

Teachers' Perspectives on Charter School Reform: Lessons From California

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This article uses teachers' experiences in charter schools as a window into larger policy questions surrounding charter school reform. Based on interview data from teachers in 17 charter schools located in 10 California school districts, the authors argue that charter school teachers were influenced by the same factors as their colleagues in traditionally organized public schools. For example, union membership continued to be valued (and thus retained) by most teachers in conversion charter schools, whereas teachers in start-up schools have largely remained outside of the union. Similar to this, across both conversion and start-up charter schools, teaching credentials were valued as indicators of professional knowledge and training. Based on these findings, the authors argue that charter school reform does not necessarily represent a radical departure from the traditional public school system.

It is too early to tell whether charter school reform is a turning point for American education, profoundly severing district and state oversight in favor of school-site autonomy, or simply part of the ongoing ebb and flow of policy cycles favoring centralized versus decentralized reforms (Elmore, 1993; Tyack, 1974). Despite their uncertain historical legacy, charter schools have elicited considerable attention and rhetorical response from educational researchers and practitioners. Charter schools have been

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associated with the "revitalization" of public education (Goenner, 1996) and credited for creating "hope and opportunity" for American education (Nathan, 1996). They have also been connected to the "radical decentralization" of American education, with all of the promises and pitfalls that can accompany a policy shift toward localized decision making (Fuller, *in press*). Similar to this, state policy makers have deeply held but often very different views of how charter schools reshape the educational landscape. For example, whereas some policy makers see charter schools as a means of restoring confidence in public education, thereby staving off various school voucher proposals, others frame charter school reform as a stepping stone toward publicly subsidized school vouchers (Wells, Grutzik, Catalan, Slayton, & Vasudeva, 1999).

In the words of one doyen of American education, Seymour Sarason, "charter schools are the most radical reform in the post World War II era" (Sarason, 1998, p.vii). Although Sarason's enthusiasm for charter school reform is tempered by his belief that few charter schools (and more generally, few reforming schools) will engage in the sustained pattern of reflection and revision needed for continuous improvement, he is excited by the possibility of creating new schools that could potentially sidestep the bureaucratized, burdensome regularities that afflict the culture of existing school systems. Thus, Sarason's hope for charter schools rests on one of the most pronounced assumptions underlying charter school reform: that such schools will be free to structure themselves in ways that work best for children and teachers, rather than regulatory or administrative bureaucracies (UCLA Charter School Study, 1998).

This article is based on data drawn from a 2½-year UCLA study on charter schools in 10 California school districts.¹ Our research team conducted in-depth case studies of each district and 17 of the charter schools within them. The districts varied on several key factors, including size; racial and socioeconomic diversity; urban, rural, or suburban community; geographic location in the state; and percentage of and types of charter schools in the district. Our sample consisted of five large urban districts, three rural

districts that were becoming increasingly suburbanized, and two districts that were mostly suburban.

The interviews that we conducted allowed us to examine charter school reform through the eyes and ears, or, more accurately, the attitudes, thoughts, and beliefs of teachers and administrators at the 17 charter schools. They had much to say, and we had much to learn. Two themes were particularly salient. The first centered on the specific qualities that teachers admired about their particular charter school. For example, we found that teachers expressed a great deal of pride and professional satisfaction in working at a charter school. Also, according to the teachers we interviewed, charter schools allowed them to personalize education and create strong relationships with students and with other teachers.

A second theme centered on how charter-school teachers constructed their professional identities. Here, we found that many teachers, although appreciating the educational independence facilitated by charter school reform, also valued their membership in larger professional communities such as unions. Similar to this, across almost all of the schools we studied, charter school leaders and parents valued teachers who provided evidence of professional knowledge and training, such as a state teaching credential.

