

## EMPIRICAL STUDY

# Teachers of Color and Urban Charter Schools: Race, School Culture, and Teacher Turnover in the Charter Sector

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### ABSTRACT

*This article explores working conditions in charter schools with varying rates of teacher turnover. Ethnographic data with 28 racially diverse teachers explores teachers' experiences, their explanations for moving charter schools, and patterns of movement when teachers leave a charter school for another school. A brief conceptual framework was used to understand multiple dimensions of working conditions in charter schools for teachers of color. Findings indicate teachers most often made*

*structural moves between charter types, primarily from charters managed by nonprofit organizations to standalone charter schools. Teachers of color describe tensions with sociocultural conditions that limited culturally inclusive practices. Discussion includes implications for policies that push to replicate charter schools in communities of color, particularly schools with poor working conditions associated with high turnover and weak propensities to retain teachers of color.*

*Key words: teacher turnover, teachers of color, working conditions, charter schools*

### Introduction

Across the nation, district leaders and charter school advocates have pushed to “scale up” charter schools by replicating and expanding popular charter school networks (Education Sector, 2009; Farrell et. al, 2012; Hassel et. al., 2011; NewSchools Venture Fund, 2006). Critics of charter expansion, however, raise important concerns about issues of equity, noting that on average charter schools employ teachers with fewer years of experience and training and are increasingly concentrated in underserved communities where students need more support (Stuit & Smith, 2012). Other critics bring attention to the kinds of schools slated for replication, such as “no excuses” charter schools that focus on classroom management and frequent testing in lieu of broad and culturally inclusive curricula (Golann, 2015). In this article, I consider a less explored but equally important concern with charter expansion: the lack of stability and racial diversity among teachers in charter

schools. Through this study I explore the patterns of teacher turnover in these schools, paying particular attention to working conditions and their implications for retaining diverse teachers. I methodically and clinically examine the experiences of 28 racially diverse teachers who worked in charter schools in New York City, including many who left their charter school by the end of study.

While charter schools enroll black students at twice the rate of traditional public schools, charter expansion in major cities has coincided with significant declines in numbers of black teachers (Albert Shanker Institute, 2015, as cited by Goldhaber, D., Theobald, R., & Tien, C., 2015). These trends raise concerns about the impact of low rates of black teacher hires in charter schools amid closures of district schools in major cities, as well as chronically high rates of teacher turnover in charter schools compared to district schools (ASI, 2015 as cited in Casey, L., Di Carlo, M., Bond, B., & Quintero, E., 2015); National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

Because teachers of color (ToCs) play an important role in fostering academically rigorous and culturally appropriate teaching practices, particularly for students of color who make up nearly half of all students in public schools, the replication of charter schools with weak propensities to hire and retain racially diverse teachers pose challenges for the creation of stable, inclusive, and equitable public schools.

### **Left Behind: The Under-representation of Teachers of Color in Charter Schools**

Several studies show that a school's increase in the number of teachers of color is positively associated with academic outcomes for students of color, including gains in academic achievement, higher rates of referral to gifted and talented programs, reductions in dropout rates, as well as reductions in discriminatory practices related to discipline, tracking, and referrals to special education (Dee, 2004; Egalite & Kisida 2015; Fairlie, Hoffmann & Oreopoulos, 2011; Gershenson, Hart, Lindsay & Papageorge, 2017; Grissom, Rodriguez & Kern, 2015; Meier, 1984). ToCs also serve as "cultural brokers" helping students negotiate school culture and expectations, particularly in schools with racial parity gaps between students and teachers (Irvine, 1989). Additional research has noted the important role that ToCs play in strengthening trust, connection and cohesion between schools, parents, and communities of color (Foster, 1991).

Unfortunately, the racial representation of teachers in charter schools has not kept pace with the increasing enrollment of students of color in charter schools. For example, despite the low proportion of total public school students in charter schools nationwide (approximately 6%), the expansion of charter schools in urban communities yields a much higher enrollment in these areas, ranging from nearly a quarter of students in Harlem (NY) enrolled in charter schools, to nearly one-half of students in Washington, D.C and approximately 100% of students in New Orleans enrolled in charter schools (Frankenberg, E., Siegel-Hawley, G., & Wang, J., 2010). These trends are in large part the reason why charter schools enroll black students at nearly twice the rate of traditional public schools nationwide, including an average enrollment of black students at 29% (across 5,274 charter schools in 42 states) compared to 17% in the nation's public schools (CREDO, 2013).

Higher enrollment among students of color in charter schools, consequently, as well as racial disparities in teacher hires, has produced significant

racial parity gaps between students and teachers. For example, despite a higher proportion of ToCs in charters nationwide compared to district schools (27% and 16%, respectively), urban charter schools in cities like Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Los Angeles, New York, and Philadelphia have yielded representation gaps between students of color and ToCs that double (sometimes triple) representation gaps in district schools (ASI, 2015 as cited in Casey, L., Di Carlo, M., Bond, B., & Quintero, E., 2015). Gaps are wider for black teachers who are severely underrepresented in the nation's expanding urban charter sectors. New York City's charter sector, in particular, had a representation gap between black students and teachers that was four times higher than the district sector in 2012 (36.9% and 9.2%, respectively) (ASI, 2015 as cited in Casey, L., Di Carlo, M., Bond, B., & Quintero, E., 2015). Disparities in teacher hiring and teacher turnover by race and ethnicity have also contributed to lack of teacher diversity in charter schools. Indeed, between 2007 and 2012, the representation of black teachers among new charter hires was consistently and significantly lower than their share of the previous year's teaching force in various cities, including Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, New Orleans, and Philadelphia (Albert Shanker Institute, 2015).

