

We, the Media

I started my career studying charter schools. Fresh out of college, I took a job with the Progressive Policy Institute, where I led an exploratory project to analyze the state of the charter school movement and identify areas for future study and investment. Ten years in, the “movement” was in its infancy. Despite some early successes, it struggled with spotty quality and stiff resistance from the status quo. Many of the people I interviewed for the project felt that the movement was at a juncture: To mature, sustain, and grow, supporters would have to focus on charter school quality foremost and develop clearer messaging to educate and inform potential allies.

Reading through the articles in this issue of the *Standard*, I’m struck by how much the charter school movement has evolved and grown, but I still see a consistent theme: continued collaboration and communication with stakeholders is vital for charters to remain viable. It’s not unlike the charge states have before them in implementing the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), where broad, inclusive, ongoing stakeholder engagement is also critical for success.

Twenty-four state boards have authority over charter schools. Some are the sole charter authorizer or share authorizing responsibilities with the state education agency, while others serve a more advisory role where they are only consulted for high-stakes decisions. But even in the few states where the state board has no direct connection to charters, they still set their state’s vision for education and ensure that all the parts of the state’s education system work in unison. Toward this end, state boards must make

an effort to understand how the charter sector works in their state and meaningfully engage with stakeholders on school choice—both allies and critics—to understand their perspectives.

One of the more powerful and valuable ways to understand how charter schools work in your state is to spend an afternoon in one. In his article, Samuel Henry wrote that as board chair in Oregon, he encouraged his board colleagues to visit area charter schools. He called the atmosphere of one of his favorite schools “electric.” I’ve had similar experiences bringing education reporters, civil rights leaders, policymakers, and others on field trips to charter schools in Washington, D.C., Chicago, and Indianapolis. Stepping into any school—charter or traditional, high-performing or low-performing—can be enlightening. For example, the reporters I hosted came away with a new understanding of charter schools and the research surrounding them, and their reporting thereafter became more nuanced and balanced.

In selecting school choice advocate and philanthropist Betsy DeVos to be his education secretary, President-elect Trump seems to be following through on a campaign promise to make education choice a priority. Time will tell what the opportunities for charter schools will be. But one thing is known: State boards of education will need to be knowledgeable about the school choice environment in their state so they can better navigate the policy challenges ahead and make decisions that help ensure that charter and traditional schools alike are working toward a common vision of education excellence for all students. ■



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