The two themes emerging from teachers' perspectives on working and teaching in charter schools have lead us to conceptualize their professional lives as part of a larger educational tapestry that extends beyond the immediate domain of their schools and classrooms. In other words, the contexts that matter for charter-school teachers are not limited to charter-school communities. Rather, charter-school teachers, like teachers in all schools, are influenced by both local and larger policy contexts. At the local level, the characteristics valued by charter-school teachers and facilitated by charter school reform resemble the teaching conditions advocated by educators engaged in a variety of school-based reforms. Moreover, despite the fact that charter-school teachers, to a greater degree than their peers in traditional schools, are released from the mandates, regulations, and controls

of states and districts, larger policy contexts continue to play a role in shaping their professional lives. Drawing from Talbert and McLaughlin's (1993) discussion of how teachers are influenced by multiple contexts, we define the interaction between local and larger contexts for charter-school teachers as the *embedded context of professionalism*.

Teaching in Charter Schools: The Embedded Context of Professionalism

Arguably, the most highly touted aspect of charter reform is the freedom and autonomy granted teachers in charter schools. Released from the constraints of district bureaucracies or rules-laden unions, charter schools are commonly portrayed as potentially fertile sites for educational innovation and creativity (Nathan, 1996; Vanourek, Manno, & Finn, 1997). Educational independence and teacher professionalism are explicitly linked by California's Charter Schools Act of 1992. The bill calls for "schools that operate independently from the existing school district structure," in part, to "create new professional opportunities for teachers, including the opportunity to be responsible for the learning at the school site" (California, 1992).

We learned in our study that in California, as in other states where charter schools operate, charter school teachers overwhelmingly value having the freedom and autonomy to teach in the ways that they want to teach (Education Commission of the States, 1995; Koppich, Holmes, & Plecki, 1998). However, our data suggest multiple professional goals that complicate common assumptions about the nature of teachers' work in charter schools. Rather than being defined by independence and autonomy, we found that the professional identity of charter-school teachers was intimately related to a variety of teaching contexts. Because this finding dovetails with Talbert and McLaughlin's (1993) research on the context conditions that affect teaching and learning, we use this work to drive our analysis of teacher professionalism in charter schools.

Talbert and McLaughlin (1993) conceptualize teaching by placing teachers, students, and classrooms at the center of a set of concentric circles, with each circle representing a specific context that has the potential to influence classroom practice. Moving outward from the center, teachers' work is shaped by numerous circles, including their subject area/department, the organization of the school, the school sector (i.e., public, private, or parochial) and system (e.g., district), and the social class structure of the school's parent community. More distant but influential circles include higher education institutions, local professional associations, and finally, society's educational goals, particular reform initiatives, and the profession's norms of practice. Talbert and McLaughlin emphasize that each of these multiple and embedded contexts together influence teaching and learning in schools. They write

... the important contexts of teaching are much more varied, embedded, and interactive in their effects on teaching practice than assumed by relevant lines of [context effects] research. The schema [of concentric circles] summarizes the multiple and embedded educational contexts that together shape teaching goals and practices in secondary and elementary schools. (p. 188)

Charter school reform seemingly redesigns this schema by reducing the number of concentric circles that influence teachers' work. Charter-school teachers have the same initial center or focus as any good noncharter teachers would have, that is, children and classrooms. However, unlike traditional teachers who must navigate the state, district, and union contexts, charter-school teachers can, in theory, be insulated from interactions beyond the school community. Yet, our interviews with charter-school teachers revealed a different picture. Rarely did teachers describe their work solely in terms of their specific charter school. Rather, teachers often described their work in the context of larger communities such as unions or their district. Similar to this, parents and administrators often valued teachers not only for their individual skills, but for their membership in a professionally educated (i.e., formally credentialled) community of educators.

Based on these interviews, we argue that the professional identity of charter-school teachers, much like teachers in traditional schools, is influenced by a fluid and dynamic mixture of local and larger teaching contexts.

By local teaching contexts, we mean specific conditions at a school site that teachers find professionally satisfying. In a majority of the 17 schools in our study, charter-school teachers identified two particularly compelling characteristics of their schools: (a) their small size and intimacy and (b) the professional pride or distinction that accompanied being a part of the charter school movement. We also note, however, that teachers across these sites questioned whether they could sustain the pace and time commitment that was required of them in the first few years after becoming a charter school.

