EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Out of the Debate and Into the Schools

Comparing Practices and Strategies in Traditional, Pilot
and Charter Schools in the City of Boston

Prepared for
**The Boston Foundation**

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Foundation
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# Out of the Debate and Into the Schools

## Comparing Practices and Strategies in Traditional, Pilot and Charter Schools in the City of Boston

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# Acknowledgments

Early in 2009, the stunning results of a Boston Foundation report comparing student performance in the three types of Boston's public schools generated a flurry of media attention and drew hundreds of teachers, parents and administrators to the Foundation for a forum. Published in partnership with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education—and scrupulously conducted by a team from MIT and the Harvard Graduate School of Education—it was titled "Informing the Debate: Comparing Boston's Charter, Pilot and Traditional Schools."

The report showed that students attending Boston's charter schools consistently outperform their peers at traditional schools on both the middle and high school levels. The results in math achievement for middle-school students in charter schools were nothing short of remarkable. The outcomes for pilot schools, which operate with some of the autonomies granted to charter schools, were mixed and deserve further investigation.

Long before the study was commissioned, the Boston Foundation had been supporting our city's charter and pilot schools because we believe that the autonomies they have over the length of the school day, staffing and other elements are crucial to offering our young people, especially those from low-income families, the best possible education—which is the key to their future success.

This study was designed to help us understand the differences in student outcomes in the three types of schools. As you read through it, you will find that several practices employed by charter schools emerge as leading contenders for their success. For instance, students at charter schools spend more than 378 hours, or the equivalent of 62 days, longer in school in a single year than students in traditional schools. And charter school principals have more power to hire the teachers that will perform best for their students and remove those teachers who do not.

In January of this year, Governor Deval Patrick signed a pioneering education reform bill that was informed by a coalition of community leaders convened by the Boston Foundation, called the "Race to the Top Coalition," which played a key role in its passage. Among other innovations, the legislation doubles the number of charter school seats in the state's worst performing school districts and paves the way for other innovative schools and practices.

It is our hope that this report will continue to build the case for the importance of autonomies for all public schools. But make no mistake: there are powerful forces aligned against the kinds of reforms we are seeking. The Boston Foundation and our many partners in this fight are optimistic, however, that as evidence continues to mount, our community will embrace the reforms our schools need to offer an excellent education to all of Boston's children. To do anything less is not only self-defeating for a community whose future depends on educating all of our children, but morally reprehensible.

Paul S. Grogan
President and CEO
The Boston Foundation

# Contents

# 1.
# Introduction

In January of 2009, the Boston Foundation, in partnership with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, published *Informing the Debate*, which examined variations in student performance levels across the three types of public schools in Boston: traditional, pilot and charter schools. The choices for Boston's students reflect similar choice trends across the nation, and fuel questions about the best option for serving all students well.

The findings of the study, conducted by a team from MIT and Harvard, suggest that middle and high school students who attend charter schools significantly outperform their counterparts attending traditional schools, while the differences in student performance between charter and pilot schools were mixed. Specifically, students who attended charter middle schools outperformed students who attended traditional schools by approximately 0.13 standard deviations in English language arts[1] and by 0.5 standard deviations in mathematics, a difference that the reports cites as "roughly equivalent to the black-white achievement gap."[2]

In other words, the improvement in student performance from just one year of attendance at a charter middle school is enough to cut the black-white achievement gap in mathematics in half.

For high school students attending charter schools, the estimated gains in English language arts were between 0.16 and 0.19 standard deviations, with charter high school students also showing gains over their traditional school peers in writing (in both topic development and writing composition). While pilot elementary school students showed gains over their peers in traditional schools of approximately 0.09 standard deviations in English language arts, the estimated gains or losses for middle and high school students varied, and thus were determined to "deserve further study."[3]

These findings gained significant public attention, and created the impetus for more research focused on why charter school students outperform their peers.

This study uses the findings from *Informing the Debate* as a launching point to delve deeper into the issues that may explain differences in student outcomes – thus moving us out of the debate and into the schools. The study sheds light on the practices and strategies employed by traditional, pilot, and charter schools in the city of Boston. The main research questions driving this study were:

- How do traditional, pilot and charter schools operate within each element of the autonomy framework?

- What practices within the elements of the autonomy framework may account for differences in student performance levels at traditional, pilot and charter schools?

- How do high performing traditional, pilot and charter schools operate within these autonomies and how are they similar or different from one another?

The findings discussed in this executive summary represent a summary of the findings in the full report. **The full report, can be found in pdf form at www.tbf.org under Understanding Boston.**

# 2.
# Background

"The charter movement is absolutely one of the most profound changes in American education," said Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education, to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools at its annual conference in 2009. Indeed, Secretary Duncan and President Obama are leveraging an unprecedented $100 billion in "American Recovery and Reinvestment Act" stimulus funding for education, including $4.35 billion in competitive Race to the Top grants aimed at advancing effective reforms, with one of the goals being the removal of state policy barriers to the creation of more charter schools. According to Secretary Duncan, states that have caps on the growth of charter schools "put themselves at a competitive disadvantage for the largest pool of discretionary dollars states have ever had access to."[4]

In the two decades since they were established, charter schools have become an integral part of the public education landscape in this country. In 2008, 1.3 million students were enrolled in the 4,303 public charter schools operating in 40 states and Washington, D.C., roughly three percent of the number of students in the nation's public schools.[5] In light of recent federal and state policy changes, those numbers are sure to grow. This growth, however, has not diminished the controversy surrounding charter schools, which are the cause of an impassioned national, statewide and local debate.

Charter schools have been an important element of public education in the Commonwealth since the

passage of the *Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993*. They were established not only as a way to provide students – especially those in underserved communities – with alternative education options, but to infuse competition, accountability and innovation into the education system.

TABLE 1

## Number and Type of Schools in the City of Boston, 2008-09

|  | Traditional | Pilot | Charter | TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **TOTAL** | 124 | 21 | 13[6] | 158 |
| **Early Learning Center (K-1)** | 5 | 1 | - | 6 |
| **Elementary** | 57 | 3 | 2 | 62 |
| **K-8** | 14 | 4 | 1 | 19 |
| **High** | 22 | 11[b] | 2 | 35 |
| **Other Configurations** | 12[a] | - | 5[c] | 17 |

Source: Boston Public Schools (October 2008) and Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education District Profiles 2008-09.

[a] There are 3 exam schools (grades 7-12); 6 special education schools (grades K-12); and 3 alternative (at risk) programs.

[b] Two schools are Horace Mann Charter Schools, whose charters are approved and funded by the Boston Public School District and which operate the same as Pilot schools.

[c] Includes Academy of the Pacific Rim (5-12), Boston Collegiate Charter (5-12), Boston Preparatory Charter (6-12), Neighborhood House (K-12), and MATCH Charter Public High (6-12).

