

# Quality in Adversity:

## Lessons from Ohio's best charter schools

By Steve Farkas and Ann Duffett, PhD

Farkas Duffett Research Group

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# Foreword

By Aaron Churchill and Chad L. Aldis

On November 1, 2015, Governor John Kasich signed landmark legislation to reform charter schools—House Bill 2, which strengthens the governance of Ohio’s charter sector and holds its key actors more accountable for their performance. These reforms lay the foundation for higher-quality charter schools and better outcomes for children. In time, we expect that the tougher accountability measures in Ohio’s revamped charter law will purge this sector of its lowest-performing schools, those that demonstrate no improvement (or worse) over the schools to which they serve as alternatives. However, simply eliminating ineffective schools is not nearly enough to create the opportunities Ohio children need; simultaneously, state policymakers should nurture the growth and replication of excellent schools.

Ohio already has some exemplary charters—a beachhead and benchmark for future sector quality—but the need for more high-quality schools in urban communities remains acute. In Columbus alone, more than 16,000 children attended truly dismal district or charter schools in 2013–14 (defined as a school that received a D or F for student growth and achievement). Equally staggering numbers of students attended low-performing schools in Cincinnati and Cleveland: 15,000 and 19,000 students, respectively. Taken together, roughly 75,000 youngsters in Ohio’s eight major cities (or about 30 percent of their public school students) were enrolled in low-quality schools that year.

As we at Fordham and others have insisted for years, these alarming statistics call for a concerted effort to grow great charters that can replace schools that don’t measure up. Now that Ohio policymakers have toughened accountability for underperforming schools, how can they jump-start the growth of more first-rate ones? What are the barriers to growth in this sector? What resources and supports are the most critical when expanding an existing school or starting one

from scratch? What policy measures need to be in place to increase the number of students attending great charters?

To gain a better understanding of the on-the-ground realities of managing a quality charter school, we decided to go directly to the source. In the present study, we surveyed the school-level leaders of Ohio’s top charters. These individuals have experience recruiting and developing teams of effective educators, know how to work with parents and their communities, and understand the strategies needed to deliver results in the face of adversity.

Our survey sample was intentionally selective, as we wanted to hear from those who lead the state’s most successful charters. After all, they are doing the hard work of growing and sustaining quality schools, and their views demand the attention of state policymakers. To qualify for the survey, the respondent’s school must have earned a performance-index letter grade of A, B, or C or a value-added letter grade of A or B in 2012–13 and 2013–14. The school that met these criteria represent just under one-third of the total charters operating in the Buckeye State.<sup>1</sup> In total, we surveyed 109 school leaders and received responses from seventy-six of them—a solid rate of reply.

To conduct the survey, we teamed up once again with Steve Farkas and Ann Duffett of the FDR Group. We have worked with them on previous studies, including surveys of Ohio district superintendents in 2011 and 2013. Given their experience talking with and listening to education leaders, we know no one better suited to lead this work, including the survey itself and pre-survey interviews and focus groups in Columbus and Cleveland.

What did we learn from these school leaders about Ohio charters? What insights can be gained about growing great schools in the Buckeye State? As we dug

<sup>1</sup> The criteria used in this study to identify top-performing charters do not match exactly the state’s definition of a high-quality charter. Ohio law provides some incentives for high-quality charters, which it defines as schools that meet the criteria of earning an A, B, or C on its performance index and an A or B on value added in the most recent school year. To create a larger sample, we loosened the criteria; using 2013–14 results, the state’s criteria would have yielded just forty-five schools—too few potential respondents to derive meaningful survey results.

into the survey responses, four themes emerged.

**First, quality must be the top priority.** When asked whether charters should expand in Ohio, 80 percent of charter leaders responded yes “but only if they are high performing.” Their quality-first mindset is underscored by the fact that 75 percent said that closing “failing charter schools” would be an effective way to improve Ohio’s charter sector (we conducted the survey in Spring 2015, before the recent statutory changes). More than half of these leaders regarded the tightening of oversight to be “necessary” to improve the overall quality of charters. In sum, these leaders are adamant that charters must demonstrate quality and that accountability measures must be taken if they do not, including the closure of schools that persistently perform poorly. The underpinning of their attention to the issue of quality is undoubtedly the damage that failing schools have wrought on the reputation of Ohio charters—leading to consequences that even quality charters have felt. Indeed, nearly six in ten school leaders (57 percent) report that “the negative image of charter schools has made it harder for my school to attract teachers and students.”