Teacher turnover, moreover, contributes to the underrepresentation of ToCs in charter schools, as turnover overall is higher in charter schools compared to district schools (24% and 15%, respectively), whereby the turnover is calculated as the number of teachers in a given year who were not teaching the following year and expressed as a percentage (NCES, 2013). Indeed, in several cities across the country, charter schools drive some of the highest rates of teacher turnover at nearly three times the rate of district teachers (Newton et al., 2011; Zubrzycki, 2015). In major cities, turnover is higher among ToCs in charter schools compared to white teachers in charter schools. For example, "charter sector leaver rates" by race and ethnicity are often higher than district schools, whereby sector leavers were those who left their teaching position in a city's charter sector in a given period of time (periods for which data is available) due to resignation, dismissal, or retirement. In Chicago, Cleveland, and Philadelphia (during periods that data were available, with the exception of Boston), leaver rates were higher for black teachers in charter schools compared to white teachers in charter schools, and higher compared to both black and white teachers in district schools (ASI, 2015 as cited in Casey, L., Di Carlo, M., Bond, B., & Quintero, E., 2015). Overall, it is important to consider the

consequences of charter expansion in cities in light of weak propensity of charters to both hire and retain teachers of color, particularly ones who are black.

### Experiences of Teachers of Color in Charter Schools: Research Design and Analysis

To understand working conditions in charter schools and its impact on teachers' decisions to leave these schools, I conducted a qualitative study using interviews and observations with 28 teachers in three schools in New York City: Community Charter (CCS), Elevation Charter (ECS), and Brighton Charter (BCS) schools. Teacher participants were racially diverse, with more than half who identified as black/African American (57%), almost a third who identified as white (32%), approximately 7% who identified as Asian American, and approximately 4% who identified as Latino/a. The teachers were asked to give interviews after several weeks of observation in classrooms, including six to seven teachers in each school who taught similar grade levels. Interviews lasted one hour on average and were transcribed verbatim.

The three charter schools that participated in the study were located in the same neighborhood in New York City and were analyzed as case studies for a larger comparative analysis of instructional practices between charter schools in a community. Case studies involve in-depth description and analysis of bounded groups or processes in a specific context (Merriam, 1988). As summarized in Table 1, charter schools in the study shared important qualities, including having the same charter authorizer (State University of New York) and thus underwent similar renewal and evaluation protocols. The schools also served similar groups of children by race and ethnicity (e.g. over 90%

black and Latino/a) and by socioeconomic status (e.g. a majority of students qualified for free or reduced priced lunch). The schools were also in operation for more than five years and therefore underwent at least one successful renewal by the state charter authorizer. Last, the schools were selected after preliminary visits to 20 charter schools in the neighborhood. One leader in each school was invited to participate in the study, resulting in 13 schools with leaders who agreed to participate (n=22), while leaders in seven schools declined to participate in the study.

While the schools shared similar student demographics, I selected schools that represented "maximum variation" in terms of different approaches to the organization of school practices (Merriam, 1988). I used literature on the organizational characteristics of schools as well as observations and interviews with leaders to inform my selection of cases, paying attention to founder type, descriptions of decision-making and autonomy, and relationships between leaders and teachers (Henig et. al, 2005; Ingersoll, 1996, 2001, Kardos et. al, 2001; Jehn & Jonsen, 2010; Simon & Johnson, 2015).

I also observed "pedagogic conditions" in schools, informed by sociologist Basil Bernstein's concepts of classification and framing, which refer to issues of power and control in areas of curriculum and pedagogy (Bernstein, 1990, 2000; Sadovnik, 1991). For example, classification, according to Bernstein, involved boundary maintenance between academic subjects, as well as boundaries between formal "academic" knowledge and local, context-specific knowledge. Framing involved control of the transmission of knowledge (i.e., pacing, sequence, selection of content; (Bernstein, 1990). For Bernstein, schools with strong classification adhered to rigid boundaries in what counts as knowledge (often

School Name (Pseudonyms)	Total Students	Grade Level	Management Type	Race/Ethnicity	Free/Reduced Lunch	Limited English	Union/UFT contracts	Facility Costs	Year Founded
"Brighton" (BCS)	404	K-4	CMO	Black 76% Latino/a 20% White 0% Other 4%	74%	7%	Non-Unionized	Co-located in DOE building	2006
"Community" (CCS)	433	K-5	Stand-Alone	Black 36% Latino/a 61% White 0% Other 3%	61%	4%	Unionized	Lease	2000
"Elevation" (ECS)	294	K-5	Stand-Alone	Black 80% Latino/a 20% White 0% Other 0%	86%	4%	Non-Unionized	Co-located in DOE building	2005

Table 1. Demographic Overview of Three Case Study Schools (2013)

<b>Structural</b>	Structural conditions included: founder type/management of charter school (e.g., standalone charters v. charters managed by an organization); school size; scale of school (number of schools); funding; access to private donations; or location (urban, suburban, rural); staffing and hiring/firing policies; union contract.
<b>Organizational</b>	Organizational conditions included: descriptions of relationships between leaders, teachers, and students (hierarchical, egalitarian); views of autonomy and decision-making; collegiality/collaboration.
<b>Sociocultural Conditions (pedagogic norms)</b>	Sociocultural conditions include the dominant views of what and how teachers should teach in a given school setting. These views are informed by ideologies, values, and orientations held by leaders and administration. Also includes beliefs about knowledge and culture, particularly prior knowledge and cultural practices of historically marginalized groups. These conditions also include Basil Bernstein’s theory of classification and framing, the former of which involves practices of boundary maintenance between official and non-dominant knowledge, and the latter involves control of how knowledge is presented and shared (i.e., pacing, sequence, selection of content).

**Table 2. Conceptual Framework for Analyzing Working Conditions: Structural, Organizational, and Sociocultural**

excluding local knowledge forms). Schools with strong framing adhered to highly structured pedagogical rules that prescribed the transmission of knowledge (e.g., scripted lessons). For this study, I argue that the politics of culture and knowledge, particularly in schools with strong classification and

framing, are important yet overlooked sites of struggle between teachers and school leaders, particularly for ToCs.