TABLE 2

## Overview of Public Schools in the City of Boston, by School Type, 2008-09

| School Type | # of Students | % of all Students (n= 61,058) | % of Students | | | | # of Teachers[7] |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  |  |  | Free or Reduced Lunch | Special Education | First Language Not English | Limited English Proficient |  |
| **Traditional Schools** | 49,655 | 81% | 78% | 22% | 36% | 20% | 3,793 |
| **Pilot Schools** | 6,501 | 11% | 70% | 19% | 31% | 11% | 543 |
| **Charter Schools** | 4,902 | 8% | 69% | 13% | 19% | 2% | 370 |

Pilot schools in Boston were created in 1994 by the Boston Public Schools and the Boston Teacher's Union in response to the growing popularity of charter schools, and possess many of the autonomies of charters. In 1997, the state authorized a charter option, Horace Mann Charter Schools, which operate like Boston's pilot school model.[8] Today, these various types of schools offer a range of options for students and their families. As of the 2008-09 school year, Boston was home to 158 traditional, pilot, and charter public schools. **Table 1** shows the number and type of schools at each level.

Traditional, pilot, and charter public schools in Boston serve approximately 61,000 of the city's students. The majority of those students (81%) attend traditional schools. Pilot schools enroll eleven percent of the city's public school students and charter schools serve the remaining eight percent. In the 2008-09 school year, traditional schools served a higher percentage of students who are eligible for a free or reduced price lunch, special education students, students whose first language is not English (FLNE), and limited English proficient (LEP) students than did pilot or charter schools (**Table 2**).

# 3.
## The Autonomy Framework

All of the Commonwealth's public schools are accountable to the federal and state performance and improvement requirements on state assessments in designated core academic subjects and other measures of performance approved by the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.[9] The strategic differences among traditional, pilot and charter schools, then, are rooted in the autonomies granted to pilot and charter schools. Charter public schools were created by the *Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993* to provide educational choice for parents, expand educational opportunity for their children, and promote innovation in their schools and districts. The premise for granting charter and pilot schools greater autonomy is that the prevailing public education model is unable to adequately serve all students, making it necessary to develop alternative schools that are not constrained by district rules and policies, nor the district and teacher union's collective bargaining agreement. Buckley and Schneider (2007) summarize this point:

> The specific kinds of democratic institutions by which American public education has been governed for the last half century appear to be incompatible with effective schooling. (p. 2)

In Boston, as with other cities and states in the United States, the autonomies granted to pilot and to charter schools are intended to improve the ability of these schools to develop innovative and coherent approaches outside of the confines of the traditional public education system. Hill (2001) discusses this concept:

> Charter schools establish internal accountability – a belief that the school's performance depends on all adults working in concert, leading to shared expectations about how the school will operate, what it will provide children, and who is responsible for what. (p. x)

Pilot and charter school leaders are free and empowered to focus all aspects of their work on their schools' students and their needs without the external constraints, while being held accountable for student outcomes.

**Traditional Schools** refer to the 124 district schools (non-pilot, non Horace Mann) that comprise the Boston Public Schools district. Governed by the Boston School Committee, budget, curriculum, staffing levels, hiring processes and the school calendar are determined centrally by the School Committee and the Superintendent. Special programs operate within a select number of schools. Examples of special programs include Advanced Work Class for high-achieving 4th – 6th graders and two-way bilingual programs. The district has three exam schools for students in the 7th – 12th grades.

**Pilot Schools** are the result of a partnership between the Mayor, the Boston Public Schools and the Boston Teachers Union, with the partners agreeing to allow the schools to operate "free of constraints" in order to create more opportunity for innovation.[10] They are designed to be laboratories of innovation that can develop best practices and share information with other district schools. Pilots operate within the Boston Public Schools district and their faculty are members of the Boston Teachers Union, but pilot schools have greater autonomy than traditional schools in: 1) *governance & leadership*, 2) *budget*, 3) *staffing*, 4) *professional development*, 5) *scheduling & time*, and 6) *curriculum & instruction*.

**Charter Schools** are independent public schools, authorized by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (through the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education). Established by the 1993 reform act, charter schools have greater autonomy than their traditional and pilot school counterparts, particularly in determining a core mission, setting curricula, determining teaching methods, allocating the budget, and hiring and firing teachers and other staff. These schools must apply to renew their charter every five years, and through the renewal process demonstrate to the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education that they are meeting established school and student outcomes. If charters fail to achieve acceptable results for students, their charters can be revoked. To date two charter schools have had their charter revoked and two were not renewed because they were not meeting these outcomes.

The autonomy framework under which pilot and charter schools operate includes control over: 1) *governance & leadership*, 2) *budget*, 3) *staffing*, 4) *professional development*, 5) *scheduling & time*, and 6) *curriculum & instruction*. **Table 3** describes each autonomy element.

TABLE 3

## Summary of Autonomy Framework Elements

| | Governance & Leadership | Budget | Staffing | Professional Development | Scheduling & Time | Curriculum & Instruction |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Traditional** | The Boston School Committee (comprised of members from throughout the City appointed by the Mayor) and the Boston Public Schools district | Schools receive budget allocations established by the district | Staffing levels determined by the district through the budget allocation process, with new hires decided by school leaders, but through a centralized process controlled by the district and influenced by the collectively bargained agreements between the union and the district | Professional development time is based on the collective bargaining agreement and decisions about professional development are made at the school level, with the district offering professional development opportunities to staff and decisions about participation are made in the school | Schedule determined by the school but limited by district policies, collectively bargained union agreements, and resources | While curriculum, pacing guides and mandated assessments are provided by the district, schools and/or teachers may develop their own assessments and instructional strategies are determined by the school and/or teachers |
| **Pilot** | A school governing board consisting of the principal, at least four faculty members, parents, community members, (and students at the high school level), with faculty, parent, and student representatives elected by their peers and community members selected by the governing board | Schools receive per pupil funding (equal to the district per pupil funding level) and have the freedom to allocate funding as needed as well as purchase services from the district | Because pilot teachers are exempt from district work rules, each governing board approves an election-to-work agreement that teachers must sign, and schools have the ability to hire as needed and to determine staffing patterns, with all staff belonging to the Boston Teachers Union and other unions | Pilot schools may negotiate additional professional development days, with negotiations between administrators and teachers at the school level—and many pilot schools have professional development embedded in the school schedule | Schedule determined by the school, with additional work hours approved by the governing board within the election-to-work agreement that teachers must approve | Curriculum and instruction determined by the school with the option to adopt or reject the district curriculum |
| **Charter** | The Commonwealth's Board of Education grants the charter and a board of trustees oversees each school, with members appointed and approved by the Commissioner of Education | School receives per pupil funding from the state and allocates funding as needed | School leaders oversee hiring, set salary levels, and determine staffing needs—and nearly all charter schools are not unionized[11] | School leaders make decisions about the staff schedule and professional development, and thus are able to design collective and individual professional development as needed | Schedule determined by the school leader and the board of trustees | Curriculum and instruction are determined by the school |

# 4.
## Methodology

In order to gain a greater understanding of the strategies used by traditional, pilot and charter schools to improve student outcomes, this study uses a survey of school principals, condensed school case studies, and an analysis of extant data. The principal survey and case study research focused on six areas in the autonomy framework: 1) *governance & leadership*; 2) *budget*; 3) *staffing*; 4) *professional development*; 5) *scheduling & time*; and 6) *curriculum & instruction*.

The following is a summary of the methods of data collection and analysis. (For a more detailed explanation of the methods of collection and analysis, please see Appendix A in the full report, which can be found in pdf form at www.tbf.org under Understanding Boston.)

