

Charter schools are a billion-dollar public enterprise funded increasingly by foundations, for-profits, and other forms of private money. *ASBJ* looks at where the money comes from and its growing influence on education reform

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Stories by Del Stover

Two decades ago, not a single penny of taxpayer money was spent on charter schools. This year, public funding for charters will run into the billions of dollars. That's a lot of money to invest in an education policy with still-unclear consequences for America's public school system.

So, 20 years after the first charter school—City Academy—opened in St. Paul, Minn., it's really quite astonishing to look at the momentum of the charter movement. In recent years, the number of charters nationwide has climbed by 400 to 500 annually; today, approximately 5,300 of these schools of choice serve more than 2 million students. An obvious question presents itself: What accounts for this growth?

Part of the answer is money. Private money.

That shouldn't come as a surprise to *ASBJ*'s readers. You already know advocacy groups—some of altruistic intent, some driven by a more raw ideology—aggressively champion charters as a strategy to improve public education and provide families with more school choice. And you've no doubt heard of the multimillion-dollar grants being distributed by some of the nation's largest and most influential foundations to fuel the growth of these schools.

Yet, many may not be aware of just how much private money is being spent to promote charters—or how that money is being put to use. Did you know the Walton Family Foundation alone handed out nearly \$75 million in school choice and charter-related grants in 2010? Or that wealthy, out-of-state campaign contributors gave \$233,000 in recent years to help charter-friendly Democrats run for office in Florida? Or that a single company, which earns a sizable share of its revenue from virtual charters, has spent nearly \$500,000 in state-level campaign contributions since 2004?

That money must have made a difference. To some degree, this investment in advocacy efforts, political campaigning, marketing, public policy papers, and research must have played some role in creating the 70 percent approval rating that charters currently enjoy with the American public—a reality reflected in the growing bipartisan support that's seen in state legislatures and Congress.

This is support that's all the more remarkable given the lack of evidence to give confidence to policymakers. Despite the widespread financial and community support charters receive—as well as billions in public funding—research shows

most are not outperforming traditional public schools on state tests, and their long-term effect on academic achievement remains in question.

Today, charters are governed by a wide variety of laws and rules across the nation. In some states, chartering authority rests with the local school district. In others, state education agencies or other bodies can authorize these schools, and the educational results vary. So does the impact of charters on traditional public schools. In some cases, they end up as a rival school system that takes money from the community's traditional schools; in others, they are proving a useful resource to their communities.

The National School Boards Association takes the position that charters can have a role in sparking innovation, as an alternative education setting for families wanting something different, or even as an escape from a difficult local situation. But NSBA also argues there should be some ground rules: Charters should abide by the same regulations as traditional public schools, and they should be held accountable to the same degree.

