School Board Privatization: A Case Study of NYC Charter Schools

Daniel Sparks

Columbia University, New York, USA

Abstract

This article examines the rise of charter schools in New York City through the lens of representation of educators on school governing boards. During its inception in the early 1990s, the charter school movement garnered support from progressives and conservatives alike. Albert Shanker, longtime head of the American Federation of Teachers, initially endorsed charter schools as engines for experimentation to be carried out by educators with fresh and potentially radical theories of pedagogy. While the charter school movement has pushed full steam ahead over the past three decades, the role of teachers in this expansion remains unclear. I use publicly available data from the New York State Education Department to identify 268 authorized charter schools for the 2020-21 academic school year. I record data on charter school board membership made available by the New York City Department of Education and State University of New York and then scrape the web (school websites, LinkedIn profiles, online CVs) for board members' current and prior professional occupations. Descriptive results suggest that school board members are overrepresented by financiers and business managers while current and past educators are less represented. The lack of teacher representation on charter school boards suggests that the charter school movement has not followed through on its initial promise to help

professionalize teaching and enhance the role of educators in school governance.

Keywords: *school governance, charter schools, neoliberal education reform, privatization*

Background

Ray Budde is credited for coining the term "charter school" in his 1974 paper "Education by Charter." Budde had experience as a teacher and school administrator prior to becoming a professor of education administration at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where he began advocating for education reform through the creation of charter schools. While his 1974 paper introduced the concept of charter schools, it was his booklet on how to restructure local school districts nearly 15 years later that helped push charter schools as a reform strategy into the mainstream.

Budde (1988) framed education reform by charter as an economic imperative for the country and outlined strategies for implementing charter school reform. Some of Budde's front-and-center policy remedies included more rigorous curriculum development, heightened teacher accountability and professionalization through higher salaries and career ladders, and expansion of business-education partnerships. Importantly, Budde's concept of the charter school was shaped by organizational theory, particularly as it relates to Deweyan educational philosophy. He sought to distribute school administrative power away from principals and towards teachers, and he advocated for teacher professionalization through more autonomy and discretion in classroom curriculum, increased opportunities for non-

classroom responsibilities, and more defined and transparent career development plans (Budde 1988).

Teachers played a critical role in Budde's vision of charter schools. Budde underscored the role of teachers in incorporating ideas learned from graduate coursework, workshops, or classroom visits into a coherent proposal to establish charter schools. In preparing the educational charter, teachers would engage in grassroots discussions with parents and other community stakeholders before presenting their idea to the school board. Upon approval, teachers would lead curriculum development efforts, as they were closest to new and potentially effective pedagogical strategies.

Still, the underlying role of school choice was important for Budde, who believed it could enable the internal organizational changes necessary for implementing his proposed reforms. According to Budde, school choice held the potential to improve individual school culture and academic results without detracting from the public's general satisfaction with public education. Selection was the key mechanism through which school choice could work: students and parents would be more committed to schools that they selected into, and teachers would have an easier time working with parents and students who selected into their schools. If parents wanted to send their children to a school with strong vocational programs or with quality arts instruction, education reform through charters could ensure that both of these options were available. Under Budde's model, teachers, along with parents, business leaders and other community members, were best positioned to develop charters that would meet local demands for education.

The charter school movement proceeded to gain traction on both sides of the aisle in the late 1980s and early 1990s, at which point a consensus had developed that public schools in America were failing. *A Nation at Risk* (1983) presented evidence

of plummeting student performance and argued that such decline was harmful not only for students and families but for US economic competitiveness in the global economy as well. The Reagan and Bush administrations recognized the need for education reform but wanted to avoid outright voucher schemes theorized by Milton Friedman in his canonical essay on the role of government in education (1955). While both administrations were not necessarily against vouchers, they were skeptical of pushing a voucher agenda that had been used several decades prior in attempts to maintain school segregation in the South. Instead, both administrations shifted the rhetoric around school choice policy and carefully redefined public education as any school serving the public interest (Henig 1994). The foundational ideas of school choice remained integral to the Reagan and Bush administrations' education reform strategy: increased choice and competition, decentralization, and a more involved role of the private sector. The charter school movement fit squarely into the framework for conservative education reform.

In the early stages of the charter school movement, conservatives were joined by more progressive voices in support of charter schools, though the motives and theoretical underpinnings for the latter mostly centered on autonomy and equity. In fact, Albert Shanker, head of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), endorsed the concept of charter schools in 1988 in a journal article as well as speeches at the National Press Club and annual AFT meeting (Shanker 1988). Unlike conservatives, Shanker initially advocated for charter schools as laboratories for progressive pedagogy, improved teacher labor conditions, and heightened teacher professionalization.

In his journal article, entitled "Restructuring Our Schools," Shanker argued that Taylorism and a lack of personalized education in schools were contributing to their inability to meet the demands of a democratic society. He described in some

depth a visit to the Holweide Comprehensive School in Cologne, Germany; at the time, the school maintained an array of unique organizational and curricular practices that seemed to be effective for its culturally and linguistically diverse student population. Shanker highlighted the school's use of team teaching, whereby students were assigned to a team of six to eight teachers for the duration of their six-year enrollment at the school, and its leveraging of peer groups for learning over more traditional lecture-style class formats. In elaborating on his impressions of Holweide, Shanker did not intend to portray its model as immediately replicable in the US context, but rather to offer an example of how schools might restructure the learning experience for students.