The principal survey was designed to obtain information on school practices and strategies within each of the autonomy framework areas and was administered to all pilot and charter school principals and a sample of traditional school principals. The overall response rate was 79%, with 78% of traditional school principals, 69% of pilot school principals and 95% of charter school principals responding. Results were analyzed in terms of differences among school types, regardless of school achievement levels. Results for high achieving schools of all types were then analyzed, and any similarities and differences across school type within the sub-sample of high-achieving schools were then compared with the results for all surveyed schools.

The condensed case studies were conducted in high achieving traditional, pilot and charter schools and were used to gather in-depth data on the practices and strategies employed within each school. A total of nine schools were selected for the case studies – three traditional, three pilot and three charter schools. (See Appendix B in the full report for school descriptions.) Within each school type, one elementary school, one middle school and one high school were selected. The one-day case study visits consisted of interviews with the principal and other administrators, focus groups with teachers and classroom observations. Case study data were coded by autonomy and emerging themes were identified through a consensual qualitative research method.[12]

Finally, extant data were used to inform the traditional school survey sample and case study sites as well as to provide descriptive information about these schools. School level data were gathered from publicly available sources and student level data were provided by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

# 5.
# Summary of Findings

The findings of this study reveal that attaining high achievement for all students requires a level of autonomy that allows school leaders to continually and quickly adapt to changing circumstances within schools. Specifically, control over the six elements of the autonomy framework – *governance & leadership, budget, staffing, professional development, scheduling & time,* and *curriculum & instruction* – gives principals the freedom to make changes that support the collective and individual needs of students and staff. Furthermore, principals of high-achieving schools, regardless of school type, find ways to create autonomy where none has been granted – particularly in the area of staffing.

Last, while each element of the autonomy framework contributes to the ability of a school leader to adapt to evolving needs in a school, there are two autonomy elements – *scheduling & time* and *staffing* – that influence the degree to which school leaders can use and orchestrate the other autonomy elements to meet the needs of students. For example, school leaders who are able to control the time students and teachers spend in school have more opportunities to address schoolwide professional development and curriculum and instruction needs. (Note: Additional findings from this study may be found in the full report, which is available at www.tbf.org.)

## Autonomy

As illustrated in **Figure 1**, pilot and charter school principals more consistently reported an ability to control key aspects of their schools. Charter school principals in particular reported very high levels of autonomy and traditional school principals reported relatively low levels of autonomy.

The questions then are: *How* is autonomy related to high performance? What are the practices and strategies that the more autonomous charter school leaders implement in their schools? Are these practices unique to charter schools or common to all high-achieving schools? And, finally, how do the autonomies work together to support high performance?

## Common Practices in Charter and Pilot Schools

The findings reveal a number of practices and strategies that are more consistently implemented in charter schools than traditional schools in Boston. Some of these practices are also prevalent in pilot schools. These are:

**A longer school day for students and teachers that, based on an estimate of 180 school days, provides charter students with an average of 378 more hours in school than their traditional counterparts.** This is the equivalent of approximately 62 more traditional school days in a single year.[13]
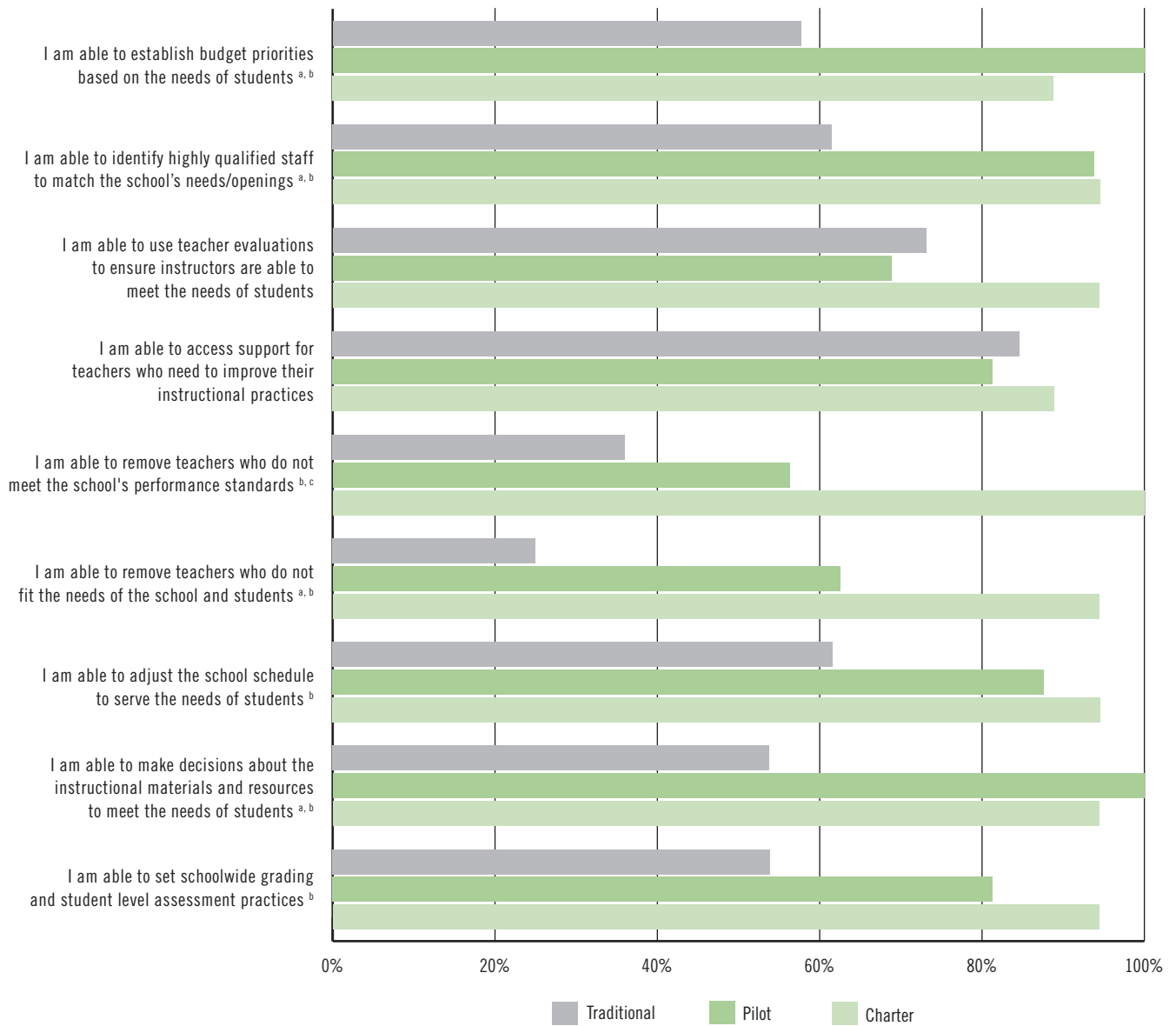
- According to principals from all surveyed schools, charter school students attend school for more than eight hours per day, and teachers are contracted to work approximately 9 hours per day (see **Figure 2** on page 14). Comparatively, in traditional and pilot schools, students attend school for about 6 hours per day, and teachers are contracted to work between 6.5 and 7 hours per day. In addition, among the high performing case study schools, charters on average reported a school year that is at least two weeks longer (192 days) than traditional (180 days) and pilot schools (181 days.) According to a recent study by the National Council on Teacher Quality, "The Boston Public Schools has one of the shortest elementary work days in the country," with 98% of 100 surveyed districts reporting longer work days.[14]

**Focus on professional development that builds the collective skill of teams of teachers or the whole school**

- Charter and pilot school principals were more likely than traditional school principals to report that either a team of teachers or the whole school participated in various forms of professional development aimed at collectively building the skills of teachers within the school including formal, internal coaching (See **Figure 3** on page 15).