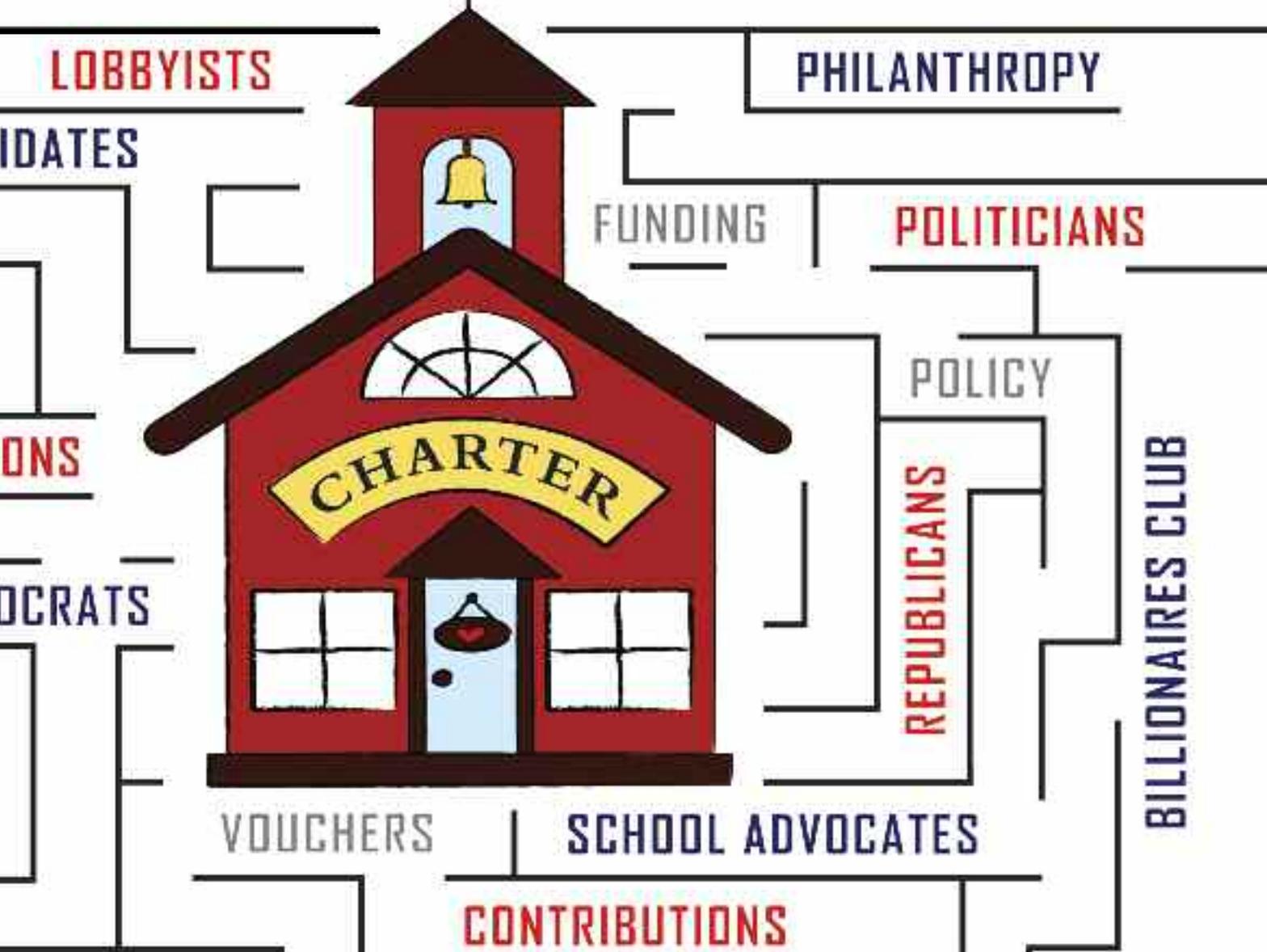
Finally, NSBA believes local school boards should retain authority over charters, retaining their role as the public trustees overseeing education services within their communities.

In the articles that follow, *ASBJ* won't answer the question of whether the private money being poured into the charter school movement is appropriately spent—or if the nation's expanding reliance on charter schools is sound policy. Nor will



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ASBJ examine the sizable sums of money that the teachers union and many traditional education groups spend to influence public policy. It's left to you to draw those conclusions.

However, examining how and where this private, pro-charter advocacy money is coming from—and how it's being spent—shines a spotlight on a complex, partially out-of-sight political campaign to promote charters as a viable option to traditional public schools.

And, hopefully, you'll also be more aware of the growing political and financial interdependence that's being created as a growing service industry coalesces around charter schools—

an industry with a vested interest in the financial funds flowing to charters, and through charters, to them. Hundreds of millions of dollars already have flowed through the nation's more than 700 charter schools operated by for-profit groups, as well as large for-profit virtual charter school operators.

So, read on. Today, private money is being spent in an effort to reshape the face of public education and, by default, to affect your work as a local school leader. The more information you have, the more prepared you will be to advocate with your state and federal policymakers about the laws and regulations you know are needed.

Follow the

Trail

The funding of charter schools is a complex maze that influences politics, policies, and your role as a local leader

For the charter school industry, language slipped into Ohio's budget bill last spring was a dream: Charter schools would be exempt from many state regulations and accountability rules. Charters could open as for-profit businesses with fewer restrictions in expanding to new campuses. A charter's governing board could hire a private management firm to run day-to-day operations—and pay them with public funds no longer subject to public scrutiny.

It was such a sweet deal that even the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, an education policy group supportive of charter schools, warned that "Ohio's charter program risks becoming a laughingstock."

In the end, lawmakers rejected the more outrageous proposals, agreeing only to ease the cap on opening new charters. But the behind-the-scenes story is what's newsworthy: The legislation was championed by David Brennan, a for-profit operator of dozens of charters nationwide, and a man who has donated approximately \$4 million to state politicians in the past decade. There was, reported the *Columbus Dispatch*, an "extensive interplay between Brennan's top lobbyists and high-ranking House staffers," who "frequently checked with the lobbyists to make sure the evolving language and later amendments were acceptable."