Altogether, based on school visits and preliminary interviews with leaders, I made a purposeful selection of school cases that varied in structural, organizational,

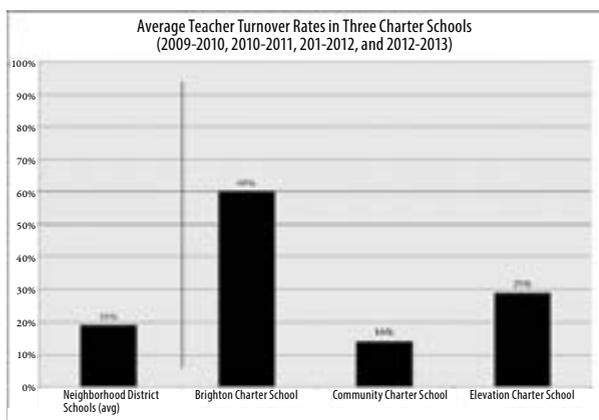
<b>Org. &amp; Pedagogic Conditions</b>	<b>Community Charter School (CCS)</b>	<b>Elevation Charter School (ECS)</b>	<b>Brighton Charter School / CMO charter (BCS)</b>
(In) flexibility re: curriculum, school procedures, and behavior policies	Semi-structured; moderately flexible	Semi-structured; moderately flexible	Structured; rigid
Descriptions of Teachers and their role in school policies	Primary role in shaping practice, semi-autonomous (co-teaching models)	Collaborative role in shaping instructional practice; semi-autonomous (team teaching and co-teaching models encouraged collaborative culture)	Secondary role in shaping instruction; little-to-no autonomy (scripted curriculum, uniform practices developed by senior managers)
Instruction: Whole-class, small group, individual	Co-teaching model allowed whole class, small group; individual	Co-teaching model allowed whole class, small group; individual	Whole Class
Relationships between teachers and leaders Horizontal/hierarchical	Semi- horizontal	Semi- horizontal	Hierarchical
Resources	Moderate; limited private capital / fundraising; struggled w/ recruitment of suitable teachers and funds for professional development to support model	Moderate; limited private capital, struggled to fund affordable quality instructional programs; also struggled w/ funding professional development for teachers, partnered w/ other charter schools to raise funds	Abundant: very successful at fundraising, significant private capital to finance additional resources for teachers, administrators and central/regional managers to oversee network operations
Stability of administration & Staff	Stable teachers, Stable admin, mix of teachers w/ range of experience; teachers paired together in co-teaching model, encouraged professional collaboration & mentoring;	Unstable teachers, Stable admin; mix of teachers w/ range of experience; teachers at times disagreed w/ or fell out with administrators and left school	Unstable teachers Unstable admin; teacher turnover common; and those w/ 2-3yrs encouraged to be administrators and soon left to start their own schools (to support replication/ expansion initiatives); students more stable than the staff

**Table 3. Summary of Organizational Conditions in Three Charter Schools**

and sociocultural conditions. Summarized in Table 2, the conditions of variance included: a) structural conditions tied to founder and managerial type (e.g., standalone and CMO); b) organizational conditions related to leaders' descriptions of teacher autonomy, decision-making, and leadership style; and c) sociocultural conditions related to views of what or how to teach (classification and framing).

Table 3 provides more detail about the organizational characteristics in each school, gleaned from interviews with charter school leaders, including principals, managers, and administrators.

After case selections were already made, and after interviews with teachers were concluded in



each school, I observed stark differences in rates of teacher turnover between the schools. As seen in Figure 1, for example, Brighton Charter School had a 60% teacher turnover rate (averaged over four years); nearly three times higher than nearby neighborhood district schools over the same period. Community Charter School had lower than average turnover rates compared to nearby district schools, with 14% teacher turnover (averaged over four years). Last, Elevation charter school had a turnover rate of 29% (averaged over the same four-year period) that was moderately higher than nearby district schools.

Given sharp differences in teacher turnover between charter schools in the study, I reanalyzed teacher interviews using a process of deductive coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994), whereby teachers' rationales for leaving schools were analyzed using categories derived from studies of working conditions, as well as Bernstein's framework of knowledge and pedagogy. For example, I categorized all interview statements related to teachers' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with schools as structural, organizational, or sociocultural. I also quantified the category of moves in the charter sector that teachers reported, including previous moves within the charter sector prior to their

current school, moves to their current school, moves to another charter school during the study or by the end of study, as well as decisions to leave teaching altogether. Last, not only was I able to note descriptions and explanations for school movements (previous or current moves), but I also noted the pattern and frequency of moves between charter school types. Overall, analysis of data was an iterative process of reviewing and analyzing coded transcripts with aid of qualitative software, Dedoose. Below, I share some of the most robust themes across teachers in the study.

### FINDINGS: Teacher Turnover in Three Charter Schools

The 28 teachers in the study made a total of 16 moves since entering the charter sector. Despite an average of four years' experience teaching in the charter sector, nearly half of teachers in the study reported moving schools at least once since working in the charter sector (13 of 28 teachers; or 46%). Three teachers (11%) described more than one move since working in the charter sector, and six teachers (21%) were no longer teaching by the end of the study in 2013. While overall teaching experience was considered as a factor shaping movement, teachers in the study had an average of seven years teaching experience, including experience in district, charter, and private schools. Teaching experience varied only moderately across case study schools, as teacher participants in Community Charter School had an average of 6 years of experience, while teachers in Brighton Charter School had 5.8 years of experience, and teachers in Elevation Charter School had 5.1 years of experience. However, participants in the study had fewer years of experience teaching in the charter sector (4.5 years) compared to overall years of experience across all sectors, including district, charter, and private schools (7 years). Fewer years of

Total Number of Moves = 16			
Type of Move	# of Moves	Pattern of Move by Charter Type	# of Moves
Between charter types (Structural)	5	Stand-alone → district school	= 0
		Stand-alone → stand-alone	= 1
		Stand-alone → CMO	= 1
Within charter types (Organizational)	4	Stand-alone → not teaching	= 2
		CMO → district school	= 1
Across sectors (Sector)	1	CMO → CMO	= 1
		CMO-ch#1 → CMO-ch#2	= 2
		CMO → stand-alone	= 4
Departures	6	CMO → no longer teaching	= 4

Table 4. Categories of Moves by Teachers Since Working in the Charter Sector

experience in charters indicates that most teachers in the study did not begin their teaching career in charter schools, but made mid-career changes when moving from district to charter schools.

