

# *Black Educational Choice*

Assessing the Private and Public Alternatives  
to Traditional K–12 Public Schools

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*Diana T. Slaughter-Defoe, Howard C. Stevenson,  
Edith G. Arrington, and Deborah J. Johnson, Editors*

*Foreword by James A. Banks*



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## When Community Control Meets Privatization: The Search for Empowerment in African American Charter Schools

*Janelle T. Scott*

### INTRODUCTION

The charter school experiment is two decades old, and there are currently over 4,000 charter schools operating in 40 states, the Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico. Under the Obama administration's *Race to the Top* program, which incentivized states to increase their charter school numbers along with other reforms, and with significant philanthropic support, the urban charter school reform movement stands to grow rapidly in the coming years. A particular and somewhat controversial growth area is that of charter schools managed by for-profit or non-profit educational or charter management organizations (MOs).<sup>1</sup>

From its inception, charter school reform enjoyed support from advocates who held differing ideological stances (Wells, Grutzik, Carnochan, Slayton, & Vasudeva, 1999). Some advocates favored allowing teachers, parents, and community members to shape schooling according to their sense of the needs of their children, while others argued public school systems were inherently wasteful and bloated and would be more creative and innovative with fewer resources if freed from districts and given to the private sector.

As the charter school movement has expanded and matured over the last two decades, teachers' union leader Albert Shanker's original vision of a teacher-led model (Shanker, 1988), has given way to a more privatized model, with significant tensions over control ensuing (Ascher et al., 2001; Bulkley, 2005). Community based charter school advocates often wish to offer a more culturally representative and responsive pedagogy than offered in traditional public schools. In comparison, MOs have specific school designs, governance structure, and curricula that they seek to bring to scale across schooling franchises,

sometimes in multiple states. These schooling models might not map onto or include space for community, teacher, or parental preferences. As such, the proliferation of MOs in urban school districts warrants much closer scrutiny in terms of its effects on community engagement and empowerment in the resulting charter schools (Scott & DiMartino, 2010). These privatization efforts have been popular with parents and communities of color, but also have been contested by the same populations.

Much of the research on charter schools operated by MOs has focused on the achievement outcomes (Garcia, Barber, & Molnar, 2009; Gill, Zimmer, Christman, & Blanc, 2007). While this research is important for determining school effectiveness in terms of test score data, it often gets mired in methodological debates. In addition, achievement studies cannot engage the political tensions that have often accompanied attempts to privatize schools serving communities of color (Scott & Fruchter, 2009), nor can they consider the multiple purposes of public education beyond test scores (Engel, 2000).

As yet the research literature has not adequately explored the issues of empowerment between predominantly African American communities and the MOs that operate their schools. We know far too little about what voice or influence parents, teachers, and community members have once they become involved in a privately managed charter school.<sup>2</sup> This chapter considers such issues in two predominantly African American charter schools. The case studies reveal that market advocates' claims that choice results in parental and community empowerment are challenged by the lived experiences of these school communities, who struggled for control. First, I discuss the chapter's conceptual framework, which considers empowerment from the perspective of teachers and communities. Next, I examine professional and community empowerment in two charter schools. The chapter ends with a discussion of the policy implications raised by the two cases.

## **CHARTERS, MOS, AND EMPOWERMENT**

Empowerment has been a prominent theme in educational reforms, and particularly important in African American struggles over schooling. At various points in the history of education policy, school reformers, policy makers, teachers' unions, grassroots organizations, and market advocates have supported reforms that shifted power from centralized state and school district bureaucracies to local school communities (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). African American teachers, parents and principals have often been central in those struggles (Murtadha & Watts, 2005; Walker, 1996). In contemporary debates about school choice, however, the voices of African American educators and community members are often muted.

Two central arguments undergird school choice. First, theorists posit that when parents are allowed to choose schools for their children that best cohere to their values and desire for quality, schools will be forced to compete for their patronage or risk closure. Another assumption is that providing parents with



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choice in their children's schooling—usually limited to district boundaries—is tantamount to fulfilling the promise of the Civil Rights Movement (Arons, 1989; Blackwell, 2007; Bolick, 1998).