Think what you want about his approach, but Brennan at least knew what he wanted. And he was willing to put money behind it.

He's not alone. An active, loosely allied network of individuals, advocacy groups, and for-profit corporations is investing in an aggressive political campaign to promote charter schools. Their money is used for campaign contri-

butions to help charter-friendly candidates win election, for negative political ads to undermine political opponents, and for professional lobbying to shape the language of legislation. And, always, this money is spent to hammer home the message about the promise of charter schools.

Yet, there's not enough known about this money. Some attempts have been made to track its byzantine trail, and references to this spending are commonly cited by critics of school choice and charters. But there are few experts or scholarly analyses to illuminate the scope or impact of these advocacy-oriented dollars. Indeed, *ASBJ* has gathered only a few crumbs of the trail, just enough, it's hoped, to offer some small sense of the amount of money involved—and how that money is being spent.

Why is this important to study? Because, in politics, money talks. Year after year, this money is making its impact felt in the political arena and potentially influencing the development of education policy. So the question before local school leaders is this: Once you understand what this money is trying to buy, do you ignore its presence—or do you seek to balance its influence by advocating for the policies you believe are best for your community's children?

That's an important question today, when one can make the argument that the political initiative rests with charter advocates. "On a policy level, the charter school movement is expanding by the drip-drip theory," says Michael Resnick, associate executive director of NSBA's Office of Federal Advocacy and Public Policy. "It's not like there's any piece of legislation that's the tidal wave of change, but every year, there is more legislation in some states ... or at the federal level."

Money talks

To talk of the money going into charter school advocacy,

one also must talk about the funds invested in lobbying for vouchers and other school choice options—efforts that have seen a revival of fortunes in the past year. All of these political campaigns depend, at least in part, on a common base of financial support and seek to elect or lobby like-minded policymakers.

But every penny spent by school choice advocates earns huge dividends for the charter movement. Charters are considered public schools, with a perceived greater level of

accountability to the public, and that makes them a palatable alternative for policymakers unwilling to face the controversy and political baggage that accompanies vouchers and tax credit schemes.

“There are a lot of Democrats who believe in and support charter schools,” says Gary Miron, a Western Michigan University professor who has extensively studied charters and school choice issues. “They believe these are public schools and are very fearful of vouchers. So charters are a

Foundation of support

One of the most powerful forces in the charter movement today is a small but incredibly wealthy group of philanthropic organizations that, over the years, has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in the charter reform effort.

Without this funding, many independent charter schools today would not be open—and some of the most notable charter networks, such as the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) Foundation and Aspire Public Schools, would not have expanded as quickly. Nor would the sizable charter school populations in Houston, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C., be as game-changing as they are.

Local school leaders are familiar with the most influential of these groups: the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Walton Family Foundation. But numerous smaller yet wealthy institutions also have played a role: the Doris and Donald Fisher Fund, the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation, the Kern Family Foundation, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, among others.

What makes these foundations so influential is the amount of money they spend—and how they spend it. Small grants of a few hundred thousand dollars provide seed money for charter startups or help independent charters get on their feet. A grant of a million dollars or more can help a state charter school association broaden its advocacy efforts or target critical funds to statewide initiatives.

One of the most powerful roles of these foundations is in building an infrastructure to support the nation's charter schools. One initiative is to provide the “venture capital” for

such organizations as the Charter Schools Growth Fund (CSGF), and the NewSchools Venture Fund, which help finance charter school operators as they launch or expand programs.

Approximately a dozen influential foundations helped raise \$86 million just for CSGF in the years leading up to 2010, when a new goal of \$155 million in additional funding was announced. The Walton Family Foundation donated \$14 million to the fund in 2010. More recently, the Gates Foundation announced it would provide bond guarantees of \$30 million that will, in part, help expand the KIPP charter school network.

Such large investments in charters—along with smaller but still significant investments in political advocacy groups—has fueled many theories about why the nation's largest foundations are investing so heavily. Some see an ideological desire to dismantle education in favor of a market-oriented education system. Others argue that a cabal of millionaires and billionaires sees the opportunity to divert billions of public education dollars into for-profit ventures.

The leaders of these great institutions talk passionately about helping children in disadvantaged circumstances. That rings true for Claire Suggs, a senior associate with the Kronley & Associates consulting firm and principal author of *Critical Contributions: Philanthropic Investment in Teachers and Teaching*.