Moreover, the enhanced role of teachers as school leaders in a more democratic educational model was central to Shanker's early support for charter schools. He recommended education policies that would enable groups of teachers, for instance, to develop charter school proposals to be reviewed for approval by union and school board representatives. His initial support for charter schools did not come without caveats; Shanker underscored the importance of such schools committing to shared governance, publicly available evaluations, and adherence to civil rights mandates in determining who is eligible for school enrollment. In spite of this early support, Shanker soon after reversed his position on charter schools after seeing increasing commercial management (by way of Education Management Organizations), rising stratification by race and income, and circumvention of unionized teachers (Kahlenberg 2007; Abrams 2016 & 2019).

Nevertheless, the charter school movement has taken off over the last 30 years and has in many ways come to define education reform in an era of market-based policymaking. The first charter school was established in 1992 in St. Paul, Minnesota. Since 2000, public charter school enrollment has increased fivefold to

about 6 percent of total public school enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics 2020). New Orleans is now an all-charter school district (Hasselle 2019), and at least 17 districts have more than 30 percent of their students enrolled in charter schools (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools 2016). This expansion occurred with the help of the Bush administration and No Child Left Behind (NCLB), but also benefited greatly from the Obama administration's Race to the Top (RTTT) initiative, which made available $4.35 billion to states to implement innovative programs in education, so long as those states lifted the cap on charter schools and tied teacher assessments to student performance on state exams. While support for charters from the left may have waned in recent years, the number of students served by charter schools continues to grow rapidly.

New York has been home to charter schools for more than two decades. In 1998, then-Governor George Pataki and the State Assembly passed a bill allowing for an unlimited number of extant public schools to convert to charter schools as well as an additional 100 charter schools that could start from scratch (Levy 1998). After passage of the bill, Pataki echoed public choice theory advocates in declaring charter school expansion as key to dismantling bureaucratic barriers to innovation and progress on school reform (Levy 1998). In 2007, the State Assembly amended the 1998 Charter Schools Act to cap the number of charter schools at 200 and again raised the cap in 2010 to 460 (New York State Education Department 2020). To date, there have been 395 charter schools authorized in New York State, 326 of which were open at the beginning of the academic year in 2020. In New York City alone, 314 charter schools have been authorized, and 268 (roughly 80 percent of the state total) are currently serving students (New York State Education Department 2020). Charter school enrollment has increased by more than 80,000 students in New York City over the past decade, from about 20,000 in 2007 to over

100,000 students in 2017, and currently accounts for roughly 10 percent of total public school enrollment (National Association Public Charter Schools 2016).

Framework for Analysis

The purpose of this study is to review the logic and rationale behind charter governance over the past 30 years. Whether charter schools have improved overall student performance is beyond the scope of this study, though the literature on this topic, as taken on the whole, is ambiguous at best (Cohodes & Parham 2021). Advocates of charter school expansion often cite evidence of standardized test score improvements (Abdulkadiroğlu et al. 2011; Angrist et al. 2016; Dobbie & Fryer 2015; Hoxby et al. 2009; Sowell 2020) and parent satisfaction with increased school choice (Oberfield 2020) whereas opponents of the charter school movement highlight evidence of decreases or null effects on test scores (Bettinger 2005; Clark et al. 2015; Gleason et al. 2010; Golann & Torres 2020), negative effects on traditional public school student performance (Ladd & Singleton 2020; Ni 2009), discrimination in school admissions processes and disciplinary policies (Bergman & McFarlin 2020; Lack 2009), and increased school segregation (Ladd & Turaeva 2020; Monarrez et al. 2022), among other critiques. I focus instead on whether charter schools have followed through on their initial potential to serve as arenas for enhanced teacher professionalization and participation in school management. Researchers have taken a number of approaches in attempting to address this question, including analysis of school leaders' day-to-day responsibilities (Dressler 2000), exploration of organizational differences between charter and traditional public schools (Wei, Patel, & Young 2014), and measurement of teacher job satisfaction at charter schools (Roch & Sai 2017). Diane Ravitch's book, *Reign of Error (2013),* debunks common claims from charter school advocates and highlights the many contradictions between charter school rhetoric and reality

when it comes to teacher professionalization and democratic control of schools. Ravitch calls out charter school efforts to limit teacher autonomy, unionization, and job protections; she further advocates for the democratic election of all public school board members, including public charter schools.

Prior analysis on who serves on nonprofit charter school boards is more limited (Ford & Irkhe, 2015). Ferrare and Setari (2016) offer insight into charter school governance by empirically estimating the relationship between private philanthropy and local charter school proliferation through QAP regression. Johnson (2017) offers the most comprehensive analysis of New York City charter school governance to date; the author examines in depth the social and professional networks involved in charter school governance and finds that financial professionals are overrepresented in board membership compared to teachers, parents, and community members. This study builds off of Johnson (2017) by reviewing the occupational history of charter school board directors and trustees for charter schools in New York City through 2020 to assess representation of current and prior teachers involved in school governance.

Role of School Governance

Charter schools differ from traditional public schools in that they qualify as 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organizations. As nonprofit organizations, charter schools and networks are legally obligated to form governing boards that assume fiduciary responsibilities for the organization. The board of directors or trustees selected by a nonprofit is tasked with the duty of care, loyalty, and obedience (National Council of Nonprofits 2020). As it relates specifically to charter schools, board responsibilities include the hiring of school leaders, setting a strategic mission or vision, monitoring school quality and performance, and providing financial oversight (SUNY Institute 2020). Among the responsibilities outlined by Budde

(1988), effective school boards "lead the community in matters of public education" and "deal openly and straightforwardly with controversy." Charter school boards are also responsible for decisions regarding school openings and closures. In accordance with the 2017 amendments to the New York State Charter School Act, charter school boards have the ultimate authority over school policy and operational decisions. Board members thus have a broad range of powers through which to influence charter school policies.