The market-based empowerment arguments invoke normative ideals: democracy, choice, and equality. Yet, some advocates of choice and privatization embrace the language of the Civil Rights Movement without holding any explicit commitment to making schools more participatory. While they favor parental *choice* of schools, they do not necessarily advocate for parental or teacher *voice* in school-level decision-making, governance, curriculum, personnel, or discipline policy. In fact, in 1990, Chubb and Moe famously argued that the central problem facing public education was that it was too democratic; allowing different stakeholders to fight over their visions for schooling was detrimental to school quality. More recently, former New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein echoed this argument, asserting it was not desirable to run schools by “plebiscite” (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Cramer & Green, 2010).

Some progressives argue that the modern school choice movement taps into the long history of African Americans seeking to realize alternative educational institutions (Forman, 2005). Indeed, many African Americans have been active in charter school reform, such as the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO). Increasingly, Democratic African American policy makers have also supported the expansion of school choice—a sea change in what has traditionally been seen as a largely white and Republican policy issue. And the relatively recently formed advocacy group, Democrats for Educational Reform, which was started by wealthy donors, has promised to only support candidates who endorse charter schools and other related reforms. Progressive charter school advocates have supported more voice and control for local communities, but they are less interested in completely dismantling public education systems, and instead want to reinvigorate them. The risk is that operating a charter school under the auspices of a private provider could result in re-regulation under new management (Handler, 1996).

This school choice support might be understood as a need for the “strategic engagement” of African American parents and communities who might not fully align with the conservative policy agendas, yet choose to engage in school choice order to secure the best options for their children in a context where quality educational options are few (Pedroni, 2007). Some African American choice advocates argue that traditional civil rights’ leadership is out of sync with the desperation of poor parents who are people of color (Holt 2000). These grassroots communities and activists of color see school choice and privatization as a means to greater power and voice (Sullivan, 2000).

Traditional civil rights groups have typically been tepid supporters and detractors of school choice. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) has opposed vouchers for over thirty years, and in 2010, joined with a coalition of civil rights groups to oppose many of the Obama administration’s educational reforms. These allies caution against

the use of charter schools as a systemic educational reform because of the mixed achievement data, and the underrepresentation of special education students and English language learners in charter schools (Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights under Law et al., 2010).

## DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

This qualitative case study had four points of inquiry in order to engage the empowerment claims offered in support of charter schools: (1) to understand the motivations from charter school communities for entering into partnerships with MOs; (2) to explore the goals of the MOs and the school communities in terms of their agendas for the schools and for public education; (3) to learn how the MO and school community negotiated governance; and (4) to explore the educational environments of the schools in the context of their cities and districts. The study was conducted in two Californian urban school districts where the percentage of African American students was in decline. This context proved to be important as the school founders formed the charter schools to serve African American students who they felt were getting lost in the districts. In addition, because California's charter school law did not guarantee founders access to start-up funds, the impetus to go it alone was balanced by the need to secure a stable management partner and/or donor (Scott & Holme, 2002). The schools shared an MO, The Better Tomorrows Education Fund (BTEF).<sup>3</sup>

### **The Management Organization: The Better Tomorrows Education Fund (BTEF)**

The Better Tomorrows Education Fund was a non-profit organization founded in 1994. A multi-millionaire donor who favored school choice funded the MO. The BTEF began targeting charter schools in primarily religious, urban communities of color, promising management and technical support, seemingly on a philanthropic basis. At the time of the study, there were 15 charter schools around the country that were partnered with the BTEF. Foundations Elementary Charter School and the Southside Learning Center were two of them.