“Among the foundations, there is a genuine and really deep commitment to providing educational opportunities for all kids,” says Suggs, who interviewed officials at 20 foundations for the study. “They really see charters as a way of infusing innovation and

excellence for disadvantaged kids in the public school system, where traditional schools are struggling ... where a charter school might be the right lever to expand opportunities to get a high-quality education.”

So why not invest more in traditional schools? That is happening through some of these foundations' other initiatives, such as the Gates Foundation's multimillion-dollar effort to improve teacher quality. And local school boards are feeling the impact: Florida's Hillsborough County Public Schools, for example, will receive \$100 million from the Gates Foundation to improve teacher quality and target more support for high-needs students.

Each foundation, of course, has its own priorities. The Walton Family Foundation, for example, puts a much greater emphasis on supporting charter school associations and political advocacy groups—and putting money into school choice organizations.

One reason more money isn't going directly to the public schools, say some observers, is that foundation officials have been somewhat disenchanted by the politics, regulatory obstacles, and inability of public school educators to replicate and expand successful grant-funded programs. Foundations have more control and leverage in pushing educational change by working with charter school operators.

And some foundation officials are very deliberative in their thinking, says Patte Barth, director of NSBA's Center for Public Education. The Gates Foundation, she says, is “really trying to invest more money into those charters that have been successful ... to expand those best practices, which are good for all schools.”

reasonable compromise for them.”

It’s impossible to quantify the impact of money on any specific piece of legislation. But at times, the broader influences of campaign funding seem clear: When the Florida legislature created an income tax credit scholarship program in 2001, giving corporations a break for funding private school vouchers, only one Democratic lawmaker voted in its favor. By 2010, 23 Democrats were willing to support a bill to expand the program. That’s a seismic shift in political thinking, one that invariably must benefit charter schools.

What happened? No doubt this shift in opinion was a reflection of the state’s increasingly positive view of school choice—an issue championed by former Gov. Jeb Bush and some of the state’s senior political and business leadership. But it’s worth noting, as a *Florida Times-Union* investigation revealed last year, that many of these lawmakers might not be in office to shape education policy if not for significant financial support from school choice advocates.

Over the past five years, the *Times-Union* reported, school choice and charter school advocates and political action committees pumped nearly \$6 million into campaign contributions, mailings, and voter polling. More than \$230,000 that went to charter-friendly Democrats came from out-of-state political donors with ties to groups supporting school choice and charters.

A closer look by *ASBJ* identified the source of some of that out-of-state money.

The American Federation for Children (AFC), a national advocacy group for school choice, gave \$1.2 million in 2010 alone to Florida political candidates. One of AFC’s founders, Betsy DeVos, and members of her family—several of whom have Florida residences—personally donated more than \$460,000 to various candidates and the state’s Republican Party. Other out-of-state contributions

that year included \$20,500 from Ohio’s Brennan, who manages charters in Florida, and \$4,500 from Blue Ridge Capital LLC, where a managing director, David Greenspan, serves as a

board member of New York City’s Success Charter Network. Other groups affiliated or allied with AFC also contributed significant sums.

Given that Florida’s teachers unions collectively spent more than \$6.5 million on campaign contributions in 2010 alone, some political observers might rightly argue that school choice advocates simply were fighting fire with fire. But there’s little doubt the charter school movement has seen its fortunes improve: Just last year, state lawmakers overwhelmingly supported a bill to allow “high-performing” charter schools to expand.

A big push

Florida isn’t, of course, the only battlefield where advocacy-oriented money is flowing. But state elections appear to be the main focus of the more aggressive advocacy groups, partly because their money can have a much greater impact in pushing policy at the state level. In recent years, such money has been spent heavily in Indiana, Louisiana, Wisconsin, and a few other states where the political climate was more favorable to school choice—or where advocates saw an opportunity to swing the political balance even more in their favor.

The progress of charter schools, however, varied greatly in these fights. In Wisconsin, the legislative battles mostly have focused on vouchers, although funds spent supporting pro-school choice lawmakers may offer benefits. In December, the state legislature was considering a bill to create a state authorizing board to approve additional charters.

In North Carolina, Americans for Prosperity, an advocacy group that promotes a wide variety of conservative issues, including charters and school choice, launched a radio ad campaign last year pressuring state lawmakers to lift the charter cap and allow them to expand in size without outside approval. That bill passed with huge bipartisan support.