School board members for traditional public schools in New York State are democratically elected in all districts with the exception of Yonkers and New York City. In New York City, the chancellor of the Department of Education oversees all public schools, but the school governance structure also consists of community education councils (CECs). Every community school district across New York City has a twelve member CEC, which is made up of nine elected members, two appointed members by the borough president, and one current high school student. Similar to charter school boards, CECs for traditional public schools review the impact of educational programming on student achievement, evaluate school district leaders, and can advocate for capital improvements. All council members are annually required to attend a training from the Department of Education that reviews tasks and responsibilities of council membership.

Unlike traditional neighborhood public schools, the members of charter school boards are not democratically elected.[1] Instead, they are self-selected by school founders or other key figures within the organization. Applications for charter schools must be approved by verified state authorizers. As outlined in Table 1, for New York City charter applicants, the SUNY Charter Schools Institute, Board of Regents, and New York City Department of Education are the three primary authorizers. Each charter school or management organization is required by New

York State law to make public all serving board members. Charter school board compliance measures required by law include submitting background checks, disclosing conflicts of interest, and publicizing monthly meeting minutes. Additionally, charter school boards are subject to requirements set out by their authorizers. The SUNY Charter Schools Institute, for instance, requires that boards have at least five but no more than 25 members; up to two members may be affiliated with Charter Management Organizations (CMOs), and a maximum of 40 percent of trustees may be affiliated with a single entity.

Table 1. New York Charter Schools by Authorizer, Academic Year 2020-2021

Authorizer	NYC	NY State
Board of Regents	66	97
NYC DOE	38	38
SUNY	186	212
Buffalo BOE	0	2
Total	290	349

Note: Total indicates all charter schools either currently in operation or planned.

Greater autonomy in school governance was an area of overlapping support from both political parties in the early phases of the charter school movement. By skirting democratic participation and processes in school governance embedded within traditional public schools, charters are more flexible in who they choose to lead and manage operations. For ardent school choice advocates, the structure of charter school governance is one element through which the decision-making of public services may be privatized. On the other hand, the structure of charter school governance holds potential to raise the voices and influence of teachers and

career educators in the provision of education. While governing boards are only one potential vehicle for education professionals to broaden their role in education production, an analysis of representation in charter school governance offers insight into how well the movement for charter schools has followed through on its early potential for greater teacher professionalization and leadership opportunities.

Data

I reviewed current and prior occupations of 1,208 charter school board members for all 268 authorized charter schools in New York City for academic year 2020-2021. Prominent CMOs that are part of the analysis include Ascend, Achievement First,* KIPP,* New Visions, Success Academy, and Uncommon Schools.*[2] Together, they account for over 30 percent of the 268 charter schools currently operating in New York City. Table 2 details the number of independent versus CMO-affiliated charter schools within each of the five boroughs, and Table 3 indicates both the number of charter schools in operation as well as those approved for future academic years by borough. Tables A1 and A2 in the appendix identify all charter networks included in the study by borough as well as the number of states in which each CMO operates schools.

To identify board members and record their occupational histories, I scraped the Internet for CVs and employee profiles. Sources for this data include school websites, company staff bios, and LinkedIn. I also used data from the SUNY Charter Institute, which recently required charter school applicants to submit profiles of board member candidates. Using the collected data, I generated two classification systems. The first identifies board members as belonging to more broad professional categories, which include finance, NGOs, government, business, educational instruction, and management, and law. I then used the 2018 Standard Occupational Classification system from the US Bureau of Labor

Statistics to code board members' current employment experiences. I further identify whether a given board member has any preK-12 teaching experience based on collected data. I was unable to collect any occupational data for 14 percent of all charter school board members for the 2020 academic school year, and many observed profiles may fail to capture full employment histories. Missing data could bias results if board members who are omitted from the analysis significantly differ from those who are included in terms of occupational history or, similarly, if omitted employment experiences vary greatly compared to those that are reported. I discuss additional limitations with data and interpretation of results later on in the article.

Table 2. Independent vs. CMO Charter Schools by NYC Borough

Charter Network	Independent	CMO
Bronx	31	64
Brooklyn	26	76
Manhattan	18	39
Queens	11	17
Staten Island	7	1
Total	94	196

Note: I identify CMOs as any organization operating two or more charter schools either within New York City or across states. Independent charter schools, as identified here, operate only one school network in New York City. Totals include planned charter schools.

Table 3. Charter Schools by NYC Borough

Charter Network	Currently Operating	Planned Included
Bronx	90	95
Brooklyn	92	102
Manhattan	55	57
Queens	25	28
Staten Island	6	8
Total	268	290

Results and Analysis

Of the roughly 1,200 board-member sample population, 23 percent are financiers, 17 percent are education professionals, 15 percent are in business, 15 percent work for NGOs, and another 10 percent practice law. Table 4 shows the full distribution of board-member representation by professional area, and Table 5 shows the distribution by 2-digit Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) codes. Nearly 60 percent of board members are classified under management, an occupational category that includes top executives, directors, and managers, while an additional 10 percent of board members practice law. It should also be noted that management occupational categories are not confined to certain professional areas; for instance, top executives include CEOs of financial institutions as well as superintendents of schools. I was unable to track down occupational histories for 14 percent of NYC charter school board members, which hinders a more complete and robust analysis.