By larger teaching contexts, we mean the institutions that influence teachers' professional lives. Although charter school reform is often characterized as a centrifugal force spinning schools and teachers out of the orbit of such traditional institutions as districts or teacher-credentialing programs, we find that these institutions remain viable, and even valued, by a variety of charter-school administrators and teachers. For the charter-school teachers in our study, these larger contexts did not fade away simply because the school was removed from state and district control. Rather, the larger contexts of teaching, along with the specific features of local charter schools, remained an important part of their professional lives.

Viewing charter-school teachers through multiple contexts allows us to understand the charter school movement as consistent with, rather than a departure from, broader efforts to reform schooling. In fact, our findings suggest underlying similarities between charter-school teachers and teachers in other reform-minded settings with respect to the context effects operating both at the school site and in larger settings. Thus, whereas we use Talbert and McLaughlin's (1993) framework for understanding teaching within context as a springboard into our discussion of the professional contexts influencing charter-school teachers, we also draw from the larger body of literature on teaching in reform-

ing schools to highlight the common threads connecting teachers in this particular reform movement with the broader teaching profession.

Also, throughout the article, we refer to teachers' experiences. However, it should be noted that "teachers" were defined differently across the 17 sites in our study. For example, whereas the majority of charter schools in our study employed teachers as they are traditionally defined, the two home-study programs referred to their educators as "educational specialists" or "facilitators" rather than teachers. Although the distinctions between teachers and facilitators or educational specialists sometimes included differences in professional training and responsibilities, in this chapter they are grouped together to include the voices of all the adults in our study who shared responsibility for teaching and student learning.

Local Professional Contexts for Charter School Teachers

The charter school teachers we interviewed described two critical aspects about their local teaching context. First, they responded enthusiastically to charter schools that maintained personal, intimate settings, either through limited enrollment (i.e., small schools) or low teacher-pupil ratios (i.e., class size reduction). Second, teachers commonly referred to their work as being intensely satisfying at a personal level. In start-up charters, this satisfaction typically took the form of an "esprit de corps," whereas teachers in conversion charters often described a renewed professional identity. In either case, charter-school teachers distinguished themselves as being more committed and harder working than most public-school teachers. These findings are consistent with other studies of charter-school teachers, which have noted that local, context-specific variables such as a familial atmosphere and opportunities to work with dedicated colleagues fosters feelings of professionalism among teachers (Finn, Bierlein, & Manno, 1997; Little Hoover Commission, 1996).

At the same time, we also document the flip side to the highly motivated teaching corps often found in charter schools: physical exhaustion and fatigue, the threat of rapid turnover, and the difficulty of sustaining intense levels of commitment over time. Like the more positive contextual features of charter schools, the intense time commitment for teachers, along with the attendant fear of burning out, has also been reported by charter-school researchers (Weiss, 1997).

Charter Teachers Value Small Size and Intimacy of Schools and Classes

Teachers reiterated the value of smallness at nearly all of the charter schools we studied. The charter schools used a variety of techniques to create a small, family-like atmosphere. Some schools, especially start-ups, had lower enrollments than other traditional schools serving similar grade levels. Other schools made a concerted effort to reduce their class sizes, a reform that dovetailed with California's efforts to lower class size in all K-3 classrooms. Still others promoted stronger relationships between teachers and students by shifting the schedule to create longer classes or a longer school day. According to many of the teachers we interviewed, these efforts to reduce the "scale" of teaching and learning in charter schools humanized and enhanced their lives as professional educators.

At Foundation Elementary, a start-up charter with 160 students, one teacher commented on the importance of keeping school intimate:

I just really like the small size . . . it's just a small atmosphere. We don't have ten different lunch periods, we have two . . . so it's more intimate. I know a lot of the kids [by] name, I know what they're up to, and they come in and work with me . . .

Echoing the views of her colleagues, another teacher, when asked about Foundation's attributes, told us, "You don't have a mass of children. You don't have 1,200 children in a school to deal with, so . . . it's nicer that way." Similar to this, at Heritage Elementary, which serves an ethnically distinct student population, one

teacher noted that charter schools change the nature of schooling: "It becomes personal, it becomes private, it becomes special, and you can't get that at a public school . . . you cannot meet those needs in any public school system, or private school system."

