Bringing Top Teachers and Principals to Charters

What makes a school good? Is it bright classrooms, modern labs, and spacious facilities? Small group instruction? A rich curriculum? Up-to-date technology? Strong administrators? Those things are all nice, but the research is clear that none are overwhelmingly important to student outcomes. What is important—two to three times as important as any other school factor—is the quality of the institution’s teachers.
(It’s sobering to note that one other influence makes even teacher quality pale in significance: the family status and background of a child may have four to eight times as much impact on student achievement as the level of teaching, according to RAND Corporation investigators. But family breakdown is a problem for another book. Schools must work with what comes in the door, and when it comes to remediation the biggest lever we can pull is the excellence of our teachers.)

The studies on what goes into teacher excellence are quite specific. Factors often assumed to be synonymous with the quality of educating—like master’s degrees and other paper credentials, state licensing, being on the job a long time, low class size, teacher salaries, and overall spending on education—turn out to matter not so much. Two factors that do matter: the instructor’s specific content knowledge, and his or her general intelligence.

That’s the verdict not only of academic research but also of field practice. “The number-one thing schools can do to unlock the potential of their students is to give them great teachers,” says Ariela Rozman, CEO of the teacher-training nonprofit TNTP. “Our teachers are everything,” says Michael Block, who leads BASIS, one of the most effective charter school networks in the country. “They know and love their content, and everything flows from that.”

Block’s mention of content is crucial. Many conventional public schools are not allowed to hire mathematicians to teach math, or people who’ve written books to lead students through literature. State policies generally require graduates of teaching colleges, most of whose training is in education theory and pedagogy, not subject matter. “Teacher preparation programs are too heavily weighted with courses in educational methods at the expense of courses in subjects to be taught,” warned the National Commission on Excellence in Education as far back as 1983.

Many charter schools are a reaction against this old style of teacher credentialing. “We look for content expertise first and foremost,” explains Craig Barrett, the former Intel CEO who went on to fund and guide the creation of BASIS Schools, making sure that retired engineers and professional musicians and history Ph.D.s would be welcome in its classrooms even if they lacked a degree from a teaching college. The philosophy at BASIS, and many other top charter schools, is that “all teachers should be content experts in the fields they are teaching. You can’t do a good job teaching kids math unless you know and love math, nor English, nor history, nor science,” says Barrett.
There is evidence backing this approach. Multiple studies find that teachers who hold a degree in mathematics (as opposed to a general teaching degree) are associated with higher student math scores, that teachers with strong training in other disciplines will inculcate more knowledge of that discipline in their pupils. The recommendation of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching is that all teachers ought to complete four years of courses in an established academic major, and then spend a fifth year learning about education methods. Other advisory groups have likewise suggested that colleges training teachers should first require a standard baccalaureate degree in a particular academic discipline, and then offer some additional instruction in pedagogical technique. Alas, hardly any teacher colleges follow this pattern. Instead, most offer four years of meandering theory and technique, with little depth in any one subject.

Along with subject expertise, the other factor that studies clearly correlate with teacher effectiveness is intelligence. Instructors’ literacy levels and verbal abilities, for instance, have been shown to be associated with higher levels of student achievement. You’re thinking: “Aha! It’s better for teachers to be smart...tell me something I don’t already know.” But the unfortunate reality is that the typical K-12 teacher produced over the last generation has not even been intellectually average among college graduates.

A host of studies have shown that individuals entering teaching during the 1970s, ’80s, ’90s, and beyond tended to have lower test scores, lesser academic skills, and poorer GPAs than students who went into other careers. For instance, Vance and Schlechty reported in 1982 that college graduates with low SAT scores were more likely than those with high SATs to enter and remain in the teaching force. Ballou (1996) found that the less selective the college, the more likely that its students entered teaching. McKinsey & Co. discovered that 47 percent of recent entries into teaching had college-entrance test scores in the bottom third of their class. Only 23 percent of new teachers scored in the top third, according to this 2010 report. The authors noted that in countries with top-performing educational systems, like South Korea, Finland, and Singapore, 100 percent of all teachers are drawn from the top third of their academic cohort.