Descriptive statistics for professional representation in charter school governance suggest that financiers are most represented on boards relative to other professional areas. Financiers are particularly overrepresented on school boards at CMOs, where 27 percent work in finance. Business professionals, which include non-financial consultants and business owners, are similarly well represented on boards. Beyond the numbers, the job titles and school-publicized profiles of board members present clear patterns in the types of professionals serving in school governance. The CVs and LinkedIn profiles of many board members exhibit an array of elite corporate and finance executives. Major job titles include CFO of Citibank, COO of Credit Suisse, VP of JP Morgan, CEO of Petra Capital, Managing Director of Goldman Sachs, president and CEO of Cumulus Media, and CEO of Third Point LLC. Over the course of their careers, many of the finance professionals have moved in and out of some of the most prominent financial institutions, including Bain and Company, UBS, Blackrock, Goldman Sachs, Deloitte, and Lehman Brothers. Other finance professionals founded private equity firms and hedge funds that may not be household names but have nonetheless accumulated billions of dollars in wealth.

Table 4. Board Member Representation by Professional Area

	Independent		CMO		Total	
Charter Network	#	%	#	%	#	%
Finance	145	.20	127	.27	272	.23
NGO	98	.13	79	.17	177	.15
Government	29	.04	11	.02	40	.03
Business	106	.14	73	.15	179	.15
Education	133	.18	73	.15	206	.17

Law	76	.10	42	.09	118	.10
Other	17	.02	30	.06	47	.04
Missing	132	.18	37	.08	169	.14
Total	736	1.00	472	1.00	1208	1.00

Table 5. Board Member Representation by SOC Code

	Independent		CMO		Total	
Charter Network	#	%	#	%	#	%
11 Management	399	.54	313	.66	712	.59
13 Business Operations	50	.07	28	.06	78	.06
15 Computer & Math	1	.00	2	.00	3	.00
17 Architecture	1	.00	2	.00	3	.00
19 Life, Physical, Social Sciences	3	.00	4	.01	7	.01
21 Community	10	.01	3	.01	13	.01
23 Legal	72	.10	43	.09	115	.10
25 Education	62	.08	15	.03	77	.06
27 Arts & Entertainment	8	.01	10	.02	18	.01
29 Healthcare	3	.00	3	.01	6	.00
31 Healthcare Support	1	.00	0	.00	1	.00
33 Protective Service	1	.00	0	.00	1	.00
35 Food Services	0	.00	1	.00	1	.00
39 Personal Care	0	.00	2	.00	2	.00

41 Sales	5	.01	0	.00	5	.00
43 Administrative	4	.01	2	.00	6	.00
53 Transportation	1	.00	0	.00	1	.00
99 Other	2	.00	0	.00	2	.00
N/A	113	.15	44	.09	157	.13
Total	736	1.00	472	1.00	1208	1.00

Success Academy is the largest charter school network in New York City, serving roughly 20,000 students (Success Academy 2020). The network was founded in 2006 by Eva Moskowitz, who was outspoken in her support of Secretary of Education Betsy Devos and her distaste for teachers' unions (Wong 2017). The organization's webpage with director and trustee bios highlights the work of one member who is a prominent New York City attorney: "[he] successfully defended Success Academy Cobble Hill in a teacher's union-driven litigation seeking to prevent the school from opening" (Success Academy 2020). In an interview with PBS, Moskowitz refers disparagingly to teachers' unions as "special interests" and suggests that they ultimately hinder school governance and student performance (PBS 2022). In listing its board member profiles, Success Academy is forthright in its views on teachers' unions and in acknowledging the work of its board in suppressing teacher labor movements.

Analysis of charter networks' representation in school governance further indicates the prominent role of capital in board selection. Several of the charter networks make it a point to highlight exactly how much money board members oversee or are responsible for in their roles as financial executives. Success Academy lauds the work of one board member who has been involved in more than $2.5 billion worth of commercial real estate transactions over the course of his career (Success

Academy 2020); Ascend charter network highlights a board member's work with a global private equity firm in managing over $60 billion in assets (Ascend 2020). While the board members' social status and net worth are often made clear by the charter schools examined in this study, their connections to the communities in which these schools are designed to serve as well as their understanding of education administration are more ambiguous.

Still, not all board members are in finance - 17 percent are involved in education, which includes direct service educational professionals such as teachers and administrators, and another 15 percent work for NGOs. The majority of board members that I identified as currently working in the nonprofit sector predominantly run or play important roles in organizations advocating for school choice. A member of Ascend's board of directors is the executive of the Charter School Growth Fund (CSGF), a national nonprofit venture capital firm co-chaired by the chairman of Walmart and the owner of the Oakland Athletics baseball team. CSGF invests in a "portfolio" of charter schools to help achieve this goal (Charter School Growth Fund 2020). One of Achievement First's trustees is the chief strategy officer for Cambiar Education. Cambiar is a nonprofit venture design studio with the stated mission of scaling ground-breaking ideas in education (Cambiar 2020). A trustee for Success Academy is the executive director of New York Campaign for Achievement Now, a nonprofit advocating for charter school expansion in New York City.