Although these class-size reduction strategies significantly overlapped with a statewide push to trim K-3 classes to 20 students each, teachers and administrators at conversion charter schools felt that they could implement the state initiative more quickly than traditional public schools. For example, Monument Elementary, located in a district with a rapidly growing enrollment, capped classes at 28 students each to prevent overcrowding. The decision to cap Monument's class size resulted in a large waiting list of students wishing to enroll, allowing Monument to control its growth by adding additional classrooms. At Monument, class size played a central role in their decision to convert to charter status. One Monument teacher told us,

I had 37 kids, so I was definitely in the mood for . . . a change in that situation. During that year, some parents and [the Principal] had been playing around with the idea of becoming a charter . . . and I think most of us felt that we needed to get control of the class size.

Although charter-school teachers most often cited the small size of their schools and/or class size as contributing to positive relationships between their students and their colleagues, changes in scheduling and organization were also deemed important. For example, two schools chose to extend their school days, giving teachers more time with students and with each other. One school rearranged its weekly schedule so that every Wednesday afternoon was pupil-free so that teachers could spend time planning and learning together. It is important to note that whereas non-charter schools in California are technically able to make these kinds of arrangements, the teachers we interviewed felt more free to pursue them after receiving their charter.

Of course, the appeal of more personalized working conditions, particularly the value placed on small schools and classrooms, extends well beyond the boundaries of charter school

reform. For example, longtime teacher, administrator, and public school reformer Deborah Meier has written at length about the virtues of small schools. Meier's (1995) suggestion that districts "break up large schools and redesign them into many small schools easily accessible on the basis of choice" (p. 102) shows a fundamental symmetry between the goals espoused by leading reform-minded educators and the direction of charter school reform. For Meier and other advocates of schools that strip away the impersonal, factory-like settings of traditional schools to facilitate more meaningful relationships between adults and students (e.g., seeSizer, 1984; 1992), reducing the size and scale of schools and classrooms is the preferred direction for public education writ large. Charter school reform, to the extent that it creates smaller, more personal school settings, does not cut against the grain of this popular recommendation for schooling. Rather, it represents one way of creating the types of local educational contexts that many practitioners and policy makers find attractive and important.

Charter Teachers Renew Professional Identities, Share Esprit de Corps

Across the schools we studied, teachers, when discussing their lives as educators in charter schools, were both challenged and invigorated by the new reform. At start-up charter schools, teachers described an esprit de corps that suffused their undertaking. Similar to this, teachers at conversion charter schools took pride in commitment and dedication to remaking public education.

Our data suggest that charter-school teachers often differentiated themselves from teachers in traditional public schools. Typically, they considered themselves to be harder working, more committed, and more professional than their counterparts. For example, at Directions Charter School, one teacher effusively praised his colleagues:

I like the collaborative, I love the other teachers here. I mean it's just such a great group, and I feel it's much more close-knit than almost anywhere else I could be. I like the striving

for excellence. I mean the people that are here also want to be here. It's not just some school that we're assigned to. And so they all have that spirit. So you're with your fellow idealists, or fools, maybe, and that's nice to have in common with everybody else. And everybody knows everybody, and I like that. I like starting out with something, and feel like I'm helping to build it.

By distinguishing themselves from other public school teachers, charter teachers sometimes suggest that organizations designed to promote teachers' interests, such as unions, are less necessary. Although there is by no means a consensus around what it means to be a charter-school teacher, our data reveal emergent attempts to define the role in opposition to conventional portrayals of public school teachers. For example, in three schools that we studied, teachers described themselves as "mavericks" or "rebels," willing to push against the district bureaucracy and to structure their teaching more progressively than other schools. At four charter schools, teachers expressed a greater sense of efficacy. When asked for examples of what had changed for them as a result of being a charter school, teachers from these schools told us that they were able to obtain instructional materials and support more quickly than they felt otherwise possible. At almost all of the 17 schools, teachers spoke generally (or at least alluded to) a boost in pride that accompanied their charter status. These discussions suggest that the charter school teachers we interviewed associated increased professional capacity, that is, greater power and control over their professional lives, with their involvement in charter school reform.