That radio ad campaign highlights another reality of today’s advocacy efforts. Money doesn’t always flow directly into a candidate’s war chest. During last year’s state races in Louisiana, the state’s AFC affiliate spent \$280,000 on campaign contributions and direct mailings that supported candidates. Alliance for Better Classrooms, another group allied with AFC, spent more than \$250,000 on advertising and campaign consulting services.

Some of that money went into television ads attacking Dale Bayard, running as an incumbent for the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, a governing body that became a battleground between those supporting Gov. Bobby Jindal’s market-oriented education policies and the governor’s opponents. In some ads, Bayard was blamed for the state’s “broken” schools and, after mentioning “New Orleans liberals,” the ad stated that “Dale Bayard always votes with them.” Bayard was soundly defeated.

Charters: The numbers

5,634

Estimated number of charter schools nationally

55

Percentage of charter schools authorized by local school boards in 40 states and the District of Columbia, as tracked by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers

60

Percentage of charter school applications denied by local school boards

37

Percentage of charter schools that perform worse than traditional public schools on standardized tests

Third-party political ads also have appeared in Wisconsin, where the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign reports that AFC spent “an estimated \$820,000 on independent expenditures and phony issue ad activity” in Wisconsin’s 2010 legislative races. These ads blamed a number of Democratic candidates for higher car insurance rates, wasteful spending—and, in one case, resembled a wanted poster that boldly stated, “Have you seen this job-killing politician?” Nowhere do the ads mention charter schools, school choice, or education in general.

Funding for this kind of electioneering is difficult to track—and can obscure the full scope of advocacy spending, says Bill Lueders of the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism, a government watchdog and

media support group. “Nonetheless, a huge amount of expense is the huge amount of money that groups spend in electoral campaigns in the form of issue ads or supportive ads that they don’t disclose they’re spending. The numbers I reported ... came from advocacy groups that would literally call up dozens of TV stations and get the information that they had about ad buys.”

Strong ties

The money involved in these advocacy efforts—and a perception by some that they pose a threat to the traditional education system—has given birth to any number of conspiracy theories: Conservatives are out to dismantle public education. A “billionaire’s club” seeks to privatize public

Charter’s profit motive

Handing out \$4 million in campaign contributions didn’t buy enough political clout to convince Ohio lawmakers to support legislation sought by David Brennan, a for-profit operator of dozens of charters nationwide.

But it did open office doors—enough, the *Columbus Dispatch* reported, to ensure a close working relationship between Brennan’s lobbyists and legislative aides in the statehouse.

That’s a dynamic that school leaders should expect to see with greater frequency in the year ahead, as a growing for-profit industry coalesces around the charter movement—and undoubtedly will seek to protect and expand its profits by influencing legislative and regulatory decisions.

Such efforts already are under way. The online education provider, K-12 Inc., which educates thousands of students through virtual charter schools across the nation, has spent nearly \$500,000 on campaign contributions since 2004, reports *The Nation*.

Another for-profit online firm, Connections Academy, spent about \$44,000 to support the 2010 re-election bid of Idaho Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Luna. Connections earned \$12.8 million in state revenue that year from the more than 2,900 students enrolled in Idaho Virtual Academy, which the Virginia-based online company operates.

These firms are among many that benefit from laws in more than 17 states that allow charters to partner with for-profit companies for facility management or educational services. In three states, Colorado, Louisiana, and New York—for-profit companies can hold a charter themselves. (New York banned new for-profit charters in 2010.) Some states are more welcoming than others. In Michigan, for example, 80 percent of the state’s 220 charter schools are managed by for-profit companies—with more than 700 charters managed by for-profits nationwide.

With revenues highly dependent on the specifics of legislation and regulations, both nonprofit and for-profit educational management firms (EMOs) have a powerful interest in influencing policy. Campaign contributions of Ohio’s Brennan were mentioned earlier. But another political big spender is charter school operator Vahan Gureghian, who gave out more than \$600,000 in contributions to Pennsylvania politicians over the past three years.

Meanwhile, the National Heritage Academies Inc., a for-profit EMO that operates 71 schools in nine states, spent \$320,000 on Washington, D.C., lobbying efforts, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

Other business entities are certain to make their voices heard in the years

ahead. Financing is one example. According to the Local Initiative Support Group, a New York-based nonprofit focused on community development, charter schools nationwide have raised more than \$5 billion in bond issues since 1999. Now, with Texas providing state backing for such lending, the Texas Charter School Association estimates another \$350 million in bond issues could be raised in Texas in just the next three years.