During the latest decade, the rising demand from charter schools for smart teachers, and the growth of alternative recruiting networks like Teach For America and TNTP, has drawn a higher quality of candidate
into the profession. Dan Goldhaber and Joe Walch compared the SAT scores of new teachers to college graduates going into all other fields. In the winter 2014 issue of *Education Next* they reported that while in 2001 teachers had ranked 3–7 percentile points below classmates, by 2009 they were two to three points above non-teachers. Still not academic stars, but trending in the right direction.

There is good research showing that the individuals hired to teach in charter schools are more likely to be graduates of selective colleges than teachers in conventional schools. A 2004 paper from the Education Policy Center at Michigan State University compared a weighted mix of 20,000 teachers at conventional and charter schools, and found that the charter teachers were significantly more likely to have graduated from a college that *Barron’s Profiles of American Colleges* placed in one of their three most selective categories, and less likely to come out of a non-selective or less-selective college. A 2009 paper by Steven Wilson zeroed in on charter schools that get good results from low-income children and found that 77–83 percent of their teachers came from one of *Barron’s* three top categories. (And about two thirds of those came out of a college in the very highest category.) Among teachers in conventional schools, only 19–25 percent graduated from colleges rated in those same selective categories.

**Teachers who make their pupils better**

The good news is that once they are in classrooms, we don’t have to guess who the good teachers are. We can look at the performance of their students. By tracking how much progress pupils make during a year in a given teacher’s classroom (as measured in average results

It is relatively straightforward to track what students know when they start with an instructor and what they know at the end of the year, and then reward or remediate teachers based on the actual record of improvement or stagnation among their students.
on standardized tests), we get a very concrete indication of whether this is a teacher capable of making a positive difference in the lives of children. Paper qualifications don’t matter; the classroom record does.

Over time, every teacher builds up a set of student performance outcomes. These are relatively easy for economists to study. And when economists do so (making proper adjustments for the demographic traits of students, to make certain that apples are being compared to apples), they find that the difference between spending a year with a good teacher versus a bad teacher can easily exceed a full grade of annual growth. For instance, a bad teacher might move his typical students only a half year ahead in knowledge during the same school year when a good teacher moved similar students ahead by a year-and-a-half worth of learning.

It’s not easy, but it has been shown that good teachers can get good results even in bad schools, even with children with checkered previous records, with pupils of all races and economic classes. And the effects of good, or bad, teaching are cumulative. Get several teachers of one sort or the other in a row, and the overall educational effect will be pronounced.

An important recent study by economists Raj Chetty, John Friedman, and Jonah Rockoff tracked almost 12,000 pupils for more than 20 years and found that the effects of good teachers and poor teachers could be traced directly to later adult outcomes like going to college, becoming a single parent, saving for retirement, and job earnings. The economists calculated that replacing a poor teacher with a teacher who is merely average would raise the lifetime earnings of the classroom of children who spent one year studying under them by a total of $266,000.

“If you leave a low value-added teacher in your school for ten years, rather than replacing him with an average teacher, you are hypothetically talking about $2.5 million in lost income,” summarized professor John Friedman of Harvard. “The message,” he underlined, “is to fire people sooner rather than later.”

Prominent education researcher Eric Hanushek of Stanford has long argued that the bottom 5 to 10 percent of teachers, judged by the annual scores of their students, should be let go every year. Legendary CEO Jack Welch did this with General Electric’s workforce, building it into the most productive of any corporation in America. In Chapter 3, we described Neerav Kingsland’s proposal for improving educational quality by shutting down the weakest 5 percent of schools every year (as measured in annual performance scores), and how this would gradually cumulate into a dramatic increase in overall school effectiveness. Remov-
ing the worst performing 5 percent of teachers in a system every year would be a more selective way of doing the same thing. The big winners would be children—especially the minority and low-income youngsters who, research shows, are especially helped by higher teacher quality.

There is a whole movement today on behalf of what is called “value-added” teaching. It urges school administrators to use the most straightforward and significant measure available to us—annual improvements in student performance—as a major factor in deciding which teachers should be hired, promoted, paid better, and fired. Since students sometimes enter the classroom far behind where they should be, outright student performance can be an unfair measure; but how far the student moves ahead during the year from wherever he started is an excellent way to identify an effective teacher. School districts in Washington, D.C., Houston, and other places have already begun using value-added metrics to raise their level of teaching and overall school quality.