FIGURE 1

## Percentage of principals reporting that they "agree" or "strongly agree" with statements about autonomy and leadership, by type of school (n=59-60)



I am able to establish budget priorities based on the needs of students [a, b]

I am able to identify highly qualified staff to match the school's needs/openings [a, b]

I am able to use teacher evaluations to ensure instructors are able to meet the needs of students

I am able to access support for teachers who need to improve their instructional practices

I am able to remove teachers who do not meet the school's performance standards [b, c]

I am able to remove teachers who do not fit the needs of the school and students [a, b]

I am able to adjust the school schedule to serve the needs of students [b]

I am able to make decisions about the instructional materials and resources to meet the needs of students [a, b]

I am able to set schoolwide grading and student level assessment practices [b]

Traditional    Pilot    Charter

NOTE:

a = Difference between traditional and pilot schools is statistically significant at the .05 level.
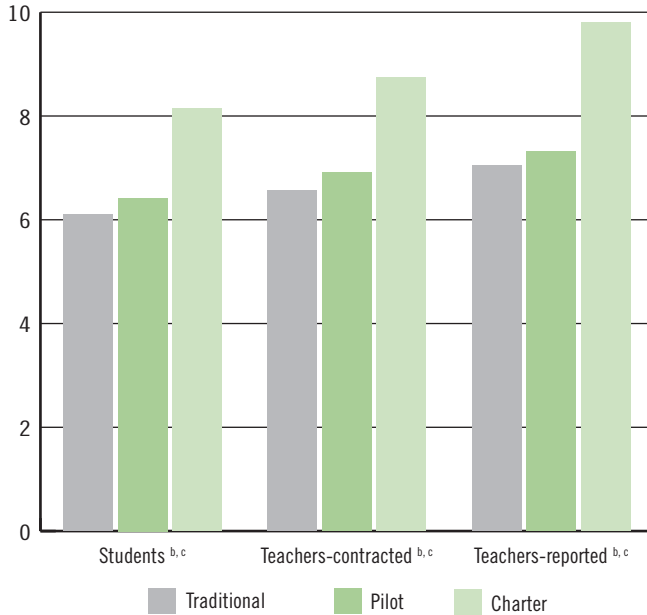
b = Difference between traditional and charter schools is statistically significant at the .05 level.

c = Difference between charter and pilot schools is statistically significant at the .05 level.

SOURCE: Principals Survey

FIGURE 2

## Average length of day, for students, contracted for teachers, and reported for teachers, by type of school (n=59)



**NOTE:**

a = Difference between traditional and pilot schools is statistically significant at the .05 level.

b = Difference between traditional and charter schools is statistically significant at the .05 level.

c = Difference between charter and pilot schools is statistically significant at the .05 level.

SOURCE: Principals Survey

**Student supports required and integrated into the school day**

■ Surveyed charter and pilot school principals were also more likely than traditional school principals to report that they require academic supports during the school day for some or all students (see **Figure 4** on page 16). Although all schools offered extra support of some kind, a markedly lower percentage of principals in traditional schools (15%) than pilot schools (63%) and charter schools (50%) reported that they required academic support for students during the school day. Low percentages of traditional school principals also reported requiring before or after school remediation, before or after school enrichment, weekend academic support and summer school for students.

These strategies fall within many of the autonomy elements; however, it is the autonomy element of *scheduling & time* that allows principals to strategically make connections among the three autonomy elements. While it is evident that charter school students and staff attend school for longer days, the key take away from the longer school day findings lies in the way the extra time was used in pilot and charter schools and how this time allowed school leaders to address school needs in areas such as *curriculum & instruction* and *professional development*. For example, because charter school teachers spend more time in the school, they have more time for collective professional development and student supports. Creating a school schedule that can accommodate non-instructional or classroom time frees teachers to engage in a range of activities that support students and that may improve student outcomes.

In other words, for charter schools, the longer school day affords them greater opportunities to build in *professional development* and student supports, *without compromising on instructional time*. Indeed, the data also show that more principals in charter schools than in pilot or traditional schools reported that their students spent five hours or more per week receiving instruction in core academic subjects. Autonomy over time, therefore, appears to contribute to greater control and flexibility in other elements of the autonomy framework; namely, *professional development* and *curriculum & instruction*.

FIGURE 3

**Percentage of principals reporting that either a team of teachers or the whole school (all or nearly all teachers) participated in various forms of professional development in 2008-09, by type of school (n=53-55)**
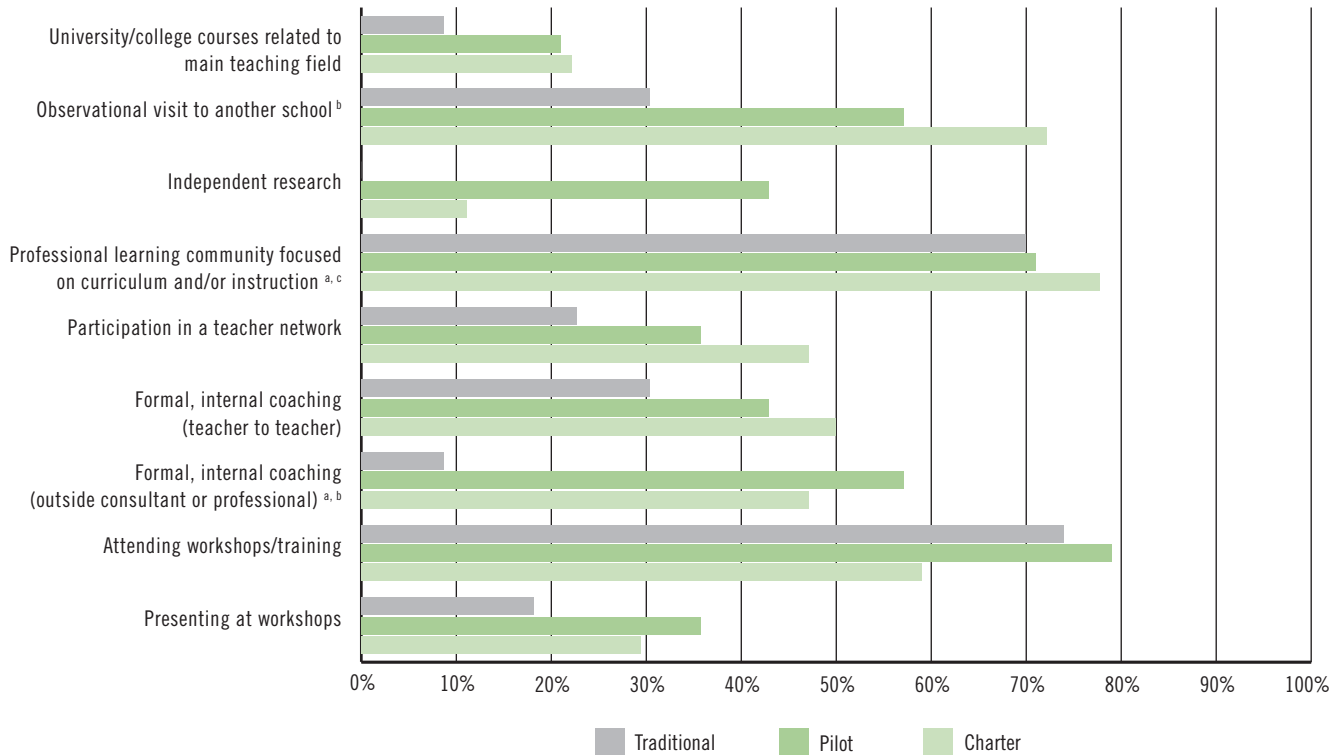


NOTE:

a = Difference between traditional and pilot schools is statistically significant at the .05 level.

b = Difference between traditional and charter schools is statistically significant at the .05 level.

c = Difference between charter and pilot schools is statistically significant at the .05 level.