The potential of this industry was highlighted last summer, when former tennis star Andre Agassi announced the launch of the Canyon-Agassi Charter School Facilities Fund, an investment fund to provide up to \$750 million to finance the construction or renovation of buildings for charters.

The potential for companies to unduly influence policy should not be ignored, says Gary Miron, a Western Michigan University professor who studies the charter school movement. Early in the decade, he says, one company threw around money to push its way into the school management business.

“It was so corrupt the way they were working, with lobbyists and with buying interests with key politicians before moving into ... taking over [schools],” he says. “Boy, they really had the connections, and they bought those connections.”

schools and profit from a new market-oriented education system.

The majority of the more strident criticism is directed at voucher advocates, but the controversy invariably casts a shadow over the charter movement, particularly when some advocates espouse policies that would weaken accountability for charters or allow them to grow without oversight. But striving to communicate a more positive—and less threatening—message are such groups as the National Association of Charter School Authorizers and National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, as well as their many state affiliates and allied associations.

Some state affiliates are more politically active than others. But many pursue a less overtly political stance and focus their efforts on advocating pro-charter policies through lobbying, serving as an information clearinghouse, providing training and technical assistance to charter schools and, in some cases, bankrolling public awareness campaigns that have included the use of billboards, transit ads, and radio and television public service announcements.

Millions of dollars flow through these organizations, whose influence is fueled by donations from a variety of philanthropic and advocacy groups. The Walton Family Foundation, for example, recently awarded \$900,000 to help launch a new state advocacy lobbying group, the Florida Charter School Alliance, which will add its voice to that of the decade-old Florida Consortium of Public Charter Schools.

The potential influence of this new advocacy group can be imagined by examining the political connections of its new board of directors, which includes a former state commissioner of education, the executive director of former Gov. Jeb Bush's Foundation for Excellence in Education, and the vice chair of the AFC. Indeed, the political and personal ties between policymakers and advocates overlap with increasing regularity. In New Jersey, for example, the state's education commissioner, Chris Cerf, was formerly president of Edison Schools Inc, now EdisonLearning, Inc., the for-profit education management group.

Meanwhile, in Florida, reports the *Orlando Sentinel*, among those playing a key role in writing a 2007 law that could loosen public oversight of charter schools were the state's former education commissioner, now a charter-school lobbyist; an official with the Florida Consortium of Public Charter Schools; and a state lawmaker who helped found a charter school in 2000. Even Vice President Joe Biden's brother, Frank, has talked to school boards on behalf of a chain of charters, reports the *Broward Palm*

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Beach New Times. And in Louisiana, the head of the Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools is the sister of Chaz Roemer, a member of the state board of education.

Such relationships only add leverage to the money put into lobbying and political contributions, and the increasingly close relationships among policymakers and advocates are definitely moving forward the charter school agenda, say political observers. Damon Ashbury, director of legislative services for the Ohio School Boards Association, says legislators in his state "are falling all over themselves for ways to add to the charter school numbers

and ease their establishment."

The debate goes on

A lot more digging still can be done regarding these private funds. Very little is known about the money spent to market charters to parents, to publish research and policy papers to persuade policymakers, and other initiatives designed to influence public opinion.

So little is known about how influential these efforts truly are—and how much they weigh against the sincere judgment of policymakers and everyday citizens about the future role of charters. All that is certain is that public opinion regarding charters continues to improve: Today, 70 percent of Americans have a favorable opinion of them, according to the latest Phi Delta Kappa poll. That's up from 60 percent just four years ago.

Still, there's little doubt that private money is playing some role in shaping the future of charters—and of public education in general. Sometimes that role can be surprising: Remember "Waiting for Superman," filmmaker Davis Guggenheim's 2010 documentary that touted the promise of charters?

Although there's some dispute about the film's backing, it was a public relations bonanza for the charter movement, reportedly fueling an uptick in financial support for advocacy groups and charter organizations. For example, Oprah Winfrey devoted an episode of her popular daytime show to school reform—giving the film great exposure—and announced that her Angel Network would donate \$6 million to a group of charter schools.