### **Foundations Elementary Charter School**

Foundations Elementary Charter School was located in the Mission Unified School District (MUSD). The school was located in a predominantly African American, working-class community where many of the district's charter schools were located, prompting an African American MUSD board member to wonder if charter school reform was merely yet another means of "experimenting" on "black and brown children." The charter school was housed at the Vista Christian Church. The K-7 school served 700 students

who were almost exclusively African American. The students' families were predominantly church members. Some teachers favored the racial and religious homogeneity of the school, while others wanted more diversity. All the parents I spoke with, however, explained that the racial make-up of the school was one of the main factors they used to choose the school for their children.

### **The Southside Learning Center**

The Southside Learning Center (SLC) was a part of the Larga Unified School District (LUSD). The school served 120 K–2 grade students; nearly all were African American. The teaching staff was all African American men and women. The BTEF had contacted one of the community leaders, asking her to form a focus group to discuss the educational needs of African Americans in LUSD. From these conversations, the BTEF and the SLC agreed to partner. The school's board, all African Americans, had connections to school district leadership, community organizations, and the private sector. The CEO of the BTEF also served on the board. The charter showed that the school's board of directors would "establish the school's objectives," while delegating the responsibility for meeting those objectives to the teachers and school-site management.

### **Findings: Community and Professional Empowerment**

The data revealed that stakeholders vied for at least two forms of empowerment: community and professional. Yet, the empowerment rhetoric surrounding charter school reform did not neatly align with community or professional control in the two schools. Political and social contexts shaped power distributions. For example, at SLC, where the district played a strong regulatory role, and where the governing board had powerful social capital, professional, and community empowerment were more evident. At Foundations, where the district played a less regulatory role, and the governing board was inactive, community empowerment was slightly more evident, with the MO and church leadership team assuming most of the decision-making over the wants of teachers, and some community members.

### **Professional Empowerment**

With multiple layers of regulation, from the district and MO, teachers felt their work was constrained. Teachers reported feeling most professionally empowered at the SLC after it terminated its relationship with the BTEF. The charter school professionals balanced their control with MO officials, school district officials, and parents in the school. Moreover, the expertise the BTEF purported to bring to local schools was often found lacking by the teachers themselves, and BTEF officials were not guaranteed to be any more responsive than school district officials.

Teachers at both schools were likely to be new to the profession, uncertified, and earned less than neighboring public school teachers. Teachers reported that the BTEF failed to provide them with professional development or classroom resources. At Foundations, the teachers were completely excluded from decision making beyond their own classrooms. The MO and the church made all of the decisions about the running of the school. While teachers were paid according to the district pay scale, Foundations teachers taught almost two hours more than MUSD teachers, and their school year was longer. They were also not part of the teachers' union.

Upon terminating their relationship with the BTEF, the SLC had significant levels of parental and teacher involvement in governance, though the school struggled to forge networks that would provide financial stability. Just months after the SLC began, tensions emerged about the role of the school's board of directors versus the BTEF. In a meeting to clarify the roles of the two groups, the CEO of the BTEF said that he imagined that the relationship between the two groups would evolve over three phases. These included (1) securing the charter approval, (2) preparing the school to start with funds and facility security, and finally, (3) operating the school.

The board, on the other hand, was unaware that the BTEF was not performing operational responsibilities all along. These included the paying of utility bills, getting insurance for the school and the board, and other basic responsibilities. In addition, payroll services for the staff and educational services for the students were not attended to. According to notes from a meeting between the groups, the parties agreed that the SLC Board had fiduciary responsibility for the school: "It will operate independently from [BTEF], raise its own funds, provide strategic directions for [SLC], and approve budgets and major expenditures. [BTEF] will act as [SLC's] agent and operate the school day-to-day." Both parties would raise money from private and governmental sources on behalf of the school.

Eventually, the BTEF and the SLC's board settled upon an agreement that gave the BTEF operating responsibilities for two years unless renewed. The agreement stated that the chain of accountability flowed from the MUSD school board to the SLC board and finally, to the BTEF. The agreement stipulated that the BTEF would be responsible for assisting the SLC board on a number of activities.