SOURCE: Principals Survey

# Common Practices across *All* High-Achieving Schools

The findings revealed a number of factors that were equally likely to be present in high-achieving schools of all types (charter, pilot and traditional). For example, the full sample of data shows that principals in charter and pilot schools were more likely than principals in traditional schools to report that they were able to hire qualified staff. However, when limiting the sample to high-achieving schools only, principals of high achieving traditional as well as charter and pilot schools reported that they possessed control over the hiring of staff. Indeed, there are several areas in which principals from high achieving schools of all types reported having control. These include:

**Freedom to hire staff that "fit" the needs of the school and share common values and teaching philosophy**

- Principals of high-achieving charter, pilot and traditional schools reported that they are able to hire qualified staff and that their staff have values and philosophies similar to their own.

FIGURE 4

## Percentage of principals reporting that various types of supports are *required* for some or all students, by type of school (n=56-60)
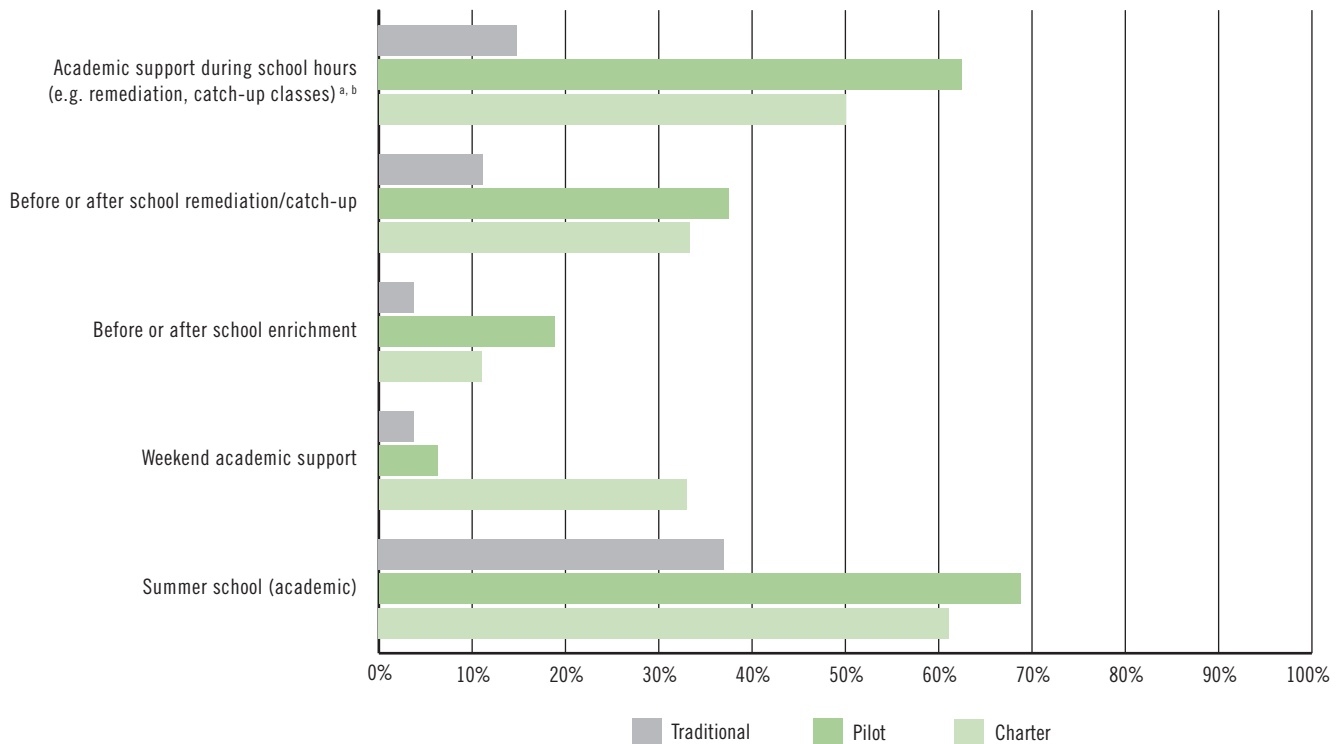


NOTE:

a = Difference between traditional and pilot schools is statistically significant at the .05 level.

b = Difference between traditional and charter schools is statistically significant at the .05 level.

c = Difference between charter and pilot schools is statistically significant at the .05 level.

SOURCE: Principals Survey

### Collaborative, trusting culture with existing staff

■ Principals of high-achieving charter, pilot and traditional schools reported that staff trust one another, share a focus on student learning, take ownership of the overall climate of the school, are motivated for the school to reach its student achievement goals, and feel responsible for all students' learning in the classroom. When comparing school types on all levels, these characteristics are more common among charters and pilots (See **Figure 5**).

### Shared instructional strategies

■ Principals of high-achieving charter, pilot and traditional schools reported that their teachers use formal strategies (e.g., collaborative planning time focused on adapting to classroom and student needs and collective professional development) to ensure that all students are ready to learn, integrate students' prior knowledge and past experience into the classroom, continuously employ efforts to improve *curriculum & instruction*, and regularly work collaboratively to improve *curriculum & instruction*.

Importantly, these characteristics of high-achieving schools demonstrate that all schools, regardless of the level of autonomy granted to them, can create cohesive, instruction- and mission-driven cultures that promote