Four types of movement emerged among teachers in the study, including structural moves that were between charter types (e.g. stand-alone to CMO schools, or vice versa), organizational moves that were within a charter type (e.g. between standalone charters, CMO-affiliated charters, or moves within a single CMO), sector moves (e.g. from charter schools back to district schools), as well as moves that were departures (e.g., moves that resulted in no longer classroom teaching).

As seen in Table 4, the kinds of movement reported by teachers since entering the charter sector were not equal across charter schools. For example, structural moves between charter types were the most commonly reported, consisting of five moves of this category and mostly from CMO charters to stand-alone charter schools (4 of 5). The high number of reported moves from CMO charters is consistent with the higher rate teacher turnover in Brighton Charter School, the only CMO charter school in the study. The second most common move was departures from classroom teaching, including six moves by teachers that resulted in “no longer teaching.” Similar to structural moves, departures from teaching were

mostly from Brighton, the CMO charter school in the study (4 of 6). Indeed, the frequent movements reported by teachers that were from CMO charters maps onto similar studies about the poor quality of working conditions in CMOs, many of which use highly prescriptive practices and offer little autonomy for teachers (see Torres, 2014).

Some of the moves reported by teachers were less rooted in structural differences between CMO charters and other schools, as some moves occurred within similar charter types, including between standalone charters or within a single CMO, such as two teachers who made moves to different schools managed by the same CMO (e.g., see discussion of Theresa and Alyssa in subsequent sections). In these instances, teachers’ moves were less related to structural conditions involving an external management organization or school size, but more related to specific organizational qualities inside a school, including the leadership style of a principal or relationships and collegiality among teachers. The least common move reported by teachers was across sector, with only one teacher reporting a move from a charter school to a district school.

Multiple moves by individual teachers were also reported, as two teachers reported making three moves since entering the charter sector, including one teacher who moved from a CMO-charter to another

Reason for working in Charter Sector	Name (Pseudonyms)	<b>Record of Movement</b> <b>1. Moves between charter types (standalone v. CMO)</b> <b>2. Moves within a charter type (e.g., within CMO network)</b> <b>3. Moves across sectors (from charter to district school)</b> <b>4. Moves out of teaching (no-longer teaching)</b>
“Disillusioned” Teachers	*Alyssa, *Theresa, Carmen, *Shawn *Donna, *Nadia, Arlene	2 teachers moved between charter types; 1 teacher no longer teaching Carmen: stand-alone → CMO-charter → no longer teaching *Shawn: CMO → CMO → stand-alone charter 2 teachers moved within a single CMO network, 1 teacher no longer teaching *Alyssa: CMO-charter 1 → CMO-charter2 *Theresa: CMO-charter1 → CMO-charter2 → no longer teaching
“Novices” recruited by Alternative teacher educ. programs	*Rachel, *Roger, Samantha, *Eric, *Lilly, Ellen, Alliyah	1 teacher moved between charter types; 1 teacher no longer teaching Ellen: CMO → stand-alone Samantha: CMO → no longer teaching
“Reformers” Community-Control	*Humphrey, *Andrew, Bridgette, *Tia, *Tracy	1 teacher moved between charter types; 1 teacher no longer teaching *Tia: stand-alone → no longer classroom teaching *Tracy: CMO → stand-alone
“Reformers” Market-Reform	*Camille, *Charles	2 teachers moved between charter types; 1 teacher no longer teaching *Charles: CMO → stand-alone *Robinson: CMO → no longer classroom teacher
“Circumstantial” Teachers	Rena, *Cindy, *Mary, *Amy, *Barbara, Kimberly, Justin	1 teacher moved between charter types *Barbara: stand-alone → stand-alone 1 teacher moved across sectors Justin: CMO → DOE school 1 teacher no longer teaching Kimberly: stand-alone → no longer classroom teaching

**Table 5. Teacher Turnover by Category of Charter Participation**  
*\*Indicates Teacher of Color*

charter school managed by a different CMO and then to a standalone charter school (e.g., see discussion of Shawn in subsequent sections). Similarly, another teacher reported moving from a standalone charter school to a CMO-charter only to leave classroom teaching shortly after (e.g., see discussion of Carmen below). A summary of all moves reported by 13 of the 28 teachers in the study is noted in Table 5. However, to better understand teachers' rationales for moving schools, I explore below teachers' experiences in the charter sector, including in three focal schools, and consider implications for how teachers make meaningful distinctions in the working conditions between schools.

### **Structural Conditions of Turnover: Weak Labor, Limited Preparation, and Powerful Donors**

As noted earlier, charter schools in the study had varying rates of teacher turnover, with Brighton Charter School (BCS) having the highest average turnover rate at 60%, and Community Charter School (CCS) having the lowest average turnover rate at 14% over the same period. Interviews with teachers and leaders in each school suggest that BCS and CCS were structurally different in fundamental ways that shaped teachers' everyday experiences, including BCS having weak labor protections for its teachers (staff were non-unionized), heavy reliance on alternatively certified teachers with limited prior experience in urban settings, and a powerful cadre of external managers and private donors with prodigious influence on the educational mission of the school.