Even though teachers often expressed an increased sense of professional identity, it was not always clear how or when their perceptions were linked to changes in curriculum and teaching. For example, one teacher at the Ursa Independent Charter School described her satisfaction with leaving a traditional public school to work at a charter school, but despite working in a very different organizational setting, neither her curriculum (textbook driven) nor pedagogy (lecturing, providing examples, testing) diverged from traditional classroom practices. Even in charter schools that

maintained more traditional school structures, teachers could not always identify what in terms of their own teaching had changed as a result of being governed by a charter rather than operating under conventional district authority. Based on these findings, we suggest that charter-school teachers' new professional identities may be based on factors other than their teaching practice.

The possibility that charter-school teachers derive professional satisfaction from factors unrelated to changes in the classroom has been previously noted in the literature. Paris (1998) suggests that charter schools, like other types of schools, "succeed by creating a culture of belief in the moral authority of the school and the legitimacy of its aims" (p. 393). Without any other change in schooling, this culture of belief may enhance teachers' feelings of professional efficacy by diminishing tensions or conflicts (e.g., student discipline problems) over the goals, expectations, and vision for the school. Charter-school teachers may derive professional satisfaction simply from the fact that they work at a charter school. For example, in a separate study of charter school teachers, Grutzik (1997) noted that teachers in charter schools often considered their choice to work in a charter school to be an important part of their professional identity. Many of the teachers in Grutzik's sample identified working in a charter school as a means of favorably distinguishing themselves from colleagues in traditional schools.

Fear of Burnout/Stretched Too Thin

Despite the attractiveness of working at small charter schools, teachers were aware of the costs involved in staying small. These costs included feeling constantly pressured by time constraints, the fear of inadequate curriculum coverage, and the prospect of physical and mental fatigue. Teachers at Community Charter School exemplified the benefits and drawbacks of working in a small, start-up charter. Sharing her enthusiasm for the school with us, one teacher remarked that "having a small staff that has a lot to say is really wonderful, and it's overwhelming sometimes because there is so much that we all need to do above

and beyond our teaching." In addition to feeling overwhelmed by noninstructional demands, the same teacher wondered whether she was being stretched too thin by the extended time commitment she made for the school, a commitment that offered little financial reward and that may be difficult to sustain year after year. "We have a commitment to the kids," she offered, "but I feel like in our society . . . being committed to human beings means being a martyr."

Another Community teacher feared that having too few staff members risked jeopardizing subject-matter expertise:

One thing about teaching in a small school is that we have to cover everything, so I'm teaching [a course] which I don't feel particularly well-prepared to teach . . . I thought there's got to be somebody more qualified than me . . . [but] in a small school you have to be flexible, and for now, that's how we're doing it.

Even at larger charter schools in our study, teachers often battled physical exhaustion. At Imperial Way Elementary, one of the first charter schools in California, years of intense demands outside of the classroom left some teachers reeling. One teacher described having to participate in "meetings beyond belief." This teacher also noted, "I rarely left here before five o'clock, [up to] four nights a week. [It was] a lot of extra time." Another teacher at the same school warned teachers who were considering joining a charter school to "be in very good physical shape. Inform your family you won't be seeing them as much as you intended until it gets off on its legs."

The time pressures felt by charter-school teachers, and the related fear of burning out, fits larger patterns of the teaching profession, particularly within reforming schools. For example, Hargreaves (1994) argues that the perennial time shortages experienced by teachers reflect the intensification of teachers' work in the face of public demands for greater accountability on narrow performance measures. Hargreaves argues that this "time compression" for teachers leads to feelings of guilt, inadequacy, and

eventually burnout and exit from the teaching profession. Though far from conclusive, our data point toward a similar conclusion. Although we did not formally track the retention rate of teachers in the 17 charter schools, the stresses that teachers shared with us support the possibility of periodic teacher turnover, as people mature, make decisions about families, and look for less frenetic settings in which to work. Even teachers firmly committed to the dynamic, reform-minded spirit of charter schools expressed reservations about their ability to keep veteran teachers.