FIGURE 5

## Percentage of principals reporting that they "agree" or "strongly agree" with statements about the characteristics of staff within their school, by type of school (n=59-60)
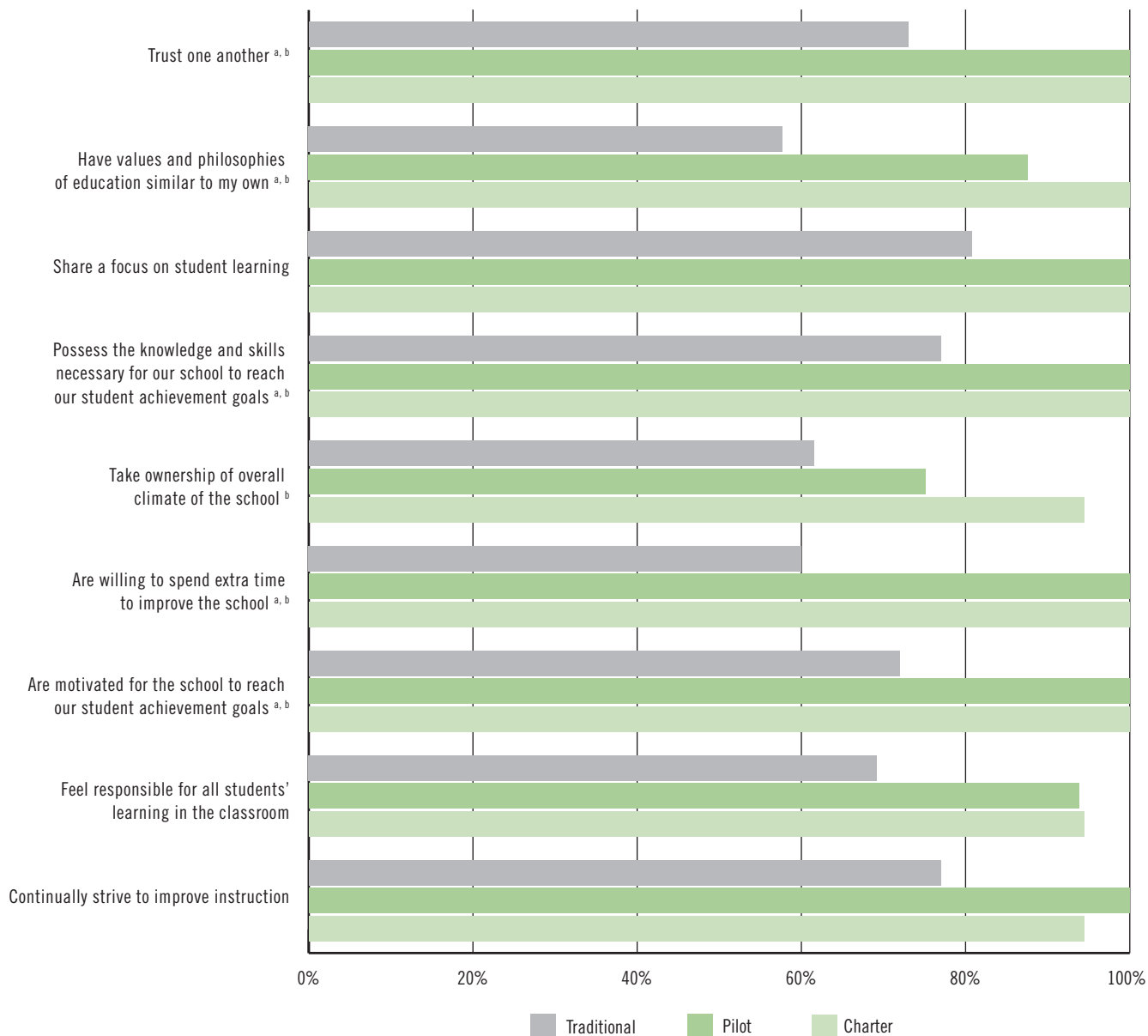


**NOTE:**

a = Difference between traditional and pilot schools is statistically significant at the .05 level.

b = Difference between traditional and charter schools is statistically significant at the .05 level.

c = Difference between charter and pilot schools is statistically significant at the .05 level.

SOURCE: Principals Survey

high achievement for all students. In particular, high-achieving traditional school principals have found ways to work around their limited autonomy to implement practices and strategies that promote high achievement for their students.

For example, data from our case study schools suggest that principals in high-achieving traditional schools find creative ways to recruit qualified staff, often by working outside of district hiring systems and schedules. Hiring the right staff, in turn, facilitates their ability to create and support a more cohesive and collaborative instructional environment.

These data demonstrate that autonomy in one area – such as *staffing* – allows for greater autonomy in another – *curriculum & instruction* (through a shared philosophy and shared instructional strategies), and that any school, regardless of type, can create conditions necessary for high student achievement. The ability of principals of all types of schools to control who is teaching in the school and ensure the fit between the characteristics of new hires and the widely held values in the school, allows the principals to influence the culture of the school as well as the collective instructional strategies among staff within the school.

However, traditional schools remain constrained in their autonomy over *staffing*. By comparison, charter and pilot schools have considerable autonomy in the area of *staffing*, as well as in the five other elements of the autonomy framework (*governance & leadership, budget, professional development, scheduling & time, curriculum & instruction*).

Furthermore, the data show that for charter schools, autonomy over both *staffing* and *scheduling & time* are particularly powerful contributors to school success, in that they create the conditions necessary for skillfully orchestrating autonomy across all six elements. Please see www.tbf for the full report

*Moving Out of the Debate and Into the Schools* reveals the dynamic nature of schools and the students they serve. To provide a one-size fits all answer is impossible. In many ways the key findings identified are similar to research on effective schools and on high performing schools. However, the ways in which the types of schools execute practices to create these conditions and characteristics are different. The findings reveal that there are many possible contributing factors for differences in student achievement among school types.

**Table 4** summarizes the possible contributing factors that may account for high levels of student achievement.

The findings that compare the strategies and practices in high achieving traditional, pilot and charter schools align with our main idea that an ability to orchestrate the strengths and weaknesses in a school to meet student needs is critical to success. Generally the case study examination of high achieving case study schools is best summed up by a traditional school principal, who stated "*We have a consistent school climate of high expectations for all.*"

While there are many different ways to reach the goal of students achieving at high levels, this sentiment describes the characteristic at the foundation of each school visited and was implicitly or explicitly used as the basis from which all decisions about students, staff and the school were intentionally made. The following provides a brief summary of the high achieving case study schools by type.

## High Achieving Traditional Schools

The high achieving case study traditional schools had a variety of types of leadership styles (some centralized control, some shared leadership), a mix of new and experienced teachers, and were willing to take risks to serve students well. All of the traditional school principals had at least 10 years of experience as an administrator and even more years of teaching experience in the Boston Public Schools. With this experience, the traditional case study school principals were able to make sense of district policies so that they could ensure coherence between the school culture and imperatives and the district mandates. Teachers followed the district curriculum and pacing guides, but felt comfortable deviating from these strategies to support students. At least two of the schools visited creatively reached out to the community to enhance support for students (e.g., health supports, psychiatric internship program). Each of the schools served the district by housing a special program (e.g., advanced work class or special education specialty), and one of the schools offered one of the only two-way bilingual programs in the district. Each school had developed feeder systems, whereby they were able to identify high quality teachers, outside of the Boston Public Schools district hiring system. But, all of the schools experienced relatively low teacher turnover.