The first major academic assessment of D.C.’s new system of teacher evaluation, done by James Wyckoff of the University of Virginia and Thomas Dee of Stanford, was released late in 2013. It showed that a rigorous value-added approach to grading teachers has clear positive effects in both retaining good teachers and pushing out persistently ineffective ones. Half of a teacher’s evaluation score in D.C. now comes from how much her students improved their standardized test scores after a year in her classroom. Other measures of increased student achievement, plus five classroom observations by principals and master teachers, are also used to grade teachers.

Instructors in D.C. with a value-added score that shows them to be “highly effective” get a cash bonus of up to $27,000. Two “highly effective” ratings in a row lead to a salary raise of as much as $25,000. Getting repeated “highly effective” scores yields the equivalent of about a five-year jump on the standard teacher salary scale. As you might expect, this resulted in higher rates of retention by the district of excellent teachers.

On the other hand, Washington teachers who get reviewed as “ineffective” are subject to dismissal, as are those rated “minimally effective” for two straight years, and those scoring for three years in a row at the middling level of “developing.” During the first couple years of the new assessment system, 500 teachers with poor ratings for effectiveness were let go from the D.C. Public Schools.
Washington’s assessment system offers coaching and other help for poor performers to improve their classroom practice. Because the coaches have the detailed performance reviews to work from, they can personalize the professional help needed by each teacher, rather than offering general training like typical teacher-development seminars. The study found evidence that teachers at the margins were incentivized to use this professional assistance—those with one low rating sought help to avoid a second, and those near the top of the middle rating made efforts to become “highly effective.”

Value-added teacher assessment is one of the more promising strands of education reform today. Conventional schools, however, with their union contracts and other regulatory constraints, sometimes find it hard to put into effect, despite prompting by everyone from free-market economists to President Obama’s Department of Education. The fact is, D.C.’s program was pushed through only after a group of major philanthropists, including the Walton, Robertson, Arnold, and Broad foundations, put up $60 million of financial sweetener for teachers—and even still the program’s creator, Michelle Rhee, was eventually pushed out of her public office after long teacher-union opposition.

Charter schools, with their comparative lack of political and regulatory restraints, have more opportunity to act on today’s powerful new understanding of teacher effectiveness. If they energetically apply value-added measurement to teaching, they will lead the nation in raising the overall quality of school instruction. Philanthropic support could greatly speed that.

The Gates Foundation has been a prominent supporter of serious teacher assessment. They are working on many levels to bring the same kinds of annual measurements, rewards, and accountability to teaching that exist in other professions. In 2009, Gates unveiled a $335 million venture to build teacher effectiveness, including $45 million of spending intended to pioneer and then spread rigorous new systems of teacher evaluation.

**Expanding the supply of excellent teachers**

Many schools today, including charters, do not have as many truly impressive teachers and teacher candidates as they need or would like. “The charter sector has spent most of its resources frantically expanding the number of ‘no excuses’ charter schools that depend on highly talented people,” explains Rick Hess, director of education policy stud-
ies at the American Enterprise Institute. “Staffing all these new schools, including thousands of additional ones to come over the next decade, while also replacing teachers who retire, fail, or burn out, will be a strain in the future. It will only become manageable if we find innovative new ways to effectively train top teachers, reduce unnecessary burdens on them, and incentivize them to stay with education as a career.”

Gretchen Crosby Sims of the Chicago-based Joyce Foundation notes that while “charter schools face disadvantages in areas like lacking access to funding for buildings, and getting lower per-pupil reimbursements from states, they also have great advantages. One of the biggest ones is greater flexibility in deploying their teachers. As a result, we as funders should increasingly focus on encouraging strong teachers to flow into the charter sector.”

Philanthropy has been crucial in supporting Teach For America, TNTP, and other groups that are bringing impressive new teachers into charter schools.