At a closer glance, the school board directors and trustees who work in education and philanthropy mostly align with neoliberal education reforms focused on enhancing choice and competition. Many of the nonprofits and charity ventures run by board members use buzzwords such as scaling, incubation, disrupting, and innovation in their mission statements and define goals through market-oriented

language like portfolio diversity and growth when referring to schools and students. Other board members categorized as currently working in education or philanthropy come from high net-worth families. Carrie Walton Penner of the Walton Family Foundation serves on KIPP's national board of directors along with Reed Hastings, Founder and CEO of Netflix, Emma Bloomberg, daughter of Michael Bloomberg, Charles Philipps, chairman of Infor and former president of Oracle, and Deborah Dauman, spouse of the former CEO of Viacom.

To see if trends in elite finance and corporate representation on charter school boards persist across the country reflect the composition of the KIPP board, I explore board representation at the nine other top charter school networks by enrollment across the country (see Table A3 in the appendix for a list of these networks). Board members for Imagine charter schools include Dennis and Eileen Bakke of AES corporation, a multinational energy company; the couple also operates the Mustard Seed Foundation, a Christian family foundation focused on philanthropic aid to churches worldwide. Uncommon's national board members include current and former executives of Bain and Company, Morgan Stanley, and Time Warner Cable. Board members for Uplift Education, one of the largest charter school networks in Texas, similarly include executives for Bain and Company as well as Merrill Lynch and Charles Schwab.

Teaching is central to the education experience, yet it seems current or former teachers play a negligible role in charter school expansion and governance of the major networks in New York City. In having first-hand knowledge of the educational process, teachers could be well-positioned to lead charter schools or at least play a more active role in their governance. Career educators are especially more likely to understand the ins and outs of school quality and strategies for improvement compared to professionals with no experience in teaching or

education administration. Nevertheless, as shown in Table 7, only 14 and 9 percent of independent and CMO charter school board members, respectively, included in the study have any preK-12 classroom teaching experience. Fourteen percent of board members with prior preK-12 teaching experience did their teaching in affiliation with Teach For America (TFA).[3]

Table 7: Teacher Representation on Charter School Boards

Charter Network	Current Teachers	Prior preK-12 Teaching Experience	% of Education Professionals with Teacher Experience	% of Board Members with preK-12 Teaching Experience
Independent	32	102	.77	.14
CMO	4	43	.59	.09
Total	36	145	.70	.12

The decisions each of these major charter networks and independent charter schools make in their board selections reflect a market-driven approach to schooling that is largely at odds with both teacher professionalization and democratic processes in school governance. There are a number of reasons why overrepresentation of financiers and business professionals might be problematic. A key talking point of each network included in this study is growth. For instance, Success Academy has grown since its founding in 2006 to 47 schools and Ascend has grown to 15 schools since 2008 (see Table 8 for selected Charter School Network Growth over time).[4] Two-thirds of charter schools in New York City are affiliated with CMOs, and the gap between independent and CMO charters expands when approved charters for future academic years are included in the

total. While the quality of instruction and ultimate impact of these charter networks on student outcomes is ambiguous, their growth and expansion in New York City is indicative of a corporate culture that prioritizes growth and marketability over proven results.

Table 8: Selected Charter School Network Site Growth in New York City, 2005-2020

Charter Network	2005	2010	2015	2020
Ascend	0	3	6	9
Achievement First	3	6	10	10
KIPP	4	4	5	8
New Visions	0	0	9	10
Success	0	7	29	31
Uncommon	0	12	12	12
Total	7	32	71	81

Notes: Numbers reflect open school sites approved in a given year, and multiple schools may be approved through a single charter school site. For instance, KIPP had eight charter school sites approved in 2020 but listed sixteen open schools on their website. The discrepancy appears to be driven by charter middle schools, which are often included in a site with charter elementary schools.

Castillo (2020) uses qualitative methods to document a progressive New York City charter school's embrace of neoliberal ideology and market forces. Such school policies and practices include prioritization of affluence over teaching experience in school governance, increased emphasis on test score improvement, fund-raising campaigns, and school expansion (Castillo 2020). Jessen and DiMartino (2016) examine branding and marketing spending across school types and metropolitan areas including New York City and find that CMOs such as Success Academy

annually spend upwards of $700,000 on marketing. The authors further highlight that CMOs rely on “prestige” rather than informational advertising, which emphasizes style over substance or quality of education. Teacher unionization rates in charter schools pale in comparison to traditional neighborhood public schools across the country. This holds true in New York, as well, where more than 98 percent of traditional public school teachers are unionized, but fewer than 10 percent of New York City charter school teachers are unionized; equivalently, only 24 charter schools included in the study are unionized (Zimmerman 2020).

The management trends in New York City charter schools presented here cannot by themselves point to a causal relationship between board representation and governance decisions. Still, these trends reflect a pervasive sentiment on the part of charter school advocates that schools be treated as firms and managed accordingly. Raymond Callahan critiqued this approach to school management nearly sixty years ago in his book *Education and The Cult of Efficiency,* which described the organization of schools in the US from 1910-1930 as profoundly shaped by the latest management strategies. At the time, school policymakers and practitioners were pressured to apply scientific management strategies within schools through Taylorism and other rational systems theories. Such measures included increasing class sizes, raising the number of classes taught by teachers, and removing low-achieving students from classrooms. Callahan was not in direct opposition to any integration between business and school management, but instead feared the effects such integration may have in turning purely economic interests and efficiency into ends rather than focusing on educational quality and student outcomes.