The more stable teaching force at CCS was due in part to the fact that teachers at the school were unionized with a specialized bargaining agreement with the principal, a rare status in charter schools. Yet CCS's turnover rate was lower than nearby district schools that also had unionized faculty, which signaled important differences in the structure of hiring at the school that went beyond labor protections. Terri Sheets, for example, was the principal of CCS and described intentional efforts to hire teachers from the surrounding community, as well as teachers who were previously paraprofessionals at the school, "I definitely try to avoid hiring brand new teachers who are not familiar with the school." Rachel, for example, was an African American teacher who worked as a teaching assistant at CCS and grew up only blocks from the school. When explaining her familiarity with the surrounding community, Rachel said, "I'm just a part of [the neighborhood]. I have an idea of how home life is

[for students]. I'm hoping it makes me more relatable to students. I can both expect and respect where students are coming from." As such, the leader of CCS praised the fact that many teachers in her school had roots in the local community and came from a built-in teacher pipeline of paraprofessionals and assistants. The practice of hiring local teachers, moreover, worked to benefit the racial diversity of teachers at CCS in light of its location in a predominantly black and Latinx community.

Elevation charter school (ECS) was the third focal school in the study, and reported high turnover at 29%, similar to BCS and much higher than CCS and nearby district schools (19%). Unlike CCS, neither ECS nor BCS had unionized faculty, nor did leaders in each school mention priorities for hiring local teachers. Nonetheless, while both schools exceeded turnover rates in CCS and in nearby district schools, their structural differences shaped the severity of turnover between the schools. For instance, even as BCS struggled to retain teachers, losing half of its teachers each year, it nonetheless benefited from highly centralized recruitment campaigns on the part of its CMO, as well as partnerships with prominent alternative teacher certification programs, both of which helped to recruit teachers nationally and maintain a steady supply of teachers for the school each year. Hence, the efficient recruitment strategies (and monetary investments for marketing and recruitment) on the part of its Brighton's CMO enabled the school to function "smoothly" in spite of high teacher turnover. In some ways, the steady supply of new teachers from across the country worked to dis-incentivize needed attention to working conditions and teacher satisfaction.

ECS also relied on alternatively certified teachers from out of state, and thus competed with BCS for teachers in the same labor pool. Kimberly, a teacher recruiter for ECS, described the school's struggle for teachers: "It's all actually very competitive, because we're all trying obviously to get the best teachers we can for our schools, but our school isn't as big as other places." The limited training of new teachers at ECS, due to expedited alternative certification programs, including teachers with short-term commitments, compounded the school's struggles to retain teachers. Indeed, as a strategy for recruitment, ECS adopted a "CMO-charter vibe" that Kimberly described as involving highly structured practices, particularly useful for novice teachers with limited training. These efforts, however, had noticeable drawbacks, "Sometimes I worry that the more we take on a CMO kind of vibe, of more structure and results, I worry that we might forget about the importance

of our teacher-student relationship." As a standalone school, therefore, with a limited budget for marketing and recruitment, and a much smaller central office compared to BCS, leaders at ECS struggled to recruit teachers from out of state and viewed its high turnover rates as a problem in need of a remedy.

In addition to limited preparation of teachers with shorter teaching commitments, structural conditions of turnover were related to powerful and prohibitive influences of private managers and donors, particularly in CMO schools. Charles, for example, was an African American teacher in a high-profile CMO charter school, serving as a math coach for teachers in fourth, fifth, and sixth grades. Charles admitted that he enjoyed the national attention that his school garnered for its high-test scores; even hoping one day to "shine like the executives on Wall Street" who contributed large private donations to the chain of charter schools he worked in. Unexpectedly, by the end of study, Charles was "let go" from the CMO charter (i.e., a non-renewal of his teaching contract). "The school had a great reputation and many of our board members were famous millionaires and billionaires, but they operated from a business standpoint. So they were only looking at children's test scores or results, and to them teachers were either getting results or not getting results." Unfortunately, according to school leaders, Charles learned that he was not "getting results" as senior managers expected and subsequently did not renew his contract for the following year. "I worked for that CMO for three and half years, and my dismissal took two minutes," noted Charles.

For some educators, particularly those with experience in the city's under-resourced district schools, CMO charters provided access to opportunities in the form of professional development, networking, and tangible resources for classroom instruction. Theresa was an African American woman who taught for five years in district schools located in one of the city's lowest income communities. In the charter sector, however, she described her excitement about the abundance of resources available, particularly in charter schools with affluent private donors, "The materials alone were enough to leave my district school. I remember what it was like [in my previous school]. Just to get a ream of paper was gold." According to some studies, Theresa's experience is not far-fetched, as large charter chains in the U.S. have significant private investments that can yield upwards of \$5,700 in additional per-pupil funding. Based on New York's average funding, infusions of private capital in Theresa's charter school likely pushed funding to

nearly \$23,000 per student.

Similarly, Shawn was an African American male teacher who taught in the city's charter sector after working in district schools. Dismayed by citywide policies prohibiting teachers to develop their own discipline plans for students, Shawn sought a teaching position in one of the city's charter schools in hopes of greater autonomy, only to struggle with CMO managers who focused narrowly on student performance. Shawn attributed his conflicts with managers to the influence of private donors, "The idea from donors was that 'we are giving [your school] all of this money, so where are our results?' But when money came, the quality of instruction became diluted . . . It was suddenly about quick, short results." Shawn eventually left his charter school to find a school that fit his ideas about teaching and learning, "My [old school] wasn't really about developing the whole child. They were about results. That's it."

Overall, the experiences of teachers like Charles and Shawn involved conflicts with powerful senior managers and private donors, both of which are rooted in the unique structure of CMO charters with external managers and influential sponsors. While teachers like Theresa found CMOs provided access to more resources and opportunities for professional development (compared to her experience in under-resourced district schools), Charles and Shawn were negatively impacted by the blunt influence and hierarchical structure that empowered managers and sought employment (voluntarily and involuntarily) in other schools.

### **Organizational Conditions of Turnover: Struggles for Leadership and Decision-making**

Organizational conditions also shaped teachers' decisions to leave schools, including school leaders with rigid expectations and little interest in negotiating with teachers' key decisions about school practices. As principal of BCS, for example, Brenda described her leadership style:

[Our managers] believe in the replicable model . . . So [the CMO's] school curriculums are the same. Our literacy instruction is the same. Our math instruction is the same . . . There are little things that we [leaders] can tweak, but there are certain things that are by design, and we are not allowed to change.