Lots of organizations have begun efforts to create more good teachers to staff charter schools. Teach For America, which recruits top college graduates and young professionals to teach for at least two years in schools serving needy populations, has moved aggressively into the charter realm in the past several years. Many big urban school districts are losing students and laying off teachers, making it harder for TFA to place its corps members in conventional schools. But the blossoming of charter schools has more than picked up the slack. In Chicago during the 2013-2014 school year, 59 percent of TFA teachers were working in charter schools. In Philadelphia, an even larger fraction work in charters—only 21 out of 257 corps members taught in conventional public schools in that city in 2013. Nationwide, about two thirds of all TFA teachers work in conventional district schools, but the fastest growing niche for TFAers is charter schools.

TFA is of course a product of enlightened philanthropy. Don and Doris Fisher were crucial funders of the initial nationwide expansion of the organization. The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, the Robertson Foundation, and Steve
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and Sue Mandel each provided $25 million in 2011 to create a $100 million long-term endowment for the organization. Even as TFA has grown explosively, two thirds of its annual funding continues to be donated by individuals, foundations, or corporations. Philanthropy has been particularly crucial in supporting TFA’s powerful new presence in charter schools, and the group’s ability to further increase the number of corps members operating in charters will depend upon continued and expanded donor support.

TNTP, founded in 1997 as the New Teacher Project, is also paying much more attention to charter schools in search of opportunities to jumpstart teacher quality. Originally, TNTP served only conventional district schools. Basing its experts in district offices, the organization would help these large urban bureaucracies recruit, train, and hire new teachers, particularly in hard-to-fill specialties like special-ed and math. The group still does this, through its TNTP Academy, which has so far recommended to districts nearly 3,000 teacher hires. Non-traditional but talented teaching candidates are located, trained, and certified by the Academy, and they have proven to be substantially more effective, on average, than other teachers in the district—performing at a level high enough to more than make up for the average lag in academics found among children from low-income families.

Since 2000, TNTP has also operated a separate Teaching Fellows program. This program looks for accomplished professionals and recent college graduates who weren’t schooled or certified as educators but have subject knowledge and talents to help high-need students. The program is extremely selective—only 8 percent of all applicants make it to the classroom. Here again, recruits are particularly steered into the hardest-to-fill jobs: about 40 percent of TNTP Teaching Fellows go into special education, 15 percent teach science, 12 percent teach math, and 10 percent work in bilingual education. More than 32,000 unusually effective teachers have come out of the program since its creation, and increasing numbers of these are being channeled into charter schools.

TNTP charges schools a fee for providing them with a highly qualified teacher. The remaining third of the group’s revenue comes from philanthropists.

There are other entities working to raise the caliber of classroom leader available to charter, district, and parochial schools. ACE—the Alliance for Catholic Education—is a kind of TFA that prepares top college graduates to work in Catholic schools, thanks to the support of many donors.
EdFuel is a nonprofit, hatched with support from the Walton Family Foundation and others, which seeks to promote education as a multifaceted field into which professionals of all sorts can enter. EdFuel matches lawyers, IT specialists, human resource managers, advocacy experts, and others to opportunities in education, including at charter schools.

Donors eager to help raise teacher quality at charter schools should be aware of the National Center on Teacher Quality, one of the nation’s leading voices on educator effectiveness. The center produces valuable research and advocacy that aims to pull the entire teaching profession up to higher levels of output. Their new 2013 handbook *Teacher Prep Review*, for instance, evaluates 1,100 different colleges on how well they prepare their graduates to become K-12 instructors.

Charter schools themselves have also taken direct action to upgrade the quality of teachers available to their students. For instance, the 38 charter schools in the Harmony network in Texas (which places a special emphasis on mathematics, science, and computer science) have a creative program that brings them strong math and science instructors. With support from the Cosmos Foundation, Harmony finds teachers with deep content knowledge in math and science who are living overseas but interested in working in the U.S. The school helps them secure legal working papers, and brings them to Texas to instruct students.

**New ways of training teachers**
Several charter school networks have started their own graduate schools of education to prepare new teachers to work in charter schools. These graduate schools meet an important need of charter networks that is rarely filled by conventional teacher prep programs: rigorous training that focuses entirely on demonstrable improvements in student academic performance. Most of these new training regimens require candidates to work in local charter schools while earning their degrees, and they focus relentlessly on practical techniques that have been show to get classroom results.

