed, all students were engaged at the beginning of the lesson. However, the proportion of students who were engaged declined as the class progressed. After the first ten minutes, in 41% of classrooms all students were engaged. After twenty minutes, in 40% of classrooms all students were engaged. Finally, after thirty minutes, in only 35% of classrooms were all students engaged. In fact, nearly full engagement was found in only a few of the classrooms observed. The results of these observations indicate that many students are not fully benefitting from instruction time, possibly resulting in distraction for the rest of the class, and suggest that charter schools may benefit from innovative solutions to ensuring that students are engaged throughout a class period. However, it should be noted that, as high school charter school students themselves report higher levels of engagement in class, there may be limits on the ability of observers to truly assess the extent to which students are engaged.

Furthermore, HSSSE results revealed that charter school students were more likely to be satisfied with the extent to which their school was preparing them for post-secondary education. For example, charter school students were more likely to agree strongly that they have been required to do research outside of assigned texts (34.8% versus 30.0%) and were significantly more likely to have taken an Advancement

Placement course (47.2% versus 32.8%). Charter school students were also more likely to agree that they have talked with an adult in their school about how to apply for college (21.3% versus 15.4%).

### *Classroom Management*

Another important aspect of school culture, classroom management, was examined through both parent and staff satisfaction surveys as well as classroom observations. The surveys revealed slightly lower satisfaction levels for both parents (50% very satisfied, 29% somewhat satisfied) and staff (29% very satisfied and 45% somewhat satisfied). This perception was supported by the classroom observations in which evaluators noted some inconsistencies between teachers and schools in punishments for certain behaviors. In the 1,000 instances of responses to student behavior that were observed, evaluators found approximately 600 instances to be reactive and 450 to be proactive. These results suggest that many teachers may be inclined to fall back on reactive methods of classroom control. However, it is important to note that innovative approaches were also observed. For example, in one school, students were asked to engage in discourse with each other or with their teacher if there was a problem. Through this discourse, the basis of the issue was identified and meaningful resolutions were planned. In another school, students who committed behavior infractions were immediately sent to the school's administrative offices and subsequently required to attend Saturday School, which typically included the involvement of a parent or family member. Over the course of the year, disruptive behaviors in this school were nearly completely eliminated. While this approach increased the burden on school leaders to deal with disruptive behavior, it also created a vital pressure valve in the classroom and, by removing the disruptive student, allowed teachers to focus time on instruction rather than discipline.

### *Staff Development and Satisfaction*

As they play an integral role in the creation of school culture, it is important to understand the experience of staff members in the Indianapolis Mayor-sponsored charter schools. Of the staff members responding to the survey, 39% were very satisfied with their work environment, and 33% were somewhat satisfied. Overall, the majority felt very (40%) or somewhat (41%) satisfied with the hours spent in classroom instruction; however, there were lower satisfaction levels with the time allowed for preparation and planning (25% very satisfied, 25% somewhat satisfied). The survey results also revealed that staff feels lower satisfaction levels with the level of teacher involvement in school decisions with only 29% being very satisfied and 29% being somewhat satisfied.

Although there can be benefits to staff turnover, research indicates that teacher retention, which is a direct result of a positive school climate, can facilitate student achievement (Cohen, Pickeral, & McCloskey, 2009). The staff satisfaction survey also asked staff members how likely they were to return to the school the following year. The majority, 54%, replied they were “extremely likely” to return, with 20% “very likely” and 13% “somewhat likely” to return as well.

In terms of opportunities for professional development, 35% of staff members felt very satisfied and 35% felt somewhat satisfied with the opportunities available to them. In the schools observed, there were both formal and informal professional development opportunities taking place. One school enabled teachers to travel to successful schools in order to observe teaching practices and consider which innovative or promising practices could be incorporated into their home school. However, the observations also note that the staff felt some confusion as to the professional development opportunities available, suggesting that schools may need to develop additional means of communicating with staff about the opportunities offered.

#### *Clarity of mission*

According to the staff surveys, 48% of staff members strongly agreed that the principal communicates a clear vision for their school and 28% somewhat agreed. In the observational data gathered, those schools meeting the standard of having the school’s mission clearly understood by all stakeholders had it explicitly stated in the student/parent handbook. Furthermore, it was discovered in the focus groups that at these schools, there was agreement and certainty about what the mission should be.

#### Discussion

The results of this study suggest that the Indianapolis Mayor-sponsored charter schools have successfully fostered many of the environmental elements that are key to student achievement. By providing for flexibility in classroom practices and organizational structure, the innovative nature of charter schools has helped create conditions for student success. On average, charter schools in Indiana include approximately 6.5 more instructional days in their calendars than their associated feeder schools (Akey, Plucker, Hansen, Michael, Branon, Fagen, & Zhou, 2009). Additionally, charter schools in Indiana average slightly longer school days (6.5 hours) as compared to their feeder schools (6.1 hours) (Akey et

al., 2009). The findings discussed above regarding the Indianapolis Mayor-sponsored charter schools are consistent with these trends.

Satisfaction with the school calendar as well as the length of school days was markedly different for parents and staff. For the most part, parents expressed satisfaction while staff was far less satisfied. The reasons for the lower levels of staff satisfaction appeared in the comments section on potential improvements. These reasons included concerns about the after-school time available for students to work on homework or participate in extracurricular activities, the capacity and resources not being sufficient to support extended day or year models, the increasing difficulties with student behavior and motivation toward the end of extended days and school years, and the difficulties for teachers in terms of burnout and not having enough after-school time.

In looking at the teaching and learning occurring in the Indianapolis Mayor-sponsored charter schools, parents and students appear to be particularly satisfied with this element. More specifically, this study suggests that parents and students are highly satisfied with the individualized attention and support students receive from teachers and with the level of academic challenge and student engagement in the schools. This focus on individual students is particularly critical given research suggesting that classroom practices must recognize the unique learning needs and strengths of individual students. To the extent that differentiated instruction helps students achieve, charter school students are likely to demonstrate high levels of achievement.

While classroom conditions in the Indianapolis Mayor-sponsored charter schools generally appear to support student achievement, this study does suggest that the Indianapolis Mayor-sponsored charter schools could benefit from additional innovation in classroom management practices. Both parent and staff surveys showed lower satisfaction with classroom management than in other areas. Developing effective classroom management practices is critical for ensuring that instructional time is maximized and that students benefit from the individualized attention discussed above. However, more research on the specific classroom practices in charter schools needs to be conducted before long-term patterns can be identified.

Finally, it should be noted that overall levels of staff satisfaction tended to be lower than that of parents and students. The relatively lower satisfaction of staff suggests that charter schools must develop

mechanisms for ensuring that they meet the needs of not only their students, but also of their staff. Staff satisfaction is vital for a healthy school culture in which collaboration and innovation contribute to student achievement. As the Indianapolis Mayor-sponsored charter schools continue to develop, they must ensure that they are not only soliciting staff opinion, but also using staff opinions to create a shared vision for the school.

### Conclusion

When thinking about innovation and charter schools, it is critical to understand the context in which they operate. This context, comprised of federal, state, and local authorities, creates the conditions that can either encourage or hinder innovation, particularly in terms of school and classroom management. However, having been given an increased level of autonomy, charter schools are, themselves, innovative institutions, and as such, they have a unique opportunity to create a distinctive school culture to best meet student needs. Charter schools have the freedom to change the length of the school day and of the school year, use different methods of teaching to promote their specific missions, and employ unique strategies for classroom management, all of which contribute to the school culture and directly impact student learning and achievement.

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