While Callahan made this argument well in advance of the inception of charter schools as an education reform strategy, his concerns over schools organizing

around business principles are prevalent within the charter school movement. Abrams (2016) highlights the emphasis on test scores and other bottom-line school performance indicators by the likes of major charter school networks like KIPP and Mastery. Abrams goes on to argue that the focus of CMOs on such statistics in part helps to attract funding from financiers and corporate elites as well as their participation on charter school boards—these executives already "live by numbers," which makes the transition from business to charter school leadership all the more seamless (Abrams 2016, p. 196).

The privatization of charter school boards holds additional implications for the future of democratic processes in school governance. While the governance structure of traditional public schools in NYC is far from flawless, its bodies are in large part democratically elected and reflect education as a public good. In contrast, the governance of charter school networks is opaque. Each of the networks included in this analysis are open to the public and are required to use lottery-based admissions if oversubscribed, but the decision-making processes dictated by school boards have been privatized.

Much as Albert O. Hirschman (1970) argued in explaining the impact of private schools in *Exit, Voice and Loyalty,* the proliferation of school choice draws many families to opt out of traditional public schools, whose quality depend to a significant degree on democratic participation and collective action. The replacement of elected community members with unelected financial and philanthropic elites may seem innocuous but speaks more broadly to shifts in how social policy is made. Such changes enhance the role of corporate social responsibility and private philanthropy at the expense of civic participation in public institutions that help sustain social cohesion and democracy more broadly (Levin 2001).

Limitations

The data presented in this article are limited in several respects, most notably for challenges in identifying all board members' occupational histories. Statistics on prior teaching experience should be viewed as floors, as profiles and CVs may not capture complete occupational histories. Previous studies (Ford & Irkhe 2015; Squire & Davis 2016) conduct their own surveys to collect a wider range of demographic information from board members. A richer data set on background characteristics, political activity, and prior occupations would greatly benefit the analysis. Collecting data on board member race/ethnicity is particularly important. The charter schools included in this study disproportionately serve black and brown students and students living below the poverty line. Providing evidence of majority-white school governing boards for these charter networks poses additional issues as they relate to race and social justice. As previously mentioned, analysis of school governing boards is only one place for potential teacher representation in school leadership in operations. More research is needed on prior teaching experience of other key leadership roles within charter schools such as school principals as well as how the distribution in decision-making may vary within and across charter schools. A comparison of representation in school governance between charter and traditional public schools would also be helpful in drawing attention to key similarities and differences. Future research would further benefit from ethnographic inquiries with students, families, teachers, administrators, and school board members. Interviews with these community stakeholders could provide insight into more general perspectives on charter schools as well as more nuanced issues of teacher autonomy and school culture and governance.

Conclusion

The governing approach of charter schools and their proliferation may be cause for concern, as it allows noneducators, particularly financial, business, and philanthropic elites, to wield more power at the expense of educators, school administrators, and community members who are likely to have more experience and knowledge concerning issues in schools and in their local communities. Broader trends of charter school expansion are indicative of the corporatization of education reform and the commodification of education more generally. Domination of charter school boards by financiers and other corporate figures comes at the expense of greater teacher professionalization and representation in governance. Only 12 percent of board members included in the study have any preK-12 classroom teaching experience. The lack of a democratic process in board member selection for charter schools also highlights an important and understudied aspect of privatization in the charter school movement. Through the lens of teacher representation on charter school governing boards, the charter school movement to date has not lived up to its founding ideas of increased democratic and teacher participation in school governance. Policymakers who are interested in teacher professionalization efforts and preserving democratic processes of school governance should consider stricter caps on the number of charter schools, democratic elections of charter school boards, mandates for teacher and community reps on charter school boards, or any combination of these three.

Acknowledgements

I thank Sam Abrams for helpful feedback and comments and Grace Brennan for research assistance. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of my research or other professional affiliations.

Appendix

Table A1. Charter Schools Authorized for Future Operation by NYC Borough

Charter Network	Bronx	Brooklyn	Manhattan	Queens	Staten Island	Total
AECI	2	0	0	0	0	2
Ascend	0	10	0	0	0	10
Achievement First	0	12	0	0	0	12
Amber	1	0	2	0	0	3
Beginning With Children	0	2	0	0	0	2
Brilla	4	0	0	0	0	4
Bronx Charter Schools for Better Learning	2	0	0	0	0	2
Brooklyn LAB	0	2	0	0	0	2
Brooklyn Prospect	0	3	0	0	0	3
Capital Prep	1	0	1	0	0	2
Classical	4	0	0	0	0	4
Democracy Prep	1	0	5	0	0	5
Dream	2	0	1	0	0	3
East Harlem Scholars	0	0	2	0	0	2
Excellence	5	0	0	5	5	5
Explore	0	6	0	0	0	6
Family Life	4	0	0	0	0	4
Growing Up Green	0	0	0	2	0	2
Harlem Children's Zone	0	0	2	0	0	2
Harlem Village	0	0	3	0	0	3
Hebrew Language Academy	0	2	1	0	0	3
Hellenic	0	1	0	0	1	2