One of the most exciting of these new teacher prep programs is the Relay Graduate School of Education, the brainchild of three of the most accomplished creators of charter schools in the nation. Dave Levin, Norman Atkins, and Dacia Toll (leaders of the KIPP, Uncommon Schools, and Achievement First charter school networks, respectively) were constantly short on great teachers. What if they built from scratch a dramatically different teacher college capable of turning smart, persistent young people into master educators?
Within months of their first 2005 discussion, Levin, Atkins, and Toll began to pull together a business plan. Then hedge-fund founder Larry Robbins, who was already a big supporter of charter schools, pledged $10 million to get the grad school off the ground. Next, the Robin Hood Foundation, the high-octane New York City philanthropy founded by financier Paul Tudor Jones, raised an additional $20 million for the new college in one night in 2007. Relay opened its doors in 2008, originally housed at Hunter College, where the dean of the education school was an enthusiastic supporter.

The two-year course of study combines best practices unearthed by actual teachers practicing their craft at Uncommon Schools, KIPP, Achievement First, and other top charters. There are three distinctive qualities to the Relay curriculum: 1) Its strong preference for practical techniques proven to work with needy children, rather than educational theory. 2) Use of new technology: More than 40 percent of coursework is delivered online, and intensive video recording is done of each enrollee’s classroom instruction, for later study and dissection. 3) A demand for measurable results: Fully half of the program’s graduation credits are tied to measured student outcomes, and to receive a master’s degree from Relay, you must demonstrate that your pupils made at least a full year’s worth of academic growth in one year of school time.

Relay was the first new graduate school of education to be founded in New York City in 80 years. As of 2013 it had already been expanded to two other locales, and was training about 850 teachers in New York, New Orleans, and Newark, New Jersey. Its training is in demand from teachers for conventional schools as well as charters. There are plans to open campuses in Houston and Chicago in 2014 and to establish sites in many other regions after that.

“We hope that in a decade we are able to serve thousands of teachers in cities across the country,” says Atkins. “If we want to turn on the next generation of K-12 students, it’s essential that we magnetize the most talented and promising college graduates to the teaching profession, and offer them an on-ramp and training that will bring out their very best over the long haul.”

Charter schools have already birthed their own teacher colleges in other locations as well. The southern California charter school network High Tech High has opened its own state-approved graduate school of education in San Diego, California. “California needs an estimated 3,300 new math and science teachers each year,” points out Larry Rosenstock, founder and CEO of
High Tech High. “Yet the massive University of California system credentials only 210 new math and science teachers per year.”

Since the teacher school began in 2007, it has not only ensured a steady flow into High Tech High of new talent that is specifically trained for its classrooms, but also supplied educators to other area charter and conventional schools. The program offers a master’s degree in education with two concentrations: school leadership, for individuals who wish to found or run an innovative school, and teacher leadership, for experienced instructors who want to deepen their practice.

Tuition is subsidized and students learn and work alongside teachers and administrators in the High Tech High network of schools. To make access easy, both this graduate school and Relay offer about half of their instruction on line, the rest on site. Philanthropic support for this innovation has been provided by the Amar Foundation, the Ronald Simon Family Foundation, and the James Irvine Foundation.

Match Charter Schools, a network of superb charters in Boston, has created a similar program. Its Sposato Graduate School of Education is a new, independent, state-approved teacher college. Enrollment is extraordinarily competitive—about 100 candidates are enrolled each year out of the 1,500 who get an interview.

The promising “residents” who are selected train as tutors in a Match charter school Monday through Thursday. They work with the same small group of six to seven students for a year, often building one-on-one relationships with the students while providing the support they need to become college ready. On Fridays and Saturdays, the residents attend graduate-school classes and participate in intensive simulations and student teaching.

In their first year of this graduate program, enrollees will each go through about 500 lifelike teaching simulations, which include touches like students walking out and misbehaving at times. Candidates learn techniques for increasing rigor and keeping students engaged. Match CEO Stig Leschly,
who founded Match with a large donation of his own money after building Exchange.com and then selling it to Amazon for $200 million, explains that “they practice moves, they scrimmage, then they get their own classrooms.”