**Second, talent matters.** When asked about the single most important challenge associated with leading a successful school, both of the respondents’ most frequent answers related to talent: “attracting high-quality teachers” and “hiring a principal who is an effective leader.” The leaders also reported that recruiting and retaining highly effective teachers remains a major challenge. One finding was especially telling: There was near consensus (85 percent) that filling teacher vacancies is a struggle, at least in some subject areas. A follow-up question provides a clue as to why: 71 percent of charter leaders said that they’re at a “serious disadvantage” in recruitment because they cannot match district salaries, due to underfunding.

**Third, securing suitable facilities is no picnic.** Nearly half of the charter leaders reported inadequate space in their buildings (in a focus group, one noted how his school’s meager facility limited the opportunities for science labs and flexible ability grouping). One cost-efficient solution to the charter-facilities problem is the acquisition of unused district schools, yet nearly half of the charter leaders reported that districts are

“generally uncooperative” with regard to making such facilities available. Virtually every respondent (92 percent) thought stronger enforcement of the legal requirement for districts to sell or lease mothballed facilities would be an effective way to support charters.

**Fourth, resources are critical.** Charter leaders made clear the challenges of operating and expanding in a harsh environment. An overwhelming majority of the respondents (87 percent) said that “a lot can go wrong” when expanding a school; more than half said that opening new schools has become “a lot harder” in recent years. What most likely underlies these sentiments is a sense that funding policies are inequitable: When asked how serious a problem lack of funding is for them this school year, 83 percent said it was very or somewhat serious. Above, we noted the salary gap and the difficulties this poses for charters seeking more great teachers. Perhaps not surprisingly, practically every leader surveyed (96 percent) thought that allowing charters to tap into local property taxes would be an effective policy shift.

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The leaders of today’s high-quality charters have managed, through a combination of energy, smarts, and perseverance, to overcome the many obstructions thrown in their way. Their schools are faring better than most charters in the state. But surely that is not enough—not when so many children in need continue to attend substandard schools. The charter leaders describe how these obstacles limit their potential reach and impact—and their frustrations come through. Consider, for example, the difficulties in recruiting and retaining effective teachers, the backbone of any high-quality school: How can they strengthen their current programs when they lose top-notch teachers to districts with deeper pockets? How can they expand to reach more children when they’re scrambling to fill vacancies?

Some of the challenges that charter leaders face are artifacts of policies that have long stunted the growth of high-quality charters in Ohio. Most urgently, policymakers need to improve the state’s bargain-basement funding arrangements for such schools. A [2014 report](#) from the University of Arkansas demonstrated how severely Ohio’s charter schools are

underfunded relative to district schools. Taking into account all taxpayer funding (local, state, and federal), charters, on average, receive approximately 75 cents on the dollar compared to districts. This disparity widens substantially in urban areas—to about 60 cents on the dollar. In Cleveland, for example, charters receive about \$8,500 per student, while the district receives upwards of \$15,500. Much of the disparity can be linked to the fact that charters are denied proceeds from local property taxes (with the exception of a handful of schools in Cleveland).

Making matters worse, Ohio charters receive only modest support for facilities and nothing from local bond issues, forcing them to cannibalize their already-thin operating budgets to make lease payments or fund capital improvements. If charters provide their own transportation, they receive only minimal reimbursement from the state. Unsurprisingly, most charters opt for district busing service (which itself creates myriad complications).

Ohio policymakers need to remove the barriers that obstruct charters so the sector's high-performing schools can thrive, grow, and reproduce and so the state's neediest children can gain access to more schools like these. This obstacle removal can take several forms:

**Establish equitable operational funding.** As discussed in the recent [Bellwether/Fordham report](#) on Ohio charter policy, two approaches would accomplish this. One option is to increase the amount of state aid, so that charter students are funded on an equal basis as their district peers (counting state and local revenues). Alternatively, state leaders could insist that local tax dollars follow students to the schools they attend—be they district or charter. As Russ Whitehurst of the Brookings Institution explains in the [2014 Educational Choice and Competition Index](#), “Funding and management processes [should] favor the growth of popular schools at the expense of unpopular schools, including weighted student-based funding in which a high proportion of a district’s own funds follow students to their schools of choice.”

