

# **KIPP Open Book: Transparency and Accountability in Schools**

Marc Mannella 03 April 2011

## **Introduction**

With over 70 schools serving more than 45,000 students, charter schools have emerged as a significant feature of Philadelphia's educational landscape. Navigating the maze of these disparate schools has proven to be a challenge for educators, policymakers and parents alike.

A charter school is simply a free, open-enrollment public school that is governed by an independent board of directors, rather than a locally elected (or appointed, in the case of Philadelphia) school board. They are funded via public dollars from the city, state and federal government, and like any other public school they must serve every child who walks through their door. Charter schools are not allowed to have admissions criteria, so if more children sign up than the school has space to serve, a lottery must be held to randomly select who is able to attend.

Just as there is a profound variation in the quality of, say, restaurants in Philadelphia, so, too, is there a profound variation in the quality of its charter schools. The problem

is that, unlike with restaurants, charter schools do not yet have a Zagat guide to help consumers make informed decisions. And whereas it is morally defensible to live in a society where some people are unable to afford an expensive restaurant, every single child deserves the opportunity to attend a school that is the educational equivalent of a 5-star restaurant.

Some advocates within the charter movement believe that parent demand is the only measure that matters in assessing the effectiveness of a school. Nearly all charter schools have long waiting lists, which, using this logic, proves that nearly all charter schools are doing a good job.

As a recent Pew report pointed out, however, many parents are choosing charter schools because they are safer than traditional public schools (Pew Charitable Trusts 2010). The reality is that the demand for charter schools is more a reflection of many parents' belief that traditional public schools are unsafe than it is an affirmation of the academic quality of Philadelphia's charter schools.

Meanwhile, the School District of Philadelphia—the entity in charge of authorizing and regulating the city's charter schools—has historically paid little attention to charters, a phenomenon some charter operators describe as “benign neglect.” With a staff of approximately 5 in its charter office, the District simply lacks the capacity to perform

the in-depth observations and analysis needed to oversee its portfolio of 70-plus schools. As a result of this lax oversight, the burden to closely examine the daily operations of charter schools falls on individual charter boards. And since all board members are volunteers and most are non-educators, there are many charter boards that (intentionally or inadvertently) simply give charter operators carte blanche to run the school as they see fit.

To explain how this laissez-faire approach impacts the charter climate, I often describe the following scenario: Imagine you are driving alone in the middle of the night and come upon a red light at an intersection. There are no cars in any direction. No one is around. Do you run the light? Most charter operators have integrity and are unwilling to break either the letter or the spirit of the law even if they can get away with it. With multiple schools under federal indictment in Philadelphia (Woodall and Shiffman 2009), however, it's obvious that there are others who would choose to run the light.

## **The Efforts of KIPP Philadelphia**

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It is in this context that KIPP Philadelphia Schools created KIPP Open Book, an ambitious project to post all of its important documents and data online. We hope that KIPP Open Book will accomplish four things:

**1. Restore the public trust.** The negative publicity resulting from the allegations of charter school fraud and fiscal mismanagement made an already skeptical public very wary of the charter movement. Since charter schools are public schools, we believe taxpayers are entitled to know exactly how their dollars are being used. That means publishing all of the items that show just that, including budgets and audits, salaries of all employees, and documents related to our Board of Trustees, including resumes, by-laws, conflict-of-interest policies and meeting minutes.

**2. Inspire others to follow.** KIPP Philadelphia Schools has an ambitious strategic plan to grow to 10 schools by 2016, which, when at capacity, will serve 4,400 students in grades K–12. If we reach this goal, we project that 36 percent more students in the neighborhoods we serve will attend college.

We are not satisfied, however, with merely impacting 4,400 students. We want to be part of building a charter movement that fulfills its original promise of operating with more autonomy in exchange for more accountability. The end result of a good accountability system is the expansion of high-performing charter schools, the improvement of struggling schools and the closing of persistently bad schools.

**3. Keep the game fair.**

Although we are strong advocates of charter school accountability, we are concerned about an accountability system that narrowly focuses on test scores. If all a school aimed to accomplish was improve test scores, it could accomplish the goal rather quickly by doing one (or all) of the following:

- Manipulate the public lottery by only recruiting students in certain neighborhoods, requiring students to “interview” before they apply, or be unwilling to accommodate students with certain special needs.
- Kick out low performers.
- Narrow the curriculum by cutting all music and art classes and focus exclusively on test prep.