The debate over charter schools will continue, but with a key difference. They now are a fixture of American education. All that remains is to settle on the scope of this reform model, what accountability will be demanded, and what governing entities will bear responsibility for watching over them.

And that debate will again be swayed by money.

Sharing the Wealth

The growth of charters is forcing school boards to confront a host of policy issues with significant and long-term implications for districts

Detroit school board President Tyrone Winfrey isn't entirely happy to be authorizing charter schools in a city already beleaguered with declining enrollment and shrinking financial resources. But he also doesn't see much benefit to his board opposing the momentum of today's charter movement.

"When I initially got on the school board, I was not a charter school fan," he says. "But if we're going to have charter schools, let the Detroit Public Schools be the authorizing body, and that way, we can set some parameters for charter school providers ... and talk about what we want and keep some consistency [in practices] with the schools already in the district."

Such a pragmatic response to the charter movement is voiced repeatedly by urban school boards nationwide. This fall, Boston's school board—with a nudge from the city's mayor—agreed to a major policy shift in its cooperation with surrounding charters. Los Angeles' board has invited outside groups to take over existing troubled schools as charter startups. In Baltimore, Denver, Nashville, and New

York City, for instance, school leaders increasingly are working toward closer ties with charters and incorporating them into what educators today call a "portfolio" of school choices available to families.

Such efforts haven't always gone smoothly, and depending on the city, the attitude of school officials toward this policy direction has ranged from enthusiastic to resigned. But their underlying experience is the same: The growth of charters is forcing school boards to confront a host of policy issues with significant and long-term implications for their districts.

What, many ask, will be the financial impact on district budgets as more charters open? What will happen to underutilized buildings if enrollment declines continue? Should districts offer professional development and curriculum support to ensure that charters have quality instruction? How can school boards prevent charters from screening out English language learners (ELLs) and special education students?

"It's going to be tough," Winfrey says of the years ahead. "We're going to have to accept that our policymaking will be affected."

School boards nationwide are dealing with entirely different situations and relationships in regards to charters.

Growing enthusiasm

That reality is going to be experienced by more and more urban school boards in the years ahead. More than 500 new charter schools opened in 2011-12, a 7 percent increase that puts the national total at about 5,600 schools, according to the National Alliance for Public School Charters.

Put another way: Charter schools now account for 5 percent of the nation's public schools—and enroll more than 2 million schoolchildren.

Those numbers will only rise. This year, several states—including Indiana, North Carolina, and Tennessee—lifted caps on the number of schools that can be chartered. This fall, the U.S. House approved a \$350 million package to help charter startups, while philanthropic organizations have awarded tens of millions of dollars to support their expansion across the nation.

Such policy decisions at the state and federal levels underscore the fundamental shift in political and public opinion in the past decade. The federal Empowering Parents Through Quality Charter Schools Act, which still must be debated in the U.S. Senate, points to the growing bipartisan support for charters, passing the House by a 300-82 margin. And the 2011 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll found approval ratings for charters has continued to grow, with 70 percent of Americans favoring them—up from 60 percent four years ago.

Not surprisingly, the attitudes of local school board members have shifted as well. Although many remain leery of the financial impact of charters—and concerned about weak accountability—"the whole tenor of conversation is different," says Robin Lake, associate director of the University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education.

Today, she says, in nearly a dozen cities, from Boston to Sacramento, Calif., school boards and charter school

providers are sitting down to develop new ground rules for working together—more as partners than as rivals.

"It's not all fun. There are still differences," she says. "But it's exciting to see people working out new arrangements about sharing resources and sharing responsibility for special needs students, and addressing the issues of low-performing schools."

Question of authority

As optimistic as that sounds, the reality is that school boards nationwide are dealing with entirely different situations and relationships regarding charters. Much depends on state laws. For example, the more authority local school boards have over charters, the greater the likelihood that board members are willing to view them favorably—and to see opportunities to work collaboratively.

One of the more collaborative efforts under way these days is in Baltimore City Schools, where state policy puts the authority for chartering schools directly in the hands of the local board. Board member David Stone says local officials see charters as a useful tool, and the board has authorized 34 over the years. Coupled with the city's specialty schools for math, science, and other programming, charters add to the variety—the portfolio—of school choices the board is creating for the city's families.

Stone, a charter supporter, says the state law putting them under the board's authority is key to Baltimore's successful model.

"I don't support multiple authorizers," he says. "There can be only one voice for the Baltimore City Schools, one body that is empowered to work with the superintendent and make decisions ... to be the collective voice of the community about what their schools should look like and how resources should be distributed."