Both options would face political headwinds, of course, and a sensible first step would be moving toward a direct-funding approach for charters (rather than the

current pass-through method, which aggravates the tension between Ohio districts and charters). However, any effort to direct-fund charters should also coincide with policy shifts that rectify the existing inequities. At the end of the day, the education of charter students—many of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds—shouldn’t be valued less than the education of their peers in district schools.

**Expand facilities support.** To their credit, Ohio policymakers have recently improved charter-facilities policy. For instance, charters in FY 2017 will receive \$200 per student to help with the cost of facilities, and the state is implementing a \$25 million facilities grant program for high-quality charters. Much more is needed, however, and we see four possible paths forward. First, the state could enact a credit-enhancement program to help charters access debt markets. The Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) calls credit enhancement “one of the most effective and least costly options for facilities financing available” because “these programs significantly reduce tax-payer dollars spent on facility debt service by effectively substituting the state’s generally far superior credit rating for that of the charter school.” Second, Ohio could reboot its revolving loan fund to help schools with renovations and improvements. This loan program was funded during the early 2000s with federal dollars but hasn’t been funded since. Third, state policymakers should heed the advice of charter leaders and find ways to ensure that districts truly make their unused facilities available to high-quality charters, as law prescribes. Finally, lawmakers should raise the per-student facilities funding from \$200 to an amount that aligns with the funding levels of other states, such as Minnesota (over \$1,000 per student), California (\$750), and New Mexico (\$700).

**Invest in the start-up phase.** Launching schools is a difficult and risky endeavor; as 87 percent of charter leaders said, expansion must be done “very carefully—a lot can go wrong.” Fortunately, Ohio recently has won a large federal grant intended to help create new charter schools. If implemented well, this will be a big step in the development of not just more charters but more high-quality charters. (At the time that this report went to press, the dollars were frozen as the state provided additional information to the

federal government.) The federal investment may not be enough, however, to guarantee that schools start off strongly. State policymakers could match those dollars for schools with strong track records of student success. Such investment by the state would further nurture Ohio’s newest schools through their infancy, mitigating the risks associated with the start-up phase and boosting their odds of long-term success.

**Hold the course on accountability.** Increasing the resources available to Ohio’s charters hinges on also upholding strict accountability for results. Taxpayers must be assured that public funds are being effectively used to further the education of children. Charters that perform poorly, as measured by their academic results, must be shuttered, both for the sake of children and in order to rebuild public trust in the charter sector. The reforms in House Bill 2 strengthen the accountability structure of Ohio’s charter system, and policymakers need to ensure that the letter and spirit of the law are followed during its implementation.

Ohio has the perfect opportunity to turn the page on its storied—some would say infamous—charter program. Lawmakers have established a strong framework for results-based accountability through the reforms of House Bill 2. Now it’s time for the Buckeye State to take the next step and put into place policies and practices that help great charter schools replicate and grow.

Too many children in desperate need of an excellent education continue to languish in mediocre (or worse) district and charter schools. Indeed, it is a well-known fact that low-income students lag far behind their affluent peers in achievement. National test results indicate that just 20 percent of low-income eighth graders in Ohio reach proficiency on NAEP, compared to 50 percent of their higher-income peers.

Ohio policymakers should clear the roadblocks that the leaders of high-performing charters say constrain their ability to scale and sustain success. If policymakers listen to our current crop of charter leaders, the next generation will be better equipped to compete for the talent, expertise, and physical capital they need to deliver the quality of education that Ohio’s children deserve.