After a full year of this intensive schedule, residents receive a Massachusetts teachers’ license and are offered full-time teaching positions in charter schools in Boston and elsewhere throughout the country. At the end of their first full year of teaching, residents are evaluated and, if found to be performing well, awarded a Master’s in Effective Teaching.

Some charters are working on ways of extending the reach of good teachers. On the campuses of Rocketship Education, students spend a portion of their day mastering basic skills via computer instruction. The software frees teachers from repetitive tasks, so they can spend more time filling individual learning gaps and teaching higher-order thinking skills to students in small groups. Teachers also have time to collaborate more, plan more, and participate in more professional development opportunities. Students reap the biggest benefit: Rocketship’s model helped it become the leading public school system for low-income students in California in 2012, as measured by scores on the California Academic Performance Index.

So-called blended learning models like Rocketship’s, mixing human and computer instruction, are growing fast. (Blended Learning: A Wise Giver’s Guide to Supporting Tech-assisted Teaching, published in 2013 by The Philanthropy Roundtable, is the definitive guide on this subject.) In addition to freeing teachers from drudge work, giving them much more information on each student’s individual progress (thanks to software which regularly spits out individual achievement reports), and opening opportunities for teachers to redesign and customize their classrooms in entrepreneurial ways, blended learning offers one other important advantage in an era where masterful teachers are the scarcest resource: The school doesn’t need as many teachers per enrolled student.

By relying on computer instruction and roving teacher’s aides to supply much basic instruction and practice, and reserving teachers for complex instruction, the typical Rocketship school requires six fewer teachers per school. That allows better pay per teacher, and provides operational savings which are used to create new schools. It also softens the problem of truly gifted teachers being in short supply. If an administrator only needs to find two or three good new instructors every year instead of four or five, that is a much more manageable hire.
Rocketship has also been lauded for its system of training and developing teachers. It uses frequent feedback from master instructors, including live coaching in the classroom via ear pieces. Once they are developed, the school tries to hang onto its good teachers by promoting all of their future school leaders from their own teacher ranks, rather than recruiting externally.

Developing and hanging onto top talent is an urgent need across U.S. K-12 education. Nationwide, close to 50 percent of all of our teachers leave the profession within five years, with rates being highest in schools full of low-income pupils (which most charter schools are). Research indicates that working conditions are the primary driver in a teacher’s decision to leave a school or the profession, and the demanding work conditions in inner-city schools can wear down even the most committed people.

Education scholar Rick Hess argues that finding ways to reduce the need for super-teachers in the future will be an essential part of sustaining the charter school revolution. Pushing for better-than-typical results can be stressful, burning out instructors after a number of years. Unionization (which Hess believes would make many charters indistinguishable from conventional schools in terms of results achieved) becomes a risk. And as the charter sector grows larger, principals have to dig ever deeper in the personnel barrel.

Charters need to use their extraordinary autonomy to develop models for delivering great education without over-reliance on heroic educators, who will always be in limited supply. There are systems that show great promise. Match schools, for instance, delegate much basic instruction to talented tutors who flow through classrooms in groups on one- or two-year contracts. (Many of these are recent college grads testing the waters in education before attending graduate school.) The tutors liberate teachers and let them focus on higher-order instruction that is less likely to lead to burnout. Another model that lessens the demand for saint-level teaching effort is blended learning. Schools like Carpe Diem and Rocketship use computerized instruction to free up teachers and reduce stress, just as Match’s system does with tutors.

**Elevating principals and new school founders**

In addition to excellent teachers, charter schools must have strong, adept administrators. Savvy principals, skilled business managers, and entrepreneurial school executives are needed to handle the operational independence that the charter system pushes down to the
individual school level. Without strong leaders, charters will only be free to flounder.

Very good, philanthropically supported programs now exist to help address the shortage of talented school leaders of this sort. Charter school incubators in many regions now offer training and support to individuals who are preparing to open new schools. There are also national programs to develop educational leaders—like the Building Excellent Schools Fellowship supported by dozens of foundation and individual donors. Chapter 2 reviewed some of these incubators in detail.