Hyde	1	1	0	0	0	2
Icahn	7	0	0	0	0	7
iLearn	1	0	0	0	0	1
Independent charter schools	31	26	18	11	7	94
KIPP	4	1	4	0	0	9
Manhattan Charter Schools	0	0	2	0	0	2
Montessori	1	0	0	0	0	1
National Heritage Academies	0	3	0	0	0	3
Neighborhood Charter Schools	1	0	1	0	0	2
New Dawn	0	1	0	1	0	2
New Visions	5	3	0	2	0	10
NYC Autism	1	0	1	0	0	2
Our World Neighborhood	0	0	0	3	0	3
Public Prep	3	0	1	0	0	4
Renaissance	0	0	0	2	0	2
Storefront	1	0	1	0	0	2
Success	5	16	11	6	0	38
Uncommon	1	12	0	0	0	13
University Prep	2	0	0	0	0	2
Urban Assembly	1	0	0	0	0	1
Urban Dove	1	1	0	0	0	2
Wildcat	0	0	1	0	0	1
Zeta	3	0	1	0	0	4
Total	95	102	57	28	8	290

Table A2. Charter Networks: Number of States in Operation

Charter Network	Number of States/Districts
AECI	1
Ascend	1
Achievement First	3
Amber	1
Beginning With Children	1
Brilla	1
Bronx Charter Schools for Better Learning	1
Brooklyn LAB	1
Brooklyn Prospect	1
Capital Prep	1
Classical	1
Democracy Prep	5
Dream	1
East Harlem Scholars	1
Excellence	2
Explore	1
Family Life	1
Growing Up Green	1
Harlem Children's Zone	1
Harlem Village	1
Hebrew Language Academy	2
Hellenic	1
Hyde	3
Icahn	1
iLearn	2
KIPP	20
Manhattan Charter Schools	1

Montessori	51
National Heritage Academies	9
Neighborhood Charter Schools	1
New Dawn	1
New Visions	1
NYC Autism	1
Our World Neighborhood	1
Public Prep	1
Renaissance	1
Storefront	1
Success	1
Uncommon	3
University Prep	1
Urban Assembly	1
Urban Dove	1
Wildcat	1
Zeta	1

Table A3. Top 10 Charter School Networks in the US by Enrollment

Charter Network	Rank
KIPP	1
Imagine	2
Harmony	3
IDEA	4
Uncommon	5
Aspire	6
Responsive Education Solutions	7
Uplift Education	8
BASIS	9
Concept Schools	10

Notes: Enrollment rankings are according to David (2018).

List of Acronyms Used
AFT – American Federation of Teachers
BOE – Board of Education
CMO – Charter Management Organization
CEC – Community Education Councils
CEO – Chief Executive Officer
CFO – Chief Financial Officer
COO – Chief Operating Officer
DOE – Department of Eucation
EMO – Education Management Organization
NCLB – No Child Left Behind
NGO – Non Governmental Organization
PBS – Public Broadcasting Service
QAP – Quadratic Assignment Procedure
RTTT – Race To The Top
SOC – Standard Occupational Classification
SUNY – State University of New York
TFA – Teach For America

Notes

[1] Traditional neighborhood public school here refers to publicly funded schools with state approved curriculums; students residing within a particular geographic boundary or school district are guaranteed entry to such schools.
[2] Each starred network operates schools in multiple states besides New York.
[3] Teach For America is an education NGO founded by Wendy Kopp in 1989. The organization recruits and trains 'corp members' to serve as teachers at under resourced schools. While TFA is lauded by some as an innovative program for teacher recruitment and improving educational equity in the US, it is criticized by others for its short training program, alternative teacher licensure, and two-year teaching requirement, among other concerns. See Chapter 14 of Diane Ravitch's book, *Reign of Error,* for an overview of arguments for and against TFA.

[4] The numbers provided are per the number of schools advertised by Success and Ascend Charter Networks on their websites. The number of schools currently in operation is 32 and 9 for Success and Ascend, respectively. The discrepancy between self-reported number of schools and the number of schools reported by the state relates to school filing procedures. For instance, an elementary, middle and high school charter school may be grouped as one school in the networks filing for the state, but the CMO usually advertises as operating 3 unique schools.

References

"A growing movement: America's largest charter school communities" (2016). *National Alliance for Public Charter Schools,* November, Eleventh Annual Edition.

Abdulkadiroğlu, A., Angrist, J. D., Dynarski, S. M., Kane, T. J., & Pathak, P. A. (2011). Accountability and flexibility in public schools: Evidence from Boston's charters and pilots. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *126*(2), 699-748.

Abrams, S. E. (2016). *Education and the commercial mindset*. Harvard University Press.

Abrams, S.E. (2019). Exit, voice, and charter schools. *La Revista Jurídica de la Universidad de Puerto Rico,* 88 (3) (May 2019): 895-919.

Angrist, J. D., Cohodes, S. R., Dynarski, S. M., Pathak, P. A., & Walters, C. R. (2016). Stand and deliver: Effects of Boston's charter high schools on college preparation, entry, and choice. *Journal of Labor Economics*, *34*(2), 275-318.

Bergman, P., & McFarlin, I. (2020). Education for all? A nationwide audit study of schools of choice. Working Paper No. 25396. National Bureau of Economic Research.

Bettinger, E. P. (2005). The effect of charter schools on charter students and public schools. Economics of Education Review, 24(2): 133-147.

"Board roles and responsibilities" (2020). National Council of Nonprofits. Retrieved from https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/tools-resources/board-roles-and-responsibilities

Budde, R. (1988). *Education by charter: restructuring school districts. Key to long-term continuing improvement in American education*. The Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast & Islands.

Callahan, R. E. (1962). *Education and the cult of efficiency*. University of Chicago Press.