# Acknowledgments

The time and talents of many individuals contributed to this report. We are deeply grateful for the fine work of Steve Farkas and Ann Duffett, the lead researchers. We appreciate their diligence, energy, and discernment during this year-long undertaking. We offer special thanks to Dr. Darlene Chambers, president of the Ohio Alliance for Public Charter Schools, who provided invaluable feedback on the survey and greatly aided in our response efforts. We also thank Piet van Lier of the Cleveland Transformation Alliance who helped at important stages of the project and also reviewed the survey instrument. From the Fordham team, we offer our gratitude to Michael J. Petrilli and Chester E. Finn, Jr. for their thoughtful reviews of earlier drafts. Many thanks also to Fordham's Jeff Murray, Jamie Davies O'Leary, and Jessica Piner for their assistance in production and dissemination. We thank Pamela Tatz who copyedited the document, as well as Andy Kittle who created the design and layout of the final report. Lastly, we express our deepest gratitude to the charter-school leaders who made time to participate in this research endeavor. Generous support for this study was provided by the Walton Family Foundation and our sister organization, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation.

*Chad L. Aldis, Vice President for Ohio Policy and Advocacy*

*Aaron Churchill, Ohio Research Director*

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# Executive Summary

*Quality in Adversity* provides an opportunity for the leaders of Ohio's top-performing charter schools to take stock of the state's charter sector.<sup>2</sup> They discuss what it takes to run their schools successfully and the challenges they face.

## Finding 1: Quality Matters

Leaders of Ohio's highest-performing charter schools feel that their sector is headed in the right direction and has even pushed the traditional public schools to work harder. They want the charter sector to grow but insist that growth be accompanied by excellence. To achieve this goal, these leaders recommend a two-pronged strategy: replicate successful charter schools and close the ones that perform poorly.

Broad majorities say that

- In terms of overall quality, Ohio's charter schools are headed in the right direction (78 percent);
- "Charter schools have pushed traditional public schools to work harder to hold on to their students" (84 percent);
- "Ohio could use more charter schools—but only if they are high-performing" (80 percent);
- "Making it easier for high-performing charter schools to replicate" would be an effective way to improve the charter school sector (91 percent); and
- "Moving faster to close failing charter schools" would be an effective way to improve Ohio's charter school sector (75 percent).

## Finding 2: The Challenges to Growth

Even as leaders of top-performing charters report that their sector is on the upswing and that their own schools are poised for growth, they believe that Ohio has become distinctly less friendly—even unfair—toward charter schools. They report that the

charter sector faces serious challenges, including the persistence of a negative image and lack of funding. These challenges make it more difficult to find quality teachers and facilities.

Growth is on the horizon:

- 74 percent of the charter leaders told us that their school will either definitely or probably expand in the near future by taking in more students or adding grades; and
- 40 percent said they will either definitely or probably replicate—that is, open an additional school at another site.

There is an unfriendly environment for growing quality charter schools:

- More than half of the respondents described Ohio today as "mostly unsupportive" of charter schools (54 percent) and "a lot harder" as a place to open new charter schools than it had been in recent years (55 percent);
- "The negative image of charter schools has made it harder" for respondents' schools to attract teachers and students (57 percent); and
- "These days, criticism of Ohio's charter schools tends to be unfair and exaggerated" (75 percent).

When it comes to facilities:

- 51 percent responded that they had room in their own buildings to enroll more students in the 2014–15 academic year, and virtually the same proportion (49 percent) said that they were at full capacity;
- 49 percent said that "a lack of space" in their building is a serious problem for their school;
- 52 percent said that "finding a suitable building" is critical to the success of a new charter school; and

<sup>2</sup> The selection criteria relied on two key components of Ohio's school report card system: a school's performance-index letter grade and its value-added letter grade. If a school received a letter grade of C or higher on the performance index, we included the charter leader in the sample. Additionally, if the school received a B or higher on the value-added metric for both the 2012–13 and 2013–14 school years, we included the charter leader in the sample. Applying those criteria yielded 109 potential respondents, of whom seventy-six completed the survey—a 70 percent response rate.

- 49 percent said that local school districts are “generally uncooperative” when it comes to making buildings and facilities available.

### **Finding 3: Top-Notch Teachers Are Key—and a Constant Challenge**

Charter school leaders think it is critical to staff their buildings with top-notch teachers but note that accomplishing this is a constant battle, given the funding disparity. Their main challenge is to recruit and retain teaching talent when neighboring school districts offer substantially higher salaries.