To ensure uniformity in instruction across schools, Brenda noted the frequency with which senior managers worked with leaders across

schools, "Our senior leaders have at least two to three meetings a week with us [about instruction], whether they're on video or in person." In some ways, the influence of managers seemed to violate the "bifurcated" structure described in BCS' formal charter proposal, which delineated clear distinctions between academic personnel (e.g. principals, teachers, and instructional coaches) and managerial personnel (e.g. CMO managers, data analysts, central office staff). Over time, however, the school's board and state evaluators overlooked the ways in which the bifurcated structure had grown hierarchical, with academic personnel almost wholly subordinate to central managers who controlled curriculum development, daily lesson plans, and worked to standardize practices and protocols inside schools. Hierarchical relationships impacted teachers, who felt subordinate to both leaders and managers in decision-making about classroom practices. Camille, for example, was an African American teacher in BCS who described limited flexibility in teaching due to scripted curriculum.

TW: Do you have enough foundation to make the [lessons] your own?

Camille: Um . . . [pause] . . . sometimes I feel like I'm sort of in a confined mode . . . I mean I feel like I don't have that full autonomy you know . . . we have planning meetings and it's like "you should be on this teaching point on this day, whatever, whatever." And sometimes it can be too much, to be honest, to where I feel like the [CMO] could have anybody in [here] teaching.

Similarly, Theresa described limitations due to hierarchical relations between managers, school leaders, and teachers: "The [CMO] goes about this whole bullying tactic with teachers. Managers try to bully teachers into doing what they want . . . but they should want people to do things because they see the value in it, not because they tell us to do it." When asked about the kinds of support that she would prefer, Camille explained that she would not force teachers to implement scripted curriculum: "If I give teachers what they need to teach, like the topic, I think they should be able to make learning happen without a script. I just feel like that's what they are supposed to do as teachers." At the time of interview, Camille expressed intentions to leave her school to open her own school. By the end of study, she indeed moved out of classroom teaching and was interning as an assistant principal for a new school. To resolve

conflicts with managers, Theresa left BCS to work in a charter school within the same CMO but located furthest from manager headquarters. In her new charter school, Theresa described her principal as less authoritarian than leaders in her previous school, adding that CMO managers were "too scared to visit" the school and thus indirectly allowed teachers more autonomy.

In contrast, leaders in standalone schools like CCS and ECS were less interested in expanding or replicating new schools, and thus retained significant influence over practices inside their respective schools. Compared to BCS, standalone schools in the study had fewer resources, but less rigidity in school-wide routines, and less hierarchical relationships between leaders and faculty. For instance, teachers in ECS described a blend of supports for teachers, including a co-teaching model that allowed autonomy within teacher-dyads to develop curriculum units. CCS, on the other hand, had a semi-structured and collaborative approach to decision-making, with grade-level teams meeting regularly to solidify practices and modify routines.

Terri Sheets, CCS's leader, emphasized the value of collaborative relationships among teachers and administration. "We're in this together," Terri noted when describing the institutional culture at CCS. Echoing this sentiment, Cindy Williams, an African American teacher in her seventh year of teaching at CCS, noted: "We have to work together if we want to get things done, but we [teachers] set the time and plan [our] time for what we're going to do." Similarly, Carl Rivers was the principal of ECS and described the defining quality of charter schools as "the capacity to have decision-makers back in the school building," referring to principals and teachers, as opposed to central office managers or district bureaucrats. Affirming this sentiment was Carmen, a white third-grade teacher at ECS who, ironically, moved from ECS to BCS in search of greater resources and a uniform, school-wide structure. When reflecting on her decisions to move schools, Carmen compared the organizational conditions of the two schools:

I think teachers were friends more at Elevation, partly because we didn't have really absurd hours, and partly because we weren't treated as disposable . . . it felt more like 'we're all in this little venture together to make it survive.' So you feel like a more important part of the puzzle . . . I didn't realize that was important to me until I left Elevation.

Indeed, although Carmen left ECS to work in BCS, she was overwhelmed by the CMO's expanded enterprise, which required significant amounts of time to implement curricula and routines in scores of new charter schools. Carmen was also discouraged by the hierarchical nature of relationships with leaders in BCS, and decided to quit less than 2 months into the school year, adding to what she estimated was a 30% turnover of teachers by the third month of the school year. By end of study, while Carmen was unsure what her next steps would be, she was no longer classroom teaching.

### **Sociocultural Conditions of Turnover: Conflicts of Race, Culture, and Knowledge**

Finally, while teachers described structural and organizational conditions as important factors shaping decisions to leave schools, these conditions led to important conflicts about race, culture, and knowledge to which teachers of color in the study expressed a number of concerns. For example, BCS' structure of weak labor protections, reliance on teachers with limited training, and a cadre of private managers and donors worked together to influence hierarchical organizational conditions with authoritarian leadership and limited autonomy for teachers. These conditions, however, had important implications for teaching and learning that impacted ToCs' decisions to stay or leave schools. Leaders in BCS, for example, valued test-based measures of quality and openly demanded that teachers serve those ends, shaping rigid pedagogic conditions for what forms of knowledge were valued (i.e., only measurable knowledge mattered). In this vein, teachers were expected to focus on "official" knowledge sanctioned in textbooks or in prescribed lessons. Likewise, pedagogic conditions in BCS yielded clear distinctions between "right" and "wrong" ways of teaching, based on students' mastery of material on tests. These norms, while ostensibly created to promote college access for students, rarely integrated local forms of knowledge, cultural expressions, dialects, or styles of dress and representation on the part of students. Timothy Peters, for example, was the director of pedagogy for BCS, and for other schools managed by its CMO, and described the instructional and pedagogical conditions intended to "move" children's scores:

Peters: I first get [students] to behave at a high level... No kid slips through my cracks!