To meet the strong interest in finding and cultivating charter school leaders from minority backgrounds, the Charter School Growth Fund created Partners for Developing Futures, a venture fund that invests in high-potential charter schools founded or overseen by a minority leader, and serving minority and low-income students. “Partners serves the important dual mission of helping to promote minority leadership while creating additional quality public education options for underserved students,” says Howard Fuller, board chairman for the Black Alliance for Educational Options, and a member of Partners’ advisory board. “We see a great need for more support for leaders of color who show potential in the charter sector.”

Other leadership programs focus on a particular place, or train leaders for a specific chain of charter schools. The Mind Trust, whose work in Indianapolis as a charter school incubator was discussed in Chapter 2, also has programs to develop school leaders. Its Education Entrepreneur Fellowship brings ambitious reformers to its home city for two years of full-time paid training in the factors to go into high-quality schooling. Their graduates get seed funding and are connected to various community partnerships that can help them launch new schools.

The Indianapolis-based Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation has provided the Mind Trust with $4.5 million in funding for this purpose. What makes the investment so unique is that Fairbanks is not generally an education funder, but rather focuses on health, sustainable employment, and the economic vitality of the foundation’s home city. However,
they now see flourishing charter schools as an important way to boost prosperity and quality of life in Indianapolis.

As the top-performing networks of charter schools have grown, several have addressed the field’s talent shortages by developing their own internal pipelines for teachers and leaders. The KIPP Fisher Fellowship, for example, provides training to educators that will equip them for the demanding job of operating a school within the KIPP network. KIPP absorbs the roughly $200,000 cost of forming each Fisher Fellow (which includes recruitment, selection, instruction, and salary). With major support from the Doris & Donald Fisher Fund, the Broad Foundation, and other donors, the year-long training program includes a residency period in a high-flying KIPP school, as well as intensive coursework at New York University’s Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. KIPP accepts fewer than 7 percent of applicants to participate in this selective and demanding fellowship—and all recipients already have several years of teaching experience, including demonstrated results among low-income students. KIPP has trained 125 of its principals in this way, men and women who have gone on to lead new KIPP schools in 20 states and the District of Columbia.

Other charter school leadership programs are based out of universities. In 2013, the Relay Graduate School of Education added a track for training school executives. It retains the school’s practical emphases on effective teaching, and shows principals how they can offer instructional leadership in their schools, but then adds the many management skills a school administrator needs. In its first season, 150 principals from around the country took part in Relay’s yearlong program.

The Rice Education Entrepreneurship Program has offered principal training at Rice University’s Jesse Jones Graduate School of Management since 2008. What’s distinctive about the REEP model is that it occurs entirely within a business school. The two-year, MBA-granting program offers intensive immersion in educational entrepreneurship, and turns out principals ready to plan, build, and manage impressive schools. REEP is heavily subsidized by Houston-area philanthropies, so students only have to pay a small portion of the costs, and they can have their loans forgiven if they work in an area school after graduation.

A program similar to REEP was launched in Chicago the same year. The Ryan Fellowship, a joint venture of Northwestern University’s Kellogg School of Management and the Accelerate Institute, brings aspiring school leaders to a top business school. They learn the skills and habits of effective educational entrepreneurship, thanks to donor support.
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The Accelerate Institute is a nonprofit that offers an array of educational programs. In addition to the Ryan Fellowship, it operates the Inner City Teaching Corps, which brings recent college graduates and mid-career professionals to Chicago’s urban classrooms for two years of service as a teacher. The institute also sponsors the Alain Locke Charter School, recognized by the U.S. Department of Education for its effectiveness at closing achievement gaps.

The funder and visionary behind the Accelerate Institute is Patrick Ryan—a former Chicago teacher and narcotics cop who went on to create a successful software company known as Incisent Technologies. Through his several training and operating philanthropies, he has been a spark plug behind the growth of charter schools in the Chicago area. Donors aiming to cultivate charter leaders in their home towns might learn from Accelerate’s ventures.