Even with such authority, school boards must be committed to a successful collaborative relationship. More than a few communities have seen charters kept at arm's length by hostile boards. But Baltimore's board has made a conscious decision to develop a relationship that allows district officials to influence charter policies on instruction, discipline, and labor agreements. They even seek out charter groups to provide unique educational opportunities or services targeting specific, traditionally underserved student populations.

The relationship is constantly evolving, Stone says. Charters and the district office have collaborated on professional development and student transportation. The district has given charters the opportunity to use its vacant or underutilized buildings. In some cases, charter providers have received help from the school system to borrow money at a lower cost, and a joint committee of

district and charter officials meets regularly to coordinate efforts on issues related to funding, instruction, and policy.

Challenges abound

Such collaboration is not easy, and no one knows that better than board members in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). Over the years, several charters have run afoul of allegations of test cheating, embezzlement, or fiscal mismanagement, and the board has closed several despite parent opposition. The board also has adopted new rules to tighten its oversight of these independently operated schools, and today at least 20 employees coordinate the district's oversight of more than 200 charters.

Yet, as this number has increased, the school board also has made repeated efforts to improve coordination. Last December, the board and 112 charter operators signed a new Quality Schools Compact, pledging to strengthen accountability measures, improve charter services to ELLs, and work closer on other instructional issues. In another agreement, LAUSD agreed to turn over millions in state funding for special education services, a decision designed both to boost charter enrollment of students with disabilities and give the district more influence over their use of expensive outside service providers.

Meanwhile, Boston's board recently agreed to a new compact with 14 charter schools in the city, an assignment that should lead to joint teacher training and recruitment efforts, closer ties on analyzing student performance data, and the creation of a common accountability instrument. Board members also agreed to explore leasing vacant and underutilized buildings to charter providers, who in turn agreed to focus more on outreach and services to special education and ELL students.

According to the *Boston Globe*, "The compact represents a truce between the city and the charter schools after years of acrimony that dates back to when the charter schools first began opening."

Such efforts should not suggest that school boards everywhere are ready to embrace charters. That's especially true where state laws essentially allow charters to proliferate as rivals for students and funding.

In Ohio, for example, school boards chafe under a state mandate to provide transportation for charter students and, despite recent efforts at change, the state's lackluster history at holding charters accountable for their poor academic performance. Similar complaints have been aired in Arkansas and Arizona, where state policy has turned public and charter schools into rivals over students and state aid.

The die is cast

Striving to strike a balance in this situation is the Milwaukee school board. On one hand, says board member Terry Falk, school officials are very sensitive to the fact that the city council and a local university also are empowered to authorize charters. That puts the pressure on board members when they're approached to sign off on a new school.

"You have to worry about things like market share," he says. "If someone comes to us and says we want to start a school, and if you don't charter us, we'll go to the city or University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and get the charter, that puts greater pressure on us, because the money flows through those entities rather than the school system."

To its credit, however, the board has become far more discriminating in its approval of charters and closing of failing schools, he says. "We're much more careful about looking under all the rocks than 10 years ago."

In Camden, N.J., however, school board members can do little but speak out, as state officials have total authority over charters. Today, the district has nearly 3,000 students attending charters in the city, and plans for even more charters have been announced.

Some board members see such growth as a threat to the district, but board member Barbara Coscarello holds a different view. She sees charters as a natural outgrowth of the public's concerns about academic failings in the city—and a desire among families to have more options.

"There's a general feeling that this is not good for urban communities, but I look on it differently," she says. "I view it in terms of a business model. When a business is not meeting the requirements of the marketplace, another business is going to come to the forefront to fill that gap, and that is what we have with charter schools."

Certainly, many political leaders in New Jersey share that opinion. Earlier this year, state lawmakers supported legislation to raise the cap on charter schools.

To arguments that this will hurt the district—drawing away its best students and siphoning away state aid—Coscarello says major changes to the city schools aren't necessarily bad policy. If anything, she says, it could force an important re-examination of student needs in the traditional schools and a renewed policy debate about how to serve children who have been served poorly.

And, in the end, she says, there's no other recourse but to accept what's coming.

"Charter schools are not going away," she says. "I think the public likes clear choices. We've heard from the people—this is what they want." ■

Del Stover (dstover@nsba.org) is a senior editor of *American School Board Journal*.