Larger Professional Contexts for Charter School Teachers

In the first section, we focused on what charter-school teachers told us was important about their local professional context. As we have pointed out, their sentiments, valuing smallness, sharing an esprit de corps, and being wary of burnout, are not unique to literature on charter schools. Rather, they broadly overlap with the larger body of research dealing with teachers' roles in and responses to school-centered educational reforms.

However, our interviews and observations also suggested an important set of larger influences that contributed to teachers' sense of professionalism. These influences included school districts, teacher unions, and the state, as exemplified by teacher credentialing requirements. Instead of a unified movement away from traditional educational institutions or organizations, we found that charter schools and their teachers varied in the ways that they chose to create, restructure, or sever relationships with districts, unions, and even the state's credentialing system. In this second section, we discuss how this broader context complicates assumptions about teacher professionalism in charter schools.

Specifically, we focus on two findings that reflect the larger context of teaching for charter-school teachers. First, we found that charter schools and teachers' unions were not necessarily incompatible. Our data suggested a rough split between unionized and nonunionized charter schools; although the start-up

charter schools in our sample did not become unionized, teachers at unionized schools that converted to charter status most often choose to retain union representation. This finding cuts against the grain of much of the literature on charter schools, which typically (and, at times justifiably) portrays unions as steadfast opponents of charter school reform (Finn et al., 1997; Nathan, 1998).

Second, we found that in all 17 charter schools in our study, almost all hired (or preferred to hire) state-credentialled teachers. This finding provides a greater contextual understanding of charter school reform in two ways. First, among the most frequently touted aspects of charter school reform is the flexibility to hire personnel without regard to state licensing requirements (Manno, Finn, Bierlein, & Vanourek, 1998). Our data indicated that this flexibility, although important, was overshadowed by the desire, particularly among charter school administrators, to hire teachers who had evidence of professional training and subject-level specialization. Second, at the time of the study, California charter schools were free to hire noncredentialled personnel. However, even though our findings suggest that credentials retain their currency even in deregulated settings, they were not always valued as evidence of teaching or subject-matter expertise. Instead, credentials were, at times, esteemed for the credibility they lent to charter schools' instructional programs, assuaging parents who may otherwise be concerned about academic quality.

Finally, we also found that charter-school teachers do not necessarily equate freedom and autonomy with the termination of district relationships. Although some teachers, especially at start-up charter schools, eschewed district responsibility or oversight for such items as salaries, seniority rights, and curriculum, teachers at conversion charter schools often preferred having their district continue to provide basic services and instructional assistance. Without undertaking an elaborated discussion of charter schools' relationships with their districts, we nevertheless suggest that teachers' desires to modify rather than terminate traditional financial relationships with their chartering districts represents a third area in which the larger contexts in which charter schools are situated profoundly influence their operation.

Existing Relationships With Teachers' Unions Tend to Be Maintained

Rather than a general exodus away from teachers' unions, the 17 charter schools we looked at tended to maintain their existing relationships. That is, all but one of the unionized conversion charter schools retained their union affiliation, whereas none of the start-up charter schools became unionized during the course of this study.

Teachers at conversion charter schools tended not to sever their relationships with their professional associations. For example, teachers at Franklin Charter Academy, a conversion charter school in the Mission Unified School District, not only stayed in the union, but also demanded that new hires be conferred the same benefits and protections that other district teachers enjoy. By taking this position, Franklin teachers opposed the district policy that allowed charter-school teachers to be employees of the school rather than the district and to be possibly paid less and given fewer employment protections than district employees. Their insistence that new teachers not be given short shrift reflects both strong union leadership at the school site and a staunch belief that new teachers should have benefits similar to teachers who are more established. One teacher at Franklin Charter Academy explained that their decision to remain in the union reflected the ongoing importance of job security for teachers. Although this teacher said that "good teachers should be content with doing their good job and that the security comes from within yourself," he recognized and supported the need for contract provisions that provide specific job protections.