- They “generally struggle to find good candidates” when they have vacancies (61 percent), and 24 percent said it is a struggle but only in specific areas.
- They believe that “charter schools will always be at a serious disadvantage because they offer significantly lower salaries than traditional districts” (71 percent).
- 53 percent said that traditional public schools are the biggest competition for teaching talent, while 40 percent said it’s both traditional public schools and other charters.
- They view teacher turnover as “a serious problem that prevents sustained improvement,” (44 percent), yet 52 percent reported turnover as a “manageable problem,” and 63 percent said that “lack of quality teachers” is not a serious problem at their own school.
- They believe that “attracting high-quality teachers” would be critical to the success of a new charter school (81 percent).

### **Finding 4: How to Start a Successful Charter School—and Keep It Going**

This unique sample—leaders of top-performing charters—reveals what a charter school needs to get right during its start-up phase and what it takes for a charter school to sustain its success.

The following are components that the charter leaders believe to be critical during the start-up phase:

- Hiring a principal who is an effective leader (88 percent)
- Having a solid financial plan (85 percent)
- Attracting high-quality teachers (81 percent)
- Building trust with families and the community (80 percent)
- Going through a careful planning phase (76 percent)
- Having an effective management organization or company (65 percent)
- Finding a helpful sponsor (64 percent)
- Starting small and expanding carefully (63 percent)
- Finding a suitable building (52 percent)
- Having a professional, engaged governing board (48 percent)

The following are factors that the charter leaders singled out as helping their schools sustain success:

- Initially, the leaders were most likely to pick three institutional structures closest to them as most effective in helping their schools succeed: their sponsor (59 percent), governing board (56 percent), and management organization (51 percent).
- But when asked to choose only one factor that has been most helpful to their own school’s success, 44 percent pointed to their management organization—far more than the proportion picking their governing board (20 percent) or sponsor (11 percent).

# Introduction

In *Quality in Adversity: Lessons from Ohio's best charter schools*, the leaders of Ohio's top-performing charter schools take stock of the Buckeye State's charter sector, based upon a comprehensive survey of their views. They talk about what it takes to run their schools successfully and the challenges they face. These leaders want to see new charter schools open in Ohio but insist that they be quality schools that are carefully planned. They give advice on what matters most when opening new charter schools. They also recommend changes that could help Ohio's charter sector become more effective.

The study's assumption is that it is worthwhile to pay close attention to what these well-placed and successful school leaders have to say. They are on-the-ground practitioners who are held accountable for the performance of their schools and who have done the work. What's more, their schools have not only survived but thrived, often showing better student achievement than other charters while contending with an environment that most describe as unwelcoming.

## Who We Interviewed

Our selection criteria for sampling leaders of top charter schools relied on two key components of Ohio's school report card system: A school's performance-index letter grade and its value-added letter grade. A charter leader was included in the sample if his or her school received a letter grade of C or higher on the performance index or if his or her school received a B or higher on the value-added metric for both the 2012–13 and 2013–14 school years.

Applying those criteria yielded 109 potential respondents of some 350 Ohio charter schools. Because this pool of leaders of top-performing schools was small, we made exceptional efforts to maximize their participation in the survey. Due to these efforts—and, most importantly, the cooperation of the school leaders who took the time to respond—the survey achieved a strong 70 percent response rate. The survey was conducted in April and May 2015 (see Methodology for details).

## How We Developed the Questionnaire

We designed the questionnaire carefully, relying on qualitative interviews and focus groups to inform the topics that the survey covered and to help word the questions themselves. Our goal was to create survey items that these leaders would recognize as reflective of the world in which they work and the challenges they face. For example, when we asked in focus groups whether Ohio should open more charter schools, those who said "yes" almost invariably insisted that the proviso be added that those schools should be quality, high-performing schools. A survey question was developed to reflect that sentiment.

In an initial phase, we interviewed eight key "influentials"—that is, professionals such as charter school authorizers, network leaders, and executives in management organizations. These interviews gave us a better feel for the issues facing Ohio charters and insights on what we might expect to hear from the school leaders themselves. We then conducted two focus groups with successful charter leaders, one with participants from the Columbus area and the other from the Cleveland area. The report makes use of quotes from these conversations to add texture and context to the quantitative findings.

Throughout the research process, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute gave the FDR Group the freedom to conduct the research fairly and independently. The analysis and writing in the report are our own and we thank the Fordham Institute and staff—especially Aaron Churchill and Chad Aldis—for the integrity and intelