



Charter schools were originally conceived as “laboratories of reform,” where new educational practices could be tested and fine-tuned before being brought to scale, and to demonstrate how a competitive marketplace could spur schools toward innovative solutions to long-standing concerns, such as attracting and retaining the best teachers. Because charter schools are granted additional flexibility in many areas, including human resource (HR) management—and because evidence suggests that many charter schools are exercising this flexibility—the charter school sector presents a promising venue to test the theory that HR management reforms will allow schools to recruit more talented teachers, support and improve the performance of the teachers already in their buildings, and retain and reward their most effective educators. This study investigates the human resource management policies and practices in Illinois charter schools through interviews and surveys with administrators in 27 Illinois charter schools during the 2013-14 school year, representing 60% of the state’s charter student population, linked with data from the Illinois State Board of Education and Chicago Public Schools.

Findings

HR Management Practices

There is a wide diversity of both practice and results, perhaps due to the flexibility charter schools are granted. Because of this diversity, it is difficult to generalize about the HR practices in the charter sector, and would be an oversimplification to paint the entire sector (or any sector for that matter) with a broad brush. Nonetheless, several trends in charter school HR management uncovered in this study are worth noting:

Teacher Recruitment: The charter schools in this study relied on both alternatively certified

(specifically TFA corps members and alumni) and traditionally prepared teachers to staff their schools. Indeed, some schools felt TFA was a bad fit for their school philosophy, and, despite some flexibility to do so, there was little discussion of hiring non-certified teachers except under extenuating circumstances. Job fairs—even those geared toward the charter school sector—were generally viewed as unproductive. Instead, referrals from current staff members were often viewed as the most fruitful source of new teachers and several schools offered referral bonuses for current teachers to facilitate this practice, particularly because this helped ensure candidates

understood and bought into the school mission. Many schools also emphasized their unique mission in the teacher recruitment and selection processes to help ensure organizational fit from the outset. The Chicago schools in this study also tended to recruit and hire much earlier in the year than the schools described in previous studies, in order to keep pace with CPS as well as one another.

Teacher Hiring: The hiring processes reported by these schools were generally thorough and deliberate, often involving full-day campus visits by teacher candidates with demonstration lessons. Current teachers were typically heavily involved in this process, interviewing candidates and weighing in on the selection process, and network staff generally devolved teacher hiring to the school level. Recruitment and hiring initiatives were at the top of administrators' lists of reported successes, failures, and future initiatives, indicating the prominent place these activities occupy in the minds of charter school leaders. There was worry from some corners that applicant pools have been shrinking and becoming less diverse in recent years, and that schools could not be as selective as they would like, especially for hard-to-staff positions. They fear that this may become more problematic as the charter sector continues to expand and other schools and districts become more strategic and competitive with their hiring practices.

Professional Development: Teacher support was frequently mentioned among these schools' most successful HR initiatives, but overall, innovation in the area of PD was underdeveloped in comparison to the other major HR functions addressed in this report. One area where these schools stood out was new teacher orientation, which often consisted of intensive, multi-week training periods. Mentoring and other accommodations and supports for new teachers were not a strong focus on many of the school leaders interviewed. Instructional coaching was common, particularly at the elementary/middle school level.

Teacher Evaluation: Teacher evaluations were characterized by the use of numerous, often informal, classroom observations, and the use of home-grown

observation rubrics, as opposed to off-the-shelf tools, such as the Danielson Framework, which is in prevalent use throughout the state. Many schools incorporated student growth measures into teacher evaluation scores, though evaluation scoring was rarely formulaic, and numerous schools that were able to calculate growth measures chose to use them solely for PD, and the evaluation process itself was typically spoken of in more formative than summative terms.

Teacher Compensation: As suggested in the literature, teacher salaries in these schools were relatively low, whereas utilization of performance pay was relatively high. Many schools incorporated elements of market-based pay by offering higher salaries for hard-to-staff positions and allowing principals a substantial degree of latitude in making offers, but most schools continued to take teacher education and experience into account with salaries in order to remain competitive. Performance-based pay was typically linked to multiple measures of teacher performance, including evaluation results, and referral bonuses were used to encourage recruitment of like-minded colleagues. Several administrators noted that they wanted to be more strategic and innovative in this area, but lacked stable funding to do so.

Teacher Retention: Shared leadership and increased teacher input were viewed as key retention strategies across these schools. Some schools attempted to reduce turnover at the front end, by using mission-driven recruitment strategies to ensure fit from the outset. Administrators were often willing to make generous accommodations to retain successful teachers, but also willing to let less effective educators leave, noting that teachers were typically on year-to-year contracts, though pointing out that non-renewal was quite rare. Leadership development was a strong component of schools' support and retention strategies. High-performing teachers were often tapped for instructional coaching or administrative positions, particularly within growing networks, several of which used fellowship programs to formalize the process.

Differences by School Characteristics: Little to no statistically significant differences in HR practices were observed between elementary/middle schools and high schools, between standalone charter schools and network- or CMO-managed charter schools, and between charter schools that had been established for fewer than five years and their more mature counterparts. However, we found numerous differences in HR practices between unionized and non-unionized charter schools and between charter schools in Chicago and those not in Chicago, suggesting that school location and unionization status play important roles in HR policy and practice.