Despite this agreement, there were still complaints about the quality and effectiveness of the BTEF on the agreed-upon tasks. Janet Nelson, a first-grade teacher who had been at the SLC from the beginning reported, "So they reneged on a lot of things. They weren't paying our bills on time. When I first started they were paying . . . we didn't think . . . we weren't sure we were going to get paid the first month, and the poor office manager never got a check on time, I mean, she would be like two or three months in the hole." The BTEF promised training and bonuses that the teachers never saw. For example, Nelson, who had been at the school from the beginning recalled that the BTEF's unfulfilled promises included trips to a warm, seaside resort

town for a staff retreat, bonuses in excess of \$1000, and teacher training and development.

Neal Smith, another first-grade teacher, confirmed many of Nelson's assertions. He too recalled late and absent paychecks, unanswered requests for help, and unpaid school utility bills. He commented, "especially as a teacher, I felt that we were self-serving, you know, we did everything." One task that the teachers undertook was sharing food services with a local elementary school. The teachers would pick up the food from that school's cafeteria.

The data about the (lack of) formal governance at the Foundations Charter School showed that authority and control at the school was located outside of it. It seemed to rest somewhere between the BTEF and the Vista Christian Church. Teachers had little control over school policy, but were told they were responsible for improving student learning.

Teachers reported that they had made repeated requests for representation on the school's board. Interestingly, many teachers said that they did not even understand what the board actually did, when they met, and whether teachers' concerns were even considered. Tayna Tharp, a veteran teacher at the school, said that when she asked to have some teacher concerns addressed, she was told that the principal would present the concerns to the board. Tharp, however, thought that the principal was not in classrooms enough to appreciate the teachers' issues. "But they didn't see our point, and I just can't understand why. And it actually, it got on my nerves. That really bugged me." During the school's first year, Tharp estimated that the board had met once. "So even if we had some sort of concern to take to the board, we couldn't. Who sits on this board, I could not tell you." This lack of clarity caused Tharp to mistrust the BTEF. She explained:

They're the governing body or whatever. If you figure that you could actually trust them that would be one thing. But I personally don't trust them. I know at one point they were talking about they were going to have the district not do our paychecks anymore and they were going to take that over. I thought, well the minute they started that I was out of here, because I don't trust that. I need my check.

When Principal Damien tried to explain what the board did, it felt as if he was reaching, often speaking in hypothetical, conditional terms:

I think the board would be the image of the school. I would portray the image, but if there was a problem I'm sure the board would let me know that those problems exist. The finances that come through the foundations would, I would say would be approved by the board because the board would be getting a lot of those, and then I would know exactly how much I have to spend, in addition to, I'm saying over and above the ADA and what the state would give us.

### Community Empowerment

Community empowerment varied in each school, and revealed the complexity in defining what parties are included in "community." While there were parent councils at each school, parental participation on both of the schools' boards of directors was minimal; one parent served on each. On the other hand, both schools' boards of directors were comprised of members of the African American church, business, educational, and legal communities. Both boards had BTEF representatives serving as well.

At the SLC, powerful community networks were such that when the BTEF was found to be deficient, the charter school board let its partnership with the BTEF end, though the school struggled financially to stay afloat following the separation. The board's monitoring of some of the BTEF's practices provided them with the evidentiary grounds to end the partnership.

Randall Evans, a SLC board of director's member, argued that the issues for which the BTEF was responsible, namely the day-to-day management of the school, were badly neglected. He liked the promises of the BTEF to a "holographic carrot." He allowed, however, that the BTEF had served an absolutely critical role early on in the charter application process. The first item was that the BTEF provided the school with a \$250,000 bond required by the LUSD to show that the school had sufficient start-up funds. The second item was that representatives from the BTEF assured the LUSD that the SLC had the backing of a "nine billion dollar [organization], so funding was absolutely no obstacle in anything that we'd like to do." With these assurances, the LUSD approved the charter. In retrospect, community leaders realized they had placed too much trust in the BTEF.