Cultivating leadership at the top
As the charter school sector has mushroomed in size and matured in sophistication, funders have increasingly realized the importance of grooming new and talented leaders for the very top tiers of educational management as well. “We need to change public education from a tired, government monopoly to a high-performing public enterprise,” urges Eli Broad, one of the country’s top education donors. “To do that you need better people in management and governance who can create the conditions that allow students and teachers to succeed.”

With that goal in mind, Broad’s foundation created the Broad Residency in Urban Education. It takes executives who have proven themselves professionally, usually in sectors other than education, and places them in two-year, full-time, paid positions within urban school systems, where they solve specific problems while gaining wide educational experience. Most Broad Residents have business, public policy, or law degrees, which they use to improve management practices in urban education. During their residency, participants receive intensive professional development, and after their stints are over, nine out of ten graduates choose to remain in education. There are Broad Residents today in many of the most important charter school networks, in the headquarters of 50 urban school systems, and in state and metropolitan departments of education.

The Broad Foundation also joined with the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation and other donors to create Education Pioneers. This
group recruits, carefully screens, and then supports graduate students in education but also fields like finance, human resources, marketing, law, or business strategy, and aims them toward careers in educational management. Education Pioneers awardees serve fellowships at charter or district schools or other educational organizations solving specific operational issues. Afterward, many remain in education on either a full-time or part-time basis. Like the Broad Residency, the generous philanthropic funding behind Education Pioneers allows it to offer competitive stipends and high-level supervision from experienced and successful leaders. Charter networks like Green Dot Public Schools, Victory Schools, Achievement First, Aspire Public Schools, KIPP, and Uncommon Schools have collaborated on projects with Education Pioneers, often leading to job offers.

Another program that relies on philanthropic funding to cultivate and train top school leaders is New Schools for New Orleans. NSNO is a nonprofit set up to transform public education in New Orleans, where more than eight out of ten students now attend charter schools. The organization has created its own in-house training program for educators interested in expanding successful single campuses into other locations. These leaders complete a specialized curriculum and receive direct one-on-one consulting on management and operational skills from local CEOs. The program brings out both a cooperative spirit that invites frank discussion of challenges and a competitive drive that inspires each member to try to produce the best performance in the city.

For more on the important topic of improving the quality of school teachers and leaders, you should consult the Roundtable's book dedicated entirely to that topic—Excellent Educators: A Wise Giver’s Guide on Cultivating Great Teachers and Principals, published in April 2014.

**Board development**

A final leadership role that is important to school success, yet not especially well supported by the current helping infrastructure that charter school leaders look to for practical assistance, is development of a school’s board. Every charter school needs a board, and they can make or break the facility—since charters operate outside of district bureaucracies, wise oversight is crucial. Yet, while a goodly number of organizations exist today to help charters recruit and train teachers, principals, and other staff, there are few that offer the specialized knowledge needed to lock in strong school-board members. It may
be time for charter school backers to support a sustained effort that will aid school founders in finding and cultivating first-rate leaders for their boards.

Frequently, boards end up dominated by one particular group—educators in some cases, business leaders in others, often initial founders or donors. But charter schools require a broad array of skills to operate successfully throughout a period of years, and pulling a broader pool of talent and experience onto a board can help solve many problems. Another problem today is that members serving on a charter-school board don't always fully appreciate the breadth of their responsibilities. To address this, some schools and support organizations have developed written guides for board members. One group of funders has gone even further, creating training seminars for all board candidates. At Brighter Choice Charter Schools in Albany, New York, every incoming board member attends a hands-on seminar that prepares him or her for service.

An alternative to funding board improvements at individual schools is to fund an intermediary organization specializing in board development that will work at many different schools. Charter Board Partners and the High Bar are two entities that specialize in this work. Charter Board Partners will help recruit boards by carefully vetting candidates with a range of talents, matching them to appropriate charter schools, and then providing ongoing training and networking opportunities. Initially focused on Washington, D.C., Charter Board Partners is now preparing to expand nationally. The High Bar, based in the Boston area, already has a national clientele. They have partnered with more than 200 charter schools in 20 states, analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of various boards, assigning targeted board training, and offering helpful tools and management systems.