Crosscutting HR Strategies

Looking across schools and across HR functions to view these HR functions as a complete system, we identify four broad themes that were related both theoretically and statistically:

- **Incentivist reforms**, including performance-based pay and strong relationships with TFA, that are commonly associated with charter schools and the school reform movement in the media;
- **Teacher empowerment practices**, such as career advancement opportunities and involving current teachers in school decision-making;
- **Information-rich decision-making**, whereby principals track performance using multiple data sources and use this information to drive HR practices; and
- **Mission-driven practices**, such as a focus on organizational fit during the hiring process and organizational culture during orientation.

These themes help us build toward a typology of school HR practices, and we find that most schools have elements of each theme, although certain schools may emphasize one strategy more than the others. We were also able to identify some statistically significant relationships between these crosscutting HR strategies and school characteristics. Specifically, we found that standalone schools use a

significantly lower proportion of incentivist practices and a significantly higher proportion of teacher empowerment practices than network-affiliated charter schools. But perhaps most interestingly, our study showed that charter schools that had been in operation for fewer than five years used significantly lower proportions of incentivist practices than their more mature counterparts, which could signal that the current generation of charter schools are shifting away from the incentivist practices commonly associated with the sector.

HR Practices & School Outcomes

Finally, we use statistical models to explore the relationships between these four broad HR strategies and important school outcomes, including teacher retention, school climate, and student achievement gains.

Teacher Retention: None of the human resource practices tracked in this study had a statistically significant relationship with three-year teacher retention rates, after accounting for location and school poverty.

School Climate: None of the HR practices had a statistically significant link with the three “essential” school climate measures (ambitious instruction, effective leaders, or collaborative teachers), but they did have relationships with narrower measures of school learning conditions. Teacher empowerment practices were positively related to the 5Essentials teacher influence measure, but negatively associated with the 5Es measure of academic press, and information-rich decision-making was inversely related with school commitment.

Student Achievement Growth: In some instances, incentivist practices were associated with increased student math scores. However, other models which used different test data to measure achievement showed little relationship with students’ reading or math scores. In sum, there is some evidence that incentivist practices may be associated with increased math achievement, but this depends on how achievement growth is measured and modeled.

Discussion

Because charter schools are granted extra flexibility and subject to more competitive market conditions, they are expected to implement more innovative and efficient HR management strategies than non-charter, district schools. The descriptions and examples of charter school HR practices documented in this report illustrate that, in many areas, many charter schools are certainly performing in accord with what are considered to be state-of-the-art approaches to HR management. But this is not universally the case, nor is it necessarily unique to the charter school sector. Instead of breaking entirely new ground, the HR strategies presented in this report represent more of a fine-tuning or customization of typical HR functions, and a freedom to experiment with variations on mainstream practices to compete in a given labor market or meet a school's specific mission. It is in these subtle but important fine-tunings and customizations and experimentations where charter schools may be most innovative and cutting edge, with HR reforms that are more evolutionary than revolutionary.

While it is difficult to draw any causal conclusions about the impact of HR practices described in this report, it is clear that many are consistent with the employment features that teachers find attractive and that address perceived weaknesses in the current educational system in general, and the teaching profession in particular. These features include increased teacher voice in school policy and curriculum decision-making, enhanced leadership and career advancement pathways, individualized professional development, opportunities for collaboration, acknowledging and rewarding success, and working with like-minded colleagues around a common mission.

Implications

- Principal preparation and in-service training and coaching can serve as levers for HR reform and school improvement. Principals play a large role in shaping and executing personnel strategy and recent research has shown that successful principals excel at both hiring the most effective teachers from other schools and retaining the most effective teachers in their own schools, which underscores the importance of developing HR management skills in our school administrators.
- Gather feedback from teachers. This study focused only on the opinions and perceptions of charter school principals and hiring administrators. Many charter school practices, such as increased influence over school decision-making and rewarding success, are intended to address perceived weaknesses in the teaching profession and to make charter schools more attractive places for teachers to work. However, teachers may have a different view of the policies and practices described by administrators in the study. To get the full picture, their input is crucial.
- Conduct further research to determine the efficacy of particular human resources practices as they relate to school outcomes. This study provides a comprehensive overview of the HR management policies in Illinois charter schools and presents a useful typology for conceptualizing HR practice. More exploration is needed about whether certain combinations of practices across various HR tasks are more productive than other combinations, or any single approach in isolation.

- Improve data collection. Illinois needs better data systems—including regular assessments that are designed to measure growth and a longitudinal data system linking students with schools and classrooms for purposes of research and school improvement—in order to be able to compare the effectiveness of HR (and other) practices on a statewide scale. The state’s development of a longitudinal data system with common identifiers and implementation of the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) exam will assist similar efforts in coming years.
- If charter schools are to serve as laboratories of reform in the area of HR policy, then researchers, policymakers, and educators—from both inside and outside the charter school sector—will need to examine their experiences, and be open to learning from their successes and the failures. Recent efforts at charter-district and charter-private school collaborations throughout the country provide promising examples of how this model could work, and we hope that this report can contribute to the conversation.



This work was funded by a generous grant from The Joyce Foundation,
and I thank them for their support of this important project.

The Illinois Education Research Council at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville was established in 2000 to provide Illinois with education research to support Illinois P-20 education policy making and program development. The IERC undertakes independent research and policy analysis, often in collaboration with other researchers, that informs and strengthens Illinois' commitment to providing a seamless system of educational opportunities for its citizens. Through publications, presentations, participation on committees, and a research symposium, the IERC brings objective and reliable evidence to the work of state policymakers and practitioners.