To underscore the failed partnership with the BTEF, Evans shared a parable by Rumi (Barks & Moyne, 1995). The parable tells the story of a traveler and his donkey. This traveler asks the servant of the home at which the traveler is to attend a party to care for the beloved donkey who had carried him on his long journey. He nags the servant to take special care with his prized animal, giving it rest, water, and the proper food. The servant replies irritably, reminding the traveler that he knows how to care for the animal properly, and encourages him to relax. Then, the servant goes off to recreate with his friends, completely neglecting the care of the donkey. Rumi concludes the parable with an admonition to those who have a prized possession:

The [traveler] then lay down to sleep and had terrible dreams about his donkey, how it was being torn to pieces by a wolf, or falling helplessly into a ditch. And his dreaming was right! His donkey was being totally neglected, weak and gasping, without food or water all the nightlong. The servant had done nothing he said he would. There are such vicious and empty flatterers in your life. Do the careful, donkey-tending work. Don't trust that to anyone else. (Barks & Moyne, 1995, pp. 71-73)

Ultimately, the SLC board decided it would be best to simply let the contract expire without extending it. The teachers and parents agreed with the move, despite the difficulties that continued. According to Janet Nelson, the first-grade teacher, "I'm glad it's over . . . yeah, I'm glad they're gone, I'm glad." Neal Smith echoed this sentiment, saying, "we haven't missed a beat, so, you know, we've just been moving on just . . . it was like . . . severing ties with them hasn't hurt us at all." According to parent council president Ansa Evers, "It got to be a lot of conflicts 'cause we wanted to use a certain learning technique, they'd be no, you need to use this. And [we'd want to have] our teachers trained in one way, no you should be doing this." She continued "and so they basically . . . they want you to do what they want you to do and not what you want to do. So they was [*sic*] trying to take our goal and make it into their goal. And it just kept . . . it would be a conflict all the time, so . . . I mean, what was best for everybody . . . we did pretty good going out on our own and becoming independent."

In the aftermath of the BTEF, there was extensive involvement of teachers and parents in school-site decision-making. The board of directors met regularly, and meetings focused upon school policy. Parent meetings took place bimonthly, and were standing-room-only. The board of directors' president regularly attended parent and faculty meetings, and the climate was collaborative. The board left the development and implementation of local school issues to the teachers, principal, and parent council and all of these parties seemed to be meaningfully involved. At the board of directors' meetings, community members were in attendance, and their concerns were taken seriously. By most accounts, overall community involvement flourished in the aftermath of the BTEF.

The school district context proved important. The LUSD had learned from the experience of the SLC, and procedures had been enacted that caught the BTEF proposing questionable schools even as the relationship between the BTEF and the SLC had soured. The district prohibited the BTEF from operating charters in the LUSD. Comparatively, the MUSD did not provide close oversight. At Foundations, teachers and parents identified the church pastor, William Paulson, as head of the school. Paulson explained that Foundations Elementary Charter School was "a faith-based charter school," punctuating his words by pounding the palm of his hand softly on the table where we sat.

Paulson said that the BTEF had approached him about starting a school just like they had the SLC. Though he wanted his own Christian school, he recognized that many families could not pay tuition, thus he embraced the charter school idea. In a pamphlet distributed to the church community, Paulson described his vision for the church and the role the charter school would play in helping him realize his mission. Paulson hoped to build a new church facility, "that is equipped with the finest technology for communication of the presentation of the Gospel." In addition, Paulson planned to build a business complex and childcare center. Paulson estimated that construction



costs would be approximately \$10,000,000. Once the childcare center and business complex were built, the church would have revenues from these operations.

There was another important revenue stream. Paulson wrote, "The current rental income from [Foundations] will provide additional resources for the mortgage payment." The current church, once vacated, could then be used for charter school classrooms. The school's expansion would benefit the church, for as Paulson wrote, "The more classroom space we have, the more students we can accommodate, the more students we accommodate, the more boys and girls we prepare for adulthood. And last but not least, the more revenue we will generate through [Foundations] for the church." Paulson saw the charter school as a means to expand his ministry, in part through capital provided by the school, even as he sought to serve African American children.