TABLE 4

## Elements of the autonomy framework and possible contributing factors
## for differences in student achievement

| Autonomy | Possible Contributing Factors |
|---|---|
| **Staffing** | • Freedom to hire staff that "fit" the needs of the school and who share common values and teaching philosophy<br><br>• Collaborative, trusting culture with existing staff<br><br>• Creatively augmenting staffing patterns to meet student needs through collaborations (e.g., psychiatric interns, relationships with teacher colleges or community service organizations) |
| **Scheduling & Time** | • Longer school day for students and for teachers<br><br>• Focus on core subject areas, and increased time in mathematics, reading and writing<br><br>• Time allotted in the regular work day schedule for teachers to discuss students and to collaboratively plan curriculum and instruction |
| **Governance & Leadership** | • Distributed leadership that builds on the strengths of the school staff and addresses the needs of students |
| **Curriculum & Instruction** | • Shared and consistent instructional strategies among staff throughout the school<br><br>• Adequate supports and instructional strategies for special student populations (e.g., special education students, LEP students)<br><br>• Sensitive assessment systems to quickly identify students who need additional supports, and provide supports<br><br>• Student supports built into the regular school day and students required to participate, meaning that student support is seen as a normal part of the school day (instead of an exception), and students routinely move in and out of supports (e.g., enrichment courses, tutoring) |
| **Professional Development** | • Focus on professional development that builds the collective skills of teams of teachers or the whole school<br><br>• Professional development time built into the regular school week/month |
| **Budget** | • Identification of creative ways to access resources that support students and staff |

## High Achieving Pilot Schools

The high achieving case study pilot schools were characterized by shared leadership, flexibility and student focused mission. Pilot school principals were the most experienced among all types of schools, and had more years of experience working in the Boston Public Schools. Leadership of the case study pilot schools was shared among administrators and teachers in almost all aspects of the school. The schools maintained a focus on students and created a system of schooling that was flexible and that could adapt to the changing needs of students in the school and entering into the school. They were each striking in the degree of teacher voice and distributed leadership. Principals and teachers alike discussed the level of influence teachers had in the school. As a result, the school benefitted from actively engaged and motivated teachers who collaborated to build on one another's skills toward a common goal.

## High Achieving Charter Schools

The high achieving case study charter schools were characterized by centralized leadership functions including monitoring for standards, teachers focused on classroom instruction, and a common philosophy among staff focused on high levels of achievement for all students. The charter schools had younger, less experienced staff than the traditional or pilot schools, and thus centralized many school functions (e.g., discipline, community engagement), with the exception of curriculum and instruction, both of which were delegated to teachers. Teachers worked longer school days and longer school years than teachers in traditional and pilot schools. Students were in school for longer days than traditional and pilot school students, and thus spent more time on academic work than their counterparts in other types of schools. These schools also had many routines and rituals for staff and students, who were clearly monitored.

Through this research, it has become evident that the autonomy elements, and the possible contributing factors within each of them, may be dependent upon one another. In addition some autonomy elements – such as *staffing* and *scheduling & time* – may be gatekeeper autonomies that can expand or degrade autonomy in other areas of the autonomy framework. As we have seen, there is evidence that it is possible to be high achieving in a traditional, pilot, or charter school setting. However, it does appear that it is vastly more difficult to be high performing in the traditional school setting since there are constraints in each element of the autonomy framework – particularly in *staffing* and *scheduling & time*. In the high achieving traditional 'case study' schools, principals used their experience and leadership skills to meet the needs of students in their schools, even if it meant deviating from district mandates. The findings suggest that other traditional school principals may not be as willing to take such risks.

# 6.
# Recommendations

While excellence can exist in any school, the results of this study suggest the following recommendations for educational leaders and policymakers as they work toward improving education in *all* schools for *all* students.

**Grant autonomy while creating provisions for support, monitoring outcomes, and holding schools accountable.**
In the study, principals in high achieving schools took advantage of, or created, the autonomy to adapt to the dynamic needs of students and staff and viewed this as a critical component of their ability to be successful. It is important to note that high achieving *traditional* case study school principals felt empowered to create this type of school environment, but that this autonomy was *taken from* rather than *granted* by the district and was often described by principals as "taking a risk." Based on this finding, district leaders or policymakers may consider increasing school autonomy. However, district leaders must be sure to couple the granting of new autonomy with the requisite supports needed as school leaders develop new types of skills in order to fully take advantage of increased autonomy. It will also be important for district leaders to closely monitor the effects of this new autonomy on principals, teachers – and ultimately students, in order to hold schools accountable for autonomy granted.

**Increase school time.** A key finding in this study is that charter schools more consistently implemented a longer school day than traditional schools, amounting to the equivalent of approximately 62 additional days of school over the course of a traditional school year. In response to this, district leaders and policymakers should consider exploring the feasibility of adding more time to the school day. In order to make effective use of this time, the time must be structured to include elements that lead to higher levels of student achievement throughout the school. A recent survey of Massachusetts teachers revealed that teachers view time and empowerment as the conditions most critical to promoting student learning.[15] In that survey, more than half of teachers indicated that they lack sufficient time to collaborate with colleagues (55%) and time during the day to prepare for classes, grade papers and develop lesson plans (53%).

The findings revealed that many of the high-achieving schools address these challenges by structuring the school day to allow student supports to be integrated throughout the day and time for teachers to discuss students' needs, collaboratively plan *curriculum & instruction*, and spend additional instructional time on the core subjects of math, reading and writing. Also, the high performing schools studied here structure their school day to accommodate *professional development* as part of the regular school week and schedule *professional development* so that teams of teachers, and in some instances, all teachers, can participate. While the high-achieving charter schools have a longer school day, which facilitates many of these activities, traditional schools may be able to creatively design their schedules and utilize staff so that the existing school schedule can incorporate more time for supporting struggling students and for teacher collaboration. Autonomy over schedules and the use of time can lead to creative approaches to extending the school day. For example, one high achieving pilot school, attempting to integrate student supports into a longer school day, placed paraprofessionals on a schedule so that they started later in the morning than teachers and then stayed with students until the end of the extended day, thus creating a seamless connection to adults who know the students throughout the school day.

**Allow for flexible school staffing and structures.** Principals in the high-achieving case study schools pinpointed the ability to identify staff to fit their students' and school's needs as an essential part of their success. Based on this finding and on the recommendations of other studies, including the National Council on Teacher Quality's 2010 report, *Human Capital in the Boston Public Schools*, district leaders should consider making provisions for more flexible school staffing structures. These flexible structures mean not only the ability to hire individuals who fit the needs of the school, but to modify the organization and staffing patterns to align with student and staff needs. Examples of flexible staffing that were identified in this study include the creation of the position of registrar to ensure students are receiving the appropriate student supports (even though their schedules may change throughout the year), and the creation of an administrative position to manage student discipline and connect with students' families, so that

teachers can focus on instruction rather than classroom discipline problems.

**Create school level systems for routinely monitoring student needs.** In this study, high-achieving pilot and charter case study schools had developed systems to monitor student progress and share the information with the adults in the school who interacted with the students. For example, one pilot school used an online system through which teachers could provide information about students' progress and which could be accessed by other teachers and tutors in the school to guide their work with individual students. In one charter school, the school leadership team administered a school-wide assessment to students every six weeks and subsequently held meetings with individual teachers to discuss the results of each student and identify interventions and supports. School and district leaders should consider sharing some of these existing models as well as supporting the development of these types of systems and procedures for monitoring students' needs.

**Look for opportunities to engage teachers in decision-making.** Study results indicate that the principals shared leadership by empowering teachers to influence aspects of the school that contributed to a collaborative and trusting culture. This is particularly important in light of statewide survey data which found that many Massachusetts educators do not feel empowered and meaningfully involved in decision-making about educational issues.[16] In response to these findings, district leaders should consider providing support and training for school leaders in developing the interpersonal skills as well as policies and routines for incorporating teachers' input in decision making. Several promising models of this type of teacher empowerment already exist in Boston and could be drawn upon to provide lessons-learned. Notably, in the high achieving case study charter and pilot schools, the way in which a collaborative and trusting culture was created differed. Pilot case study school principals relied heavily on a distributed leadership model in which teachers were involved in all types of decisions about the schools (from budget priorities to the schedule and school assessments). In charter case study schools, principals tended to centralize many of the school functions, so that while teachers were

empowered in these schools, they were limited to the domain of curriculum, instruction and student learning.