I'm not going to have any "Ones" in my class.

TW: What if you do?

Peters: Well, I'd know way ahead of time, and I'd fix it.... Our [CMO] has a very strong culture that's big on "who's got it" and "who's not got it!" [Mastery of material based on test scores].

The "strong culture" of instruction, as referred to by Timothy, includes explicit ranking of students by test scores. Indeed, observations at BCS included regular incidents where children who performed below grade level referred to one another as "Ones", while children who performed at grade level referred to one another as "Twos", while children who reached proficient were called "Threes"; and children who performed above average were called "Fours." In light of BCS' strong culture of relentless focus on test scores, Timothy boasted that he could deliver results expediently, "I've been involved from the beginning of this [CMO's] project. I'd say to charter founders early on, 'what kind of scores do you want this time around?' And I'd say, 'Done!' [Slams hand on table]."

BCS' culture of testing and its narrow view of knowledge resembled Bernstein's view of strong classification and strong framing, whereby boundaries between 'academic' and local knowledge, and the control of how knowledge is presented (e.g., pacing, sequencing, and selection of activities) were impermeable. Such conditions conveyed sociocultural beliefs that were intolerable for many ToCs who regarded them as forms of marginalization on the part of largely white leaders and charter managers. Before leaving her charter school, for example, Theresa noted racial disparities between leaders and teachers: "I mean it's not that many of us [blacks] in the CMO. I could probably count on one hand how many black people there are." As such, Theresa felt that racial disparities compromised the quality of relationships with parents:

I had to intercede a lot with parent relationships. Of the two teachers that were on my grade level team, they didn't know how to interact with parents of color . . . So that, and just being able to build a sense of community with students and parents was something I knew how to do.

Other teachers described more direct conflicts with test-based approaches to instruction that limited the inclusion of students' culture and prior knowledge in schools. Shawn, for example, worked

in three different charter schools since entering the sector in 2008, including moves from a CMO-charter to a different CMO-charter and finally to a stand-alone charter school (ECS). Shawn described feeling out of place with each school's culture and its philosophy of teaching: "I would say I was a misfit in the charters I've been in. My philosophy was a little too much to the left." To explain his philosophy, Shawn noted: "[History] shows that change is bigger than one plus one, or two plus two, or ten times ten. Students have to be able to draw from a well of rich knowledge that will keep them pressing toward the mark of a higher prize." Shawn described his own approach to teaching as "drawing from wells of rich knowledge" among students, particularly students of color who he believed had a history of resilience and hope that could fuel social change. As such, Shawn sought to connect students to the historic meaning of education for social justice, a vision much broader than passing exams.

In a similar vein, Charles described dissatisfaction with charter schools that failed to embrace what he called a "progressive" approach to teaching:

Educators are not supposed to make students feel as though historically their people don't function on the level as another group of people within the same nation. You shouldn't make some groups feel inferior... But kids in Harlem are in just that sort of predicament... Progressive teachers bring learning to the students, where they are. They say to students, 'Your environment is the primary tool to get you to learn, so I'm going to start with the things that you see every day to connect you to learning.'"

After leaving his CMO-charter school for a small standalone school, Charles explained that he was learning to value practices that focused less on delivering children out of "the hood" by way of test scores, and more on developing practices that would cultivate meaningful connections between school and the social and cultural contexts of his students. In doing so, Charles hoped to empower students toward critical changes within their communities, and moved away from fixing so-called cultural deficits in communities of color and toward challenging broader structures of inequality that circumscribed communities of color.

### **Conclusions: Listening to Teachers of Color about the Harms of Charter Expansion**

Initiatives to create inclusive, diverse, and equitable

public schools must consider the challenges that charter schools pose, particularly schools with poor working conditions and chronic high turnover among teachers of color. Working conditions, moreover, involve multiple and interwoven dimensions that shape teachers' experiences, including structural, organizational, and sociocultural conditions. Based on findings in this study, structural conditions in charter schools that were harmful to the retention of teachers of color included weak labor protections, hiring practices that relied on out-of-state teachers via alternative teacher certification programs, as well as the disproportionate influence of private donors and external managers. Schools in the study with these kinds of structural conditions had the highest rates of teacher turnover, including one of the three focal schools in the study (Brighton Charter School) that was managed by a CMO.

Teacher turnover was also tied to organizational conditions inside schools, such as leadership, decision-making, and autonomy. Organizational conditions were intertwined, however, with structural conditions, as teachers who left CMO-affiliated schools described limited autonomy and decision-making due to highly structured and hierarchical norms driven by senior managers in central offices, many who regarded academic personnel (principals, teachers, and staff) as subordinate groups. Turnover was lower in standalone charter schools, particularly in Community charter school, which embraced a family-like ethos rooted in collaboration and teamwork (i.e., "we're in this together to make it work"). These qualities were supported, however, by structural conditions including unionized teachers with specialized bargaining agreements, leaders who prioritized hiring teachers from the surrounding community, and preferences for hiring teachers who worked previously as paraprofessionals or assistants and thus had strong familiarity with students and families at the school. In contrast, in the absence of a well-trained and stable cadre of teachers, charters like BCS doubled down on prescribed curriculum, as well as other forms of top-down leadership to accommodate large numbers of novice teachers, all limiting teacher autonomy.