The heavy involvement of the Vista Christian Church indicated that the accountability mechanisms of the district over its charter schools were weak—at least in terms of enforcing California statutes prohibiting public funds to go to religious schools. When asked how the district ensured that schools were not in violation of even these liberal guidelines, MUSD lawyer, Gerry Sanda admitted that no one in the district was really watching after the charter school began operating.

Consequently, the Foundations charter school community was largely comprised of students, parents, and staff who were affiliated with the Vista Christian Church. Many teachers complained that the ability of the church community to have a school that matched its values and served its congregants came at the expense of their own professional empowerment. School professionals did not have the opportunity to shape school policy, and many parents placed their trust in their pastor.

The principal, Shane Damien saw his own role as the one responsible for daily school operations. Yet, it seemed that most of his work involved negotiating with the church to make sure school and church functions did not conflict with one another. The school deferred use of the facility in the event of some church functions. One afternoon, a repast was held in the school's auditorium following a funeral service at the church; school activities normally held in the room were cancelled that day. On such days when church luncheons were held, any school uses of that space were cancelled or curtailed. It was unclear if the board had decided that the school would share with the church or if it was *de facto* policy. Wilma Sessions, a community member of the board of directors, complained that the board had only met once that she could recall, and commented that she could not discern who "owned" the school.

The transparency of records for Foundations was problematic. I was unable to obtain some documents that would normally be available, such as budgets, salary information, and minutes from board meetings, and Principal Damien did not have access to them, either. Thus, at Foundations, while the

Ultimately, the SLC board decided it would be best to simply let the contract expire without extending it. The teachers and parents agreed with the move, despite the difficulties that continued. According to Janet Nelson, the first-grade teacher, "I'm glad it's over . . . yeah, I'm glad they're gone, I'm glad." Neal Smith echoed this sentiment, saying, "we haven't missed a beat, so, you know, we've just been moving on just . . . it was like . . . severing ties with them hasn't hurt us at all." According to parent council president Ansa Evers, "It got to be a lot of conflicts 'cause we wanted to use a certain learning technique, they'd be no, you need to use this. And [we'd want to have] our teachers trained in one way, no you should be doing this." She continued "and so they basically . . . they want you to do what they want you to do and not what you want to do. So they was [*sic*] trying to take our goal and make it into their goal. And it just kept . . . it would be a conflict all the time, so . . . I mean, what was best for everybody . . . we did pretty good going out on our own and becoming independent."

In the aftermath of the BTEF, there was extensive involvement of teachers and parents in school-site decision-making. The board of directors met regularly, and meetings focused upon school policy. Parent meetings took place bimonthly, and were standing-room-only. The board of directors' president regularly attended parent and faculty meetings, and the climate was collaborative. The board left the development and implementation of local school issues to the teachers, principal, and parent council and all of these parties seemed to be meaningfully involved. At the board of directors' meetings, community members were in attendance, and their concerns were taken seriously. By most accounts, overall community involvement flourished in the aftermath of the BTEF.

The school district context proved important. The LUSD had learned from the experience of the SLC, and procedures had been enacted that caught the BTEF proposing questionable schools even as the relationship between the BTEF and the SLC had soured. The district prohibited the BTEF from operating charters in the LUSD. Comparatively, the MUSD did not provide close oversight. At Foundations, teachers and parents identified the church pastor, William Paulson, as head of the school. Paulson explained that Foundations Elementary Charter School was "a faith-based charter school," punctuating his words by pounding the palm of his hand softly on the table where we sat.

Paulson said that the BTEF had approached him about starting a school just like they had the SLC. Though he wanted his own Christian school, he recognized that many families could not pay tuition, thus he embraced the charter school idea. In a pamphlet distributed to the church community, Paulson described his vision for the church and the role the charter school would play in helping him realize his mission. Paulson hoped to build a new church facility, "that is equipped with the finest technology for communication of the presentation of the Gospel." In addition, Paulson planned to build a business complex and childcare center. Paulson estimated that construction

costs would be approximately \$10,000,000. Once the childcare center and business complex were built, the church would have revenues from these operations.