Castillo, E. (2020). A neoliberal grammar of schooling? How a progressive charter school moved toward market values. *American Journal of Education*, 126 (4): 519-547.

Clark, M. A., Gleason, P. M., Tuttle, C. C., & Silverberg, M. K. (2015). Do charter schools improve student achievement?. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *37*(4), 419-436.

Cohodes, S. R., & Parham, K. S. (2021). Charter schools' effectiveness, mechanisms, and competitive influence. Working Paper 28477. National Bureau of Economic Research.

David, R. (2018). National charter school management overview: 2016-17 School Year. *National Alliance for Public Charter Schools*.

Dobbie, W., & Fryer Jr, R. G. (2015). The medium-term impacts of high-achieving charter schools. *Journal of Political Economy*, *123*(5), 985-1037.

Ferrare, J. J., & Setari, R. R. (2018). Converging on choice: The interstate flow of foundation dollars to charter school organizations. *Educational Researcher*, 47 (1): 34-45.

Firing Line With Margaret Hoover (2022, January 28). Interview With Eva Moskowitz. *PBS.* Retrieved from https://www.pbs.org/wnet/firing-line/video/eva-moskowitz-0mkdaj/.

Ford, M. R., & Ihrke, D. M. (2015). A comparison of public and charter school board governance in three states. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, 25 (4): 403-416.

Gleason, P., Clark, M., Tuttle, C. C., & Dwoyer, E. (2010). The Evaluation of Charter School Impacts: Final Report. NCEE 2010-4029. *National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance*.

Golann, J. W., & Torres, A. C. (2020). Do no-excuses disciplinary practices promote success?. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, *42*(4), 617-633.

Hasselle, D. (2019, August 12). Now an all-charter district, New Orleans schools experiment still faces questions. *Nola.com.* Retrieved from https://www.nola.com/news/education/article_30fbef6e-b476-11e9-a3b5-57480c7a30f7.html.

Henig, J. (1994). *Rethinking school choice: Limits of the market metaphor*. Princeton University Press.

Hirschman, A. O. (1970). *Exit, voice, and loyalty: Responses to decline in firms, organizations, and states. Harvard University Press*.

Hoxby, C. M., Murarka, S., & Kang, J. (2009). How New York City's charter schools affect achievement. *Cambridge, MA: New York City Charter Schools Evaluation Project*, 1-85.

Jessen, S. B., & DiMartino, C. (2016). Perceptions of prestige: A comparative analysis of school online media marketing. *National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education,* Working Paper 230.

Johnson, C. (2017). *Networked: New York City's charter schools and the new profiteers.* CUNY Academic Works.

Kahlenberg, R.D. (2007). *Tough liberal: Albert Shanker and the battles over schools, unions, race, and democracy*. Columbia University Press.

Lack, B. (2009). No Excuses: A Critique of the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) within Charter Schools in the USA. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies (JCEPS)*, *7*(2).

Ladd, H. F., & Singleton, J. D. (2020). The fiscal externalities of charter schools: Evidence from North Carolina. *Education Finance and Policy*, *15*(1), 191-208.

Ladd, H. F., & Turaeva, M. (2020). Parental preferences for charter schools in North Carolina: Implications for racial segregation and isolation. *National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research (CALDER) Working Paper*, 196-0618.

Levin, H. (2001). *Privatizing education: Can the school marketplace deliver freedom of choice, efficiency, equity, and social cohesion*? Westview Press.

Levy, C. (1998, December 18). Senate passes charter plan for schools. *New York Times.*

Monarrez, Tomás, Brian Kisida, and Matthew Chingos. 2022. "The Effect of Charter Schools on School Segregation." *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 14 (1): 301-40.

National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2018). Unionized charter schools, 2016-17, accessed at https://www.publiccharters.org/sites/default/files/documents/2018-02/Unionized%20Charter%20Schools%202016-17_0.pdf.

New York State Education Department (2020). New York charter school fact sheet, accessed at http://www.p12.nysed.gov/psc/facts/nyscsfactsheet

Ni, Y. (2009). The impact of charter schools on the efficiency of traditional public schools: Evidence from Michigan. *Economics of Education Review*, *28*(5), 571-584.

Oberfield, Z. W. (2020). Parent engagement and satisfaction in public charter and district schools. *American Educational Research Journal*, *57*(3), 1083-1124.

Ravitch, D. (2013). *Reign of error: The hoax of the privatization movement and the danger to America's public schools*. Vintage.

Shanker, A. (1988). Restructuring our schools. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 65 (3): 88-100.

Sowell, T. (2020). Charter Schools and Their Enemies. *Basic Books.*

Squire, J., & Davis, A. C. (2016). *Charter school boards in the nation's capital.* Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

White, J. (2009). States open to charters start fast in 'race to top'. Press Release, US Department of Education.

Wong, Alia (2017, September 22). The most polarizing education reformer in New York City. *The Atlantic.*

Zimmerman, Alex (2020, February 28). After 15 rocky years, NYC's teacher union no longer wants to run a charter school. *Chalkbeat*. Retrieved from https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2020/2/28/21178679/after-15-rocky-years-nyc-s-teacher-union-no-longer-wants-to-run-a-charter-school.

Author Details

Daniel Sparks is a doctoral student in the economics and education program at Teachers College, Columbia University in New York, USA, and a senior research assistant at the Community College Research Center.

Email: jds2303@tc.columbia.edu

Phone: (610) 368-9167

Address: 525 W 120th St., New York, NY 10027