At a second conversion charter school, Wilson Elementary, teachers also decided to retain union membership. Whereas Wilson's teachers, like those at Franklin, were concerned about losing seniority, fringe benefits, and retirement options if they left the union, some also saw the union as an important contributor to implementing successful changes at the school. Wilson's principal exemplified the view that the union (and the sponsoring district) could help establish and sustain reform, rather than undermine it. Citing the importance of charter schools nurturing a

strong relationship with both unions and districts, he said, "The really strong charter schools are the ones where the district and the union have backed up [the school] and helped them to implement changes."

Only a single conversion charter school, Imperial Way, opted out of union representation. After its sponsoring district forced the school to decide whether it would maintain existing relationships with the district and union, the school ultimately chose independence and autonomy from both entities. When the decision was made to leave the district and abandon the bargaining unit, however, several veteran teachers chose to leave the charter school rather than risk losing all that they had invested in the district over the years. Although these teaching veterans professed deep attachments to their charter school, they were not ready to abandon the rights and privileges accrued through their union protections.

In start-up charter schools, teachers were either ambivalent about unions or strongly rejected them. Ambivalence was expressed at Foundation Elementary, where the union membership appears to be a peripheral issue. When asked about their relationship to the union, several Foundation teachers were uncertain about whether they were in the union. For teachers at other start-up charter schools, the union represented a roadblock to change. Teachers at Academic Charter School, for example, felt that they had no need for a teachers' union, and spoke very negatively about it. In fact, the school's founders, drawing on their experience with the school's sponsoring district, felt that the union's rules and requirements were simply too rigid, and clashed with their idea of what charter schools should be.

Given the emphasis on freedom, autonomy, and flexible staffing of charter school reform, it is important to understand that teachers' larger professional context, as embodied by teachers' unions, was not rejected across the board. This finding suggests that conflicts between unions and charter school advocates, often heated at both the district and state policy-making levels, sometimes subside at the school level. Although charter-school teachers, like teachers in all schools, were divided in their

support for teachers' unions, they were often eager to retain the benefits that unions commonly provide, such as increased job security, health insurance coverage, and pension provisions. For the most part, teachers' decisions about unions followed the lines of its status as either a start-up or conversion charter school. In either case, teachers' unions represent a "concentric circle" of influence that helps define the larger professional context of teachers' work in charter schools.

Teaching Credentials Remain Valued

The area of teacher credentialling is a second area that continued to shape teachers' work in charter schools. In California, prior to the 1998 amendments to the charter school legislation, charter schools were allowed to employ a wide range of individuals, including noncredentialled teachers and experts from other careers. Nevertheless, we found that nearly all of the charter schools in our study preferred to hire teachers with valid state credentials for their classrooms. We learned that whereas charter school founders valued the concept of "at-will" employment, they also recognized the importance of having professionally trained educators on staff.

Some charter schools hired credentialled teachers because their sponsoring districts required it as part of the charter agreement. Yet, several charter-school administrators explained that the decision to hire credentialled teachers was made for reasons of heightened credibility. Because many parents perceived credentialled teachers to be more qualified to teach than other candidates, charter schools were forced to respond to their concerns. For example, the principal of the Ursa Independent Charter School was skeptical of using credentials as a measure of teaching quality, but preferred to hire credentialled teachers to assure parents that Ursa was a serious school. However, other charter school leaders suggested that credentials help assure a strong academic program. As one principal at a start-up charter told us,

With charter schools you can hire teachers that may not even be certified, but . . . it is not providing the best education if

you do not have professional people teach. . . . I'm going to make sure we get certified teachers that are trained as professionals.

A teaching credential was not considered crucial for all courses. Noncredentialed teachers were sometimes hired to teach extracurricular activities or noncore electives. At Mountain Peak Charter School, a consultant was pleased about the opportunity to hire noncredentialed teachers, especially for courses geared toward specific vocations. "It is nice because we have hired people that have certain business experience [e.g., paramedics] . . . we have flexibility," he said. At another charter school, the principal explained that although they encourage certification, they do not require it. He stated, "If we have a Ph.D. who's an expert in biology and [that person] proves that he or she can teach young people well, we'll hire them, whether they're certified or not."