Sociocultural conditions were also important in teachers' decisions to leave schools, and also influenced by structural and organizational conditions. Sociocultural conditions were manifested primarily in conflicts about instructional norms that minimized, and at times excluded altogether, value for the cultural resources and prior knowledge of students. Inclusive practices were particularly important for teachers of color who often serve as

“cultural brokers” for students and communities of color in terms of helping students negotiate differences between home culture and school expectations (Irvine, 1989). In this study, such roles were nearly impossible to carry out in some schools, such as BCS, with its culture of strong classification and framing, where boundaries between academic and local knowledge as well as the control of knowledge (pacing, sequencing, and selection of lesson content) were heavily regulated. Not all ToCs identified as cultural brokers, however, or viewed test-based approaches to instruction as problems, including ToCs in the study who did not leave schools with inflexible sociocultural conditions, such as Theresa and Alyssa who moved to charter schools within the same CMO with similarly rigid instructional practices. In these cases, access to material resources and professional development via prodigious donations to CMOs from wealthy funders was too desirable to give up, particularly for teachers with prior experiences in under-resourced district schools in low-income communities. This finding, however, suggests the high turnover rate at CMO charters like BCS might be even been higher if not for material resources provided to teachers. Teachers like Theresa and Alyssa, moreover, convey the importance of both material and sociocultural resources for teachers of color, including professional development opportunities, classroom materials, and culturally flexible spaces for the inclusion of diverse students from historically marginalized backgrounds.

Overall, in a sociopolitical climate where market enthusiasts look to expand the charter sector, envisioning them as models of pedagogical experimentation and innovation, this study highlights the ways in which charter schools vary in their structural, organizational, and sociocultural conditions, including some schools that limit teachers’ capacity to innovate due to hierarchical working

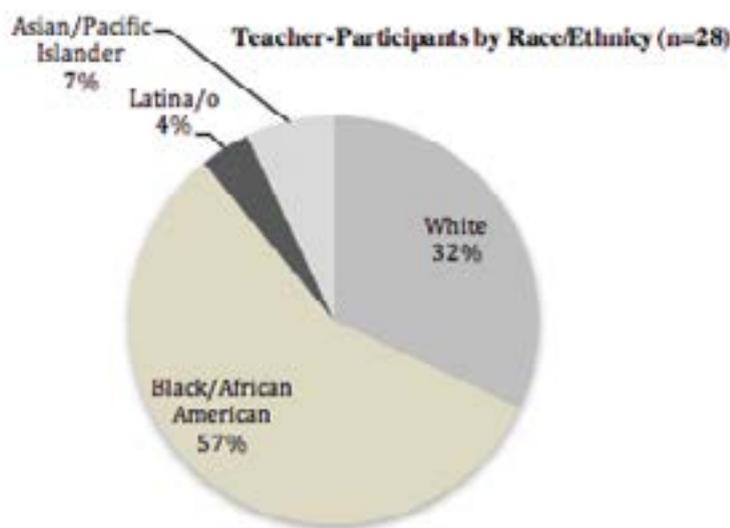
### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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APPENDIX

Teacher Name	Charter School Name	Total Years in Education	Years in charter sector	Background	Teacher Education Type		Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Age
1. Ms. Amy	"Community" Charter School	9	9	charter only	Traditional	University-based	Asian/Pacific Islander	Female	30-35
2. Ms. Donna		6	4	DOE & Charter	Traditional	University-based	Black/African American	Female	25-30
3. Ms. Cindy		7	7	charter only	Traditional	University-based	Black/African American	Female	30-35
4. Ms. Rena		7	7	charter only	Traditional	University-based	White/Caucasian	Female	30-35
5. Ms. Rachel		2	2	charter only	Traditional	University-based	Black/African American	Female	20-25
6. Ms. Tracy		5	5	Charter only	Traditional	University-based	Black/African American	Female	30-35
7. Ms. Robinson	"Brighton" Charter	5	3	Private/religious & Charter	Traditional	University-based	Black/African American	Female	30-35
8. Ms. Alyssa		8	3	DOE & Charter	Alternative	Alt. Cert.	Black/African American	Female	30-35
9. Ms. Theresa		8	3	DOE & Charter	Traditional	University-based	Black/African American	Female	30-35
10. Ms. Samantha		3	2	Charter Only	Alternative	TFA & Teacher U	White/Caucasian	Female	25-30
11. Ms. Carmen		5	3	DOE & Charter	Alternative	TFA & University-based	White/Caucasian	Female	25-30
12. Ms. Lily	"Elevation" Charter School	1	1	charter only	Alternative	TFA & Relay	Black/African American	Female	20-25
13. Mr. Eric		1	1	charter only	Alternative	TFA & Relay	Black/African American	Male	20-25
14. Ms. Ellen		3	1	DOE & Charter	Alternative	TFA & University-based	White/Caucasian	Female	25-30
15. Ms. Alliyah		3	1	private & charter	Alternative	TFA & University-based	White/Caucasian	Female	25-30
16. Mr. Shawn		16	5	DOE & Charter	Traditional	University-based	Black/African American	Male	35-40
17. Ms. Kimberly Patrick		8	3	DOE & Charter	Traditional	University-based	White/Caucasian	Female	30-35
18. Ms. Barbara		4	4	charter only	Traditional	University-Based	White, Latina/o	Female	25-30
19. Ms. Marry	"Jifunza" Charter School	14	4	Foreign schools	Traditional	International	Black/African American	Female	40-45
20. Ms. Tia		7	3	DOE & private	Traditional	University-based	Black/African American	Female	30-35
21. Ms. Arlene		7	2	DOE & Private	Traditional	International	White/Caucasian	Female	30-35
22. Ms. Nadia		17	3	DOE & Charter	Traditional	University-Based	Black/African American	Female	35-40
23. Ms. Bridgette		5	1	DOE & Charter	Traditional	University-Based	White/Caucasian	Female	35-40
24. Mr. Roger	CMO-charter	9	5	DOE & Charter	Alternative	TFA & University-based	Asian/Pacific Islander	Male	30-35
25. Mr. Charles		4	4	charter only	Traditional	University-based	Black/African American	Male	30-35
26. Mr. Justin		3	1	DOE & Charter	Traditional	University-based	White, Jewish	Male	20-25
27. Mr. Humphrey	Standalone Charter	14	14	Charter only	Traditional	University-based	Black/African American	Male	35-40
28. Mr. Andrew		14	10	Charter only	Traditional	University-based	Black/African	Male	35-40

List of Teacher Participants interviewed



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