**Provide professional development to school leaders on effective distributed leadership models that capitalize on the strengths of school staff.** Related to the previous recommendation, district leaders should consider providing school leaders with *professional development* and support to develop models of shared leadership. Distributed leadership can take many different forms. Among the schools included in this study, the charter school principals, with younger (and likely less experienced) staff had centralized many of the school functions and allowed teachers to take full ownership of *curriculum & instruction*. In the pilot schools with older (and likely more experienced) staff, the principals were able to share responsibility for nearly every aspect of the school. As education researcher Richard Elmore has written, "some principals and teachers are simply better at doing some things than others. Organizing these diverse competencies into a coherent whole requires understanding how individuals vary, how the particular knowledge and skill of one person can be made to complement that of another, and how the competencies of some can be shared with others."[17] The ability of a school leader to assess the strengths and weaknesses of teachers and staff in the school and share leadership based on that assessment is critical, and providing *professional development* to school leaders to acquire or enhance this leadership skill is an essential consideration for district leaders.

**Encourage schools to continue to learn from each other.** Together, traditional, pilot and charter schools make up the system of public education in the city of Boston and as such, there is a necessary co-existence, with each offering specialized services to some students. Traditional, pilot and charter school leaders should continue to promote the exchange of effective practices and explore ways to work together, so they may serve all of Boston's students well.

# 7.
# Conclusion

In the United States, schools are often described as "loosely coupled systems" where leadership manages operation of the school and individual teachers, who comprise the technical core of the school, handle the management, instruction and content within their own classrooms.[18]

The findings for high-achieving schools of all types are similar in that they alter the loosely coupled organization of schools so that the focus on coherence in instruction and practice across the schools is predominant, thus creating an environment in which there are routines and rituals that contribute to student understanding of the expectations held for them.[19]

The most critical finding of this study is the difference in the amount of time charter school teachers and students spend in school every year when compared to traditional and pilot schools and how that additional time is used. This finding is significant, in that it not only means that students and teachers spend more than 378 hours – or roughly 62 traditional schooldays worth – of additional instruction every year when compared with traditional school students and teachers. It also contributes to the ways in which school leaders are able to use time in other autonomy areas (e.g., *curriculum & instruction, professional development*), as they are not as constrained by time as leaders of traditional schools. Therefore, the difference in the amount of time gives school leaders, teachers and students in charter and some pilot schools a tremendous advantage in almost all aspects of their educational experience. In Massachusetts, the issue of school time has recently been addressed by policymakers. The Massachusetts education reform bill, "An Act Relevant to the Learning Gap," signed into law by Governor Deval Patrick on January 18, 2010, ensures that state, district and school level policymakers will be given the tools they need to create the conditions – such as a longer school day and longer school year – that can lead to high performing schools. With its passage, more schools will have the ability to operate within an autonomy framework that contributes to the ability of school leaders to create conditions where staff can focus on students and students can thrive.

However, as suggested in our recommendations, while granting more time and autonomy to schools and to school leaders may create enabling conditions for school improvement, without proper support for schools and school leaders newly entrusted with these autonomies, it may not necessarily lead to higher levels of student achievement.

The question remains as to how well equipped school leaders and teachers are to maximize these autonomies for the benefit of their schools and students. In successful schools, these autonomies have been placed in the hands of individuals who have developed systems to continually monitor student, staff and school progress toward widely held school goals and objectives. In such a system, the school leader's ability to balance and manage the dynamic nature of the school is critical. It is not clear if these skills were prevalent among the traditional school principals surveyed, as their autonomy is limited. Still, the high achieving traditional school principals showed that while it is possible that there are school leaders who are ready and able to use these autonomies to improve student outcomes, there are likely some who are not ready. The challenge for leaders and policymakers lies in establishing the appropriate structures and incentives to support all principals as they work within their unique contexts to lead and develop staff, manage resources, provide instructional leadership, and ultimately promote high achievement for all students.

# Endnotes

[1] The study reported that the range of raised student achievement in English language arts was between .09 and .17 standard deviations over students in traditional schools.

[2] Pathak A. Abdulkadiroglu, et al., *Informing the Debate: Comparing Boston's Charter, Pilot and Traditional Schools* (Boston, MA: The Boston Foundation, 2009) 9.

[3] Abdulkadiroglu, 9.

[4] "Obama's Charter Stimulus: An incentive for states unfriendly to school choice to mend their ways," *Wall Street Journal*, June 12, 2009, (http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124476693275708519.html, (April 30, 2010).

[5] U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, (2008).

[6] In 2009-2010, one additional charter school opened: Dorchester Collegiate Academy Charter School. This school is not included in the 2008-09 count of charter schools because it was not yet serving students and thus, was not included in this analysis.

[7] Data for # of students, % free and reduced lunch, % students receiving Special Education Services, % of students FLNE, # of teachers all comes from the Massachusetts Department of Education School Profiles, and are from the 2008-2009 school year.

[8] Horace Mann charter schools, like pilots, are approved by the local school committee and the district, have a separate governing board, and teachers retain their union membership, salary and benefits and accrue seniority. Currently two schools in Boston are Horace Mann Charter schools.

[9] Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, "Massachusetts Charter Schools: Technical Advisory 07-01: Teacher Qualifications in Massachusetts Charter Schools," Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/tech_advisory/07_1.html (April 30, 2010).

According to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education,

> "NCLB requires all public school teachers of core academic subjects to be highly qualified…In order to be considered highly qualified, non-charter public school teachers of core academic subjects must: possess a bachelor's degree, demonstrate subject matter competence in each of the core academic subjects they teach, and possess an active and valid MA license to teach. Teachers in Commonwealth charter schools must meet all of the same requirements, except that of licensure. The licensure component of the federal highly qualified definition is waived for Massachusetts Commonwealth charter school teachers because it is not a requirement of the state charter school statute and regulations (M.G.L. c.71, 89 (qq) and 603 CMR 1.07).

[10] Center for Collaborative Education, 2006.

[11] Teachers in the Conservatory Lab Charter School in Boston unionized as an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers Massachusetts in 2009.

[12] Clara E. Hill, et al. "A Guide to Conducting Consensual Qualitative Research." *The Counseling Pscychologist* 25, no. 4 (1997): 517-572.

[13] This number was calculated based on averages of school day lengths reported by surveyed charters, pilots and traditional schools. Some charters may have a longer school year than the state mandated minimum of 180 days.

[14] This finding focused on elementary school teachers. See National Council on Teacher Quality: Human Capital in Boston Public Schools: Rethinking how to attract, develop and retain effective teachers. (Washington, DC: National Council on Teacher Quality, 2010).

[15] Eric Hirsch, et al., Massachusetts Teaching Learning and Leading Survey: Creating School Conditions Where Teachers Stay and Thrive, (Santa Cruz: New Teacher Center, 2008).

[16] Hirsch, et al. (2008).

[17] Richard Elmore, Building a new structure for school leadership. (Washington, DC: Albert Shanker Institute, 2000), 14.

[18] Weick (1976); Lipsky (1977).

[19] This finding is similar to Merseth (2009) study on high performing charter schools.