KIPP Philadelphia Schools does not have 100 percent proficiency rates and likely never will because we serve the students who need us most, and we refuse to play these games. We would like to see all schools follow our lead and publish their student demographic and student attrition data so that it is evident which schools are producing results through great teaching and which are producing results through manipulating the system.

**4. Respond to “yeah, buts.”** Our schools may not hit 100 percent proficiency, but we do take students who, on average, arrive in fifth grade two years behind grade level, and we help 80 percent of them to reach proficiency by the time they finish our eighth grade. Our students—82

percent of whom qualify for free and reduced lunch—outperform their peers at the district and state level. Many critics question how we are able to succeed where so many others have failed. They offer what we call “yeah, buts.” As in: Yeah, you produce great results, but.... you don’t serve the most challenging students, you have more resources than traditional public schools, you kick out a lot of kids. . . .

By publishing all of our data online, we are able to quickly dispel these myths. Our student demographic data reveal that we enroll a higher proportion of low-income students and students with disabilities than the School District of Philadelphia average. Our budgets demonstrate that our mature (enrolled to capacity) schools are self-sufficient on public funding, and that our fundraising efforts support our growth, not operating costs at our existing schools. Our student attrition data reveal that more students stay at KIPP from year to year than the traditional public schools in the neighborhoods we serve.

## **Where Do We Go From Here?**

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We launched KIPP Open Book in early December. Since then, we have learned that several charter schools have decided to do something similar. We applaud these efforts to embrace transparency, especially in a political environment that can be difficult for charters.

If —as stated earlier—the end goal is to create a system where every parent has the option to send their child to a Top Chef–quality charter school, then the question becomes whether or not projects like KIPP Open Book are really the equivalent of a Zagat guide.

The short answer is “no” because, unlike with food, there is no general agreement about which factors determine the quality of a school. Is a school with incredible test scores that loses 25 percent of its students from year to year a quality school? Is a school that has low test scores but incredibly high parent satisfaction rates a good school? How about a school that is doing well academically but can’t keep its finances in order?

The KIPP Foundation—the organization that provides support to all 99 KIPP schools across the country—has an entire team devoted to identifying the key factors that comprise school quality. Zagat may focus on 4 factors (food, price, décor, service), but the KIPP Foundation focuses on 6:

1. Are we serving the children who need us?
2. Are our students staying with us?
3. Are our students progressing and achieving academically?
4. Are our alumni climbing the mountain to and through college?
5. Are we building a sustainable people model?
6. Are we building a sustainable financial model?

Transparency is a means to an end. Throwing data on the web will not magically improve school performance because society still doesn't agree on what makes a great school, and parents don't yet have access to the information required for them to become savvy consumers in the educational marketplace.

But if we can agree on what makes a great school, and then ensure that parents have better information and authorizers hold charter schools to higher standards, we believe we will see fewer 1-star and more 5-star charter schools. The direct result of better schools is more children going to and through college, and on to have a happy, independent life. Until we collectively turn our focus to making that a reality, the robust charter landscape we have here in Philadelphia will not lead to better life outcomes for our children.

**Marc Mannella founded KIPP Philadelphia Charter School (KPCS) in 2003, and served as its School Leader for five years. Prior to founding KPCS, Mannella taught middle school science in Baltimore as a Teach For America corps member, and then taught high school biology and environmental science at a charter high school in Philadelphia. Seeing very bright children in his high school classes struggle to do basic mathematics and read science textbooks, he decided to take on education reform on a larger scale, which led him to KIPP. Because of KPCS' initial success, Mannella has taken on a new challenge as CEO of KIPP**

**Philadelphia Schools. In this role he has laid forth a plan for KIPP to grow from one high performing charter school to a cluster of ten high-performing charter schools, by 2019. At full enrollment this cluster of schools will serve grades K–12, and increase the number of minority students in North and West Philadelphia who are prepared to matriculate to college by 36 percent. Mannella holds a BA in Psychology and Biology from the University of Rochester, and an MEd in Education Leadership from National Louis University.**

## **References**

## **References**

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