Our findings indicate that state teaching credentials remained an important element of professional identity for charter school teachers. This finding is surprising given persistent critiques of the teacher education/state credentialing process, and of state regulations in general. It suggests that teachers who have been prepared by colleges and subsequently certified by the state are perceived by parents and even some educators as being better qualified to teach children than other candidates. Although California amended its state law in 1998 to require state certification for charter school teachers, our finding suggests that even in the absence of such mandates, many charter schools preferred to fill their core teaching positions with credentialed teachers.

Conclusion

The professional lives of charter-school teachers were profoundly influenced by both local and larger contexts for teaching. At the local level, many charter-school teachers were attracted to, and satisfied with, the opportunity to teach at small, family-like schools with dedicated, like-minded professionals. However, even as teachers' local contexts were remade, their relationships to larger teaching contexts often endured. Although the touch-

stones of charter-school reform—freedom and autonomy—suggested that teachers be released from the bureaucratic tendrils of districts, unions, and the state licensing system, each of these contexts remained influential to varying degrees. More important, all three remain valued by at least a portion of charter-school teachers and administrators. Using an analytic framework based on the work of Talbert and McLaughlin (1993), we term the ongoing, nested interactions across teaching contexts as the *embedded context of professionalism*.

Because our conversations with charter school teachers and administrators showed us that an isolated view of teaching does little to help us understand the complexity of teachers' work, we found the idea of an embedded context for professionalism to be especially compelling. It was helpful to understand teaching in charter schools in terms of multiple contexts for at least two reasons. First, the various forces that influenced teachers were not easily disentangled from each other. Districts, unions, and state licensing requirements continually interacted with the charter school movement in California; these extended professional contexts do not simply fade away for a great many teachers in the charter schools. Second, and more important, charter schools do not change the layers of concentric circles themselves, but they do change the nature of the relationships that exist across these contexts. Although many of the teachers in the start-up charter schools did have looser relationships with these entities than did most of the teachers in conversion schools, teachers across charter school did not simply cast off those layers of professionalism that have been deemed unimportant or cumbersome by some policy makers and practitioners.

Our evidence suggests that charter schools often provided an intensely rewarding school context, such as the intimate personal settings of small schools and classes. Charter-school teachers, for the most part, also said that they found professional pride in being among a select group of school reform pioneers. However, at the same time, these contexts were constantly fluctuating. Over the course of our study, teachers inundated by nonclass-

room responsibilities struggled with weariness and exhaustion, and openly speculated about their ability to sustain their level of commitment over the long haul.

To enhance their effectiveness at the school level and sustain their long-term performance, some charter-school teachers and founders either maintained or reshaped their relationships with districts, unions, and the state. Although many charter school advocates and founders decried the excessive bureaucracy and “red-tape” of the public educational system, many charter-school educators established strong working relationships with institutions within the system that advanced their school’s mission. In addition, although we find that charter-school teachers are divided in their support for teacher unions, only one conversion charter school in our study opted out of union membership. The other conversion schools that were part of a union before going charter remained in the union, and the start-up schools with no union affiliation prior to receiving their charter remained outside of the union.

Finally, even when charter schools had the opportunity to hire noncredentialed teachers, they rarely exercised this option. This finding suggests that charter school founders valued the concept of “at-will” hiring, but also recognized the importance of professionally trained educators, or at least valued the credibility that credentials add to charter schools’ instructional programs. For these reasons, we found that charter school teachers, like teachers at traditional schools, remained, for the most part, firmly embedded within multiple professional contexts.

Note

1. The findings of the UCLA study are reported in the 1998 policy monograph, *Beyond the Rhetoric of Charter School Reform: A Study of Ten California Districts*. The study’s principal investigator was Amy Stuart Wells. Research associates included Ligia Artiles, Sibyll Carnochan, Camille Wilson Cooper, Cynthia Grutzik, Jennifer Jellison Holme, Alejandra Lopez, Janelle Scott, Julie Slayton, and Ash Vasudeva. The study was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Ford Foundation.

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