There was another important revenue stream. Paulson wrote, "The current rental income from [Foundations] will provide additional resources for the mortgage payment." The current church, once vacated, could then be used for charter school classrooms. The school's expansion would benefit the church, for as Paulson wrote, "The more classroom space we have, the more students we can accommodate, the more students we accommodate, the more boys and girls we prepare for adulthood. And last but not least, the more revenue we will generate through [Foundations] for the church." Paulson saw the charter school as a means to expand his ministry, in part through capital provided by the school, even as he sought to serve African American children.

The heavy involvement of the Vista Christian Church indicated that the accountability mechanisms of the district over its charter schools were weak—at least in terms of enforcing California statutes prohibiting public funds to go to religious schools. When asked how the district ensured that schools were not in violation of even these liberal guidelines, MUSD lawyer, Gerry Sanda admitted that no one in the district was really watching after the charter school began operating.

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church community was empowered to have a school, professional empowerment seemed to be lacking as a result, and the predominantly African American, female teaching staff were disgruntled with their treatment by the church.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

These two cases reveal that the African American struggle for educational empowerment endures even when school choice is afforded to parents in the form of charter schools. Counter to the hopes of conservative and progressive advocates of charter school reform, these two cases demonstrate that choice alone is not a sufficient policy mechanism to generate the full empowerment of African American teachers, school leaders, and parents. Management organizations that bring top-down business models to the management of public schools are not always in concert with the preferences of teachers and community members.

Yet, charter schools have also provided many African American communities with the opportunity to create alternatives to traditional public schools. Sustaining such schools as independently operated, however, continues to be a struggle in the face of a growing preference from policy makers and philanthropies for franchises, or networks of charter schools. These models, while sometimes boasting high achievement scores, have also been shown to have high student attrition rates, and serve fewer special education students.

The potential for professional and community empowerment in the two cases was most optimal when the schools had strong social networks to school district administration, government officials, and the private sector. Policy makers could facilitate the development of grassroots schools by targeting them with resources, technical assistance, and capacity building. Comparatively, MOs hold that their school design is optimal when it is adhered to without alterations (National Charter School Research Project, 2007). When donors, MOs, and board members have the ability to withdraw support for the school if their preferences are not executed, empowerment might not extend to full participation in the governance of the school for teachers, parents, and community members (Scott, 2009).

Certainly not all MO-charter school partnerships present the challenges described in this chapter. They do serve as cautionary tales about the degree to which the current, management organization model for charter school reform incorporates the leadership and voices of the African American communities they propose to serve. Indeed, the history of African American education is replete with struggles—successful and not—for control and the power to influence the governance, curriculum, and personnel choices of the schools their children attend. In many ways, privatization challenges this possibility, but the loss of power is not necessarily predetermined, nor is schooling under public governance a panacea. As the SLC board of directors' president said, quoting Rumi, African Americans must "do the careful,

donkey tending work” as they continually seek empowerment and quality schooling for their communities in an increasingly privatized public sector.

## NOTES

1. EMOs typically operate on a for-profit basis, and CMOs typically operate on a non-profit basis. EMOs can manage charter schools and traditional district schools while CMOs operate charter schools exclusively. There are also partner organizations that provide varying levels of management expertise that do not identify as EMOs or CMOs, and who work with charters and traditional public schools. I refer to the range of private management organizations in a generalized way: management organizations (MOs).

2. I do not advance a comparative argument about empowerment in traditional public schools or school districts. The history of African American schooling demonstrates that parents and communities have engaged in long struggles to have their voices, values, and concerns addressed by public and private school officials.

3. The names of schools, teachers, and MO are pseudonyms. Contact the author for additional information regarding the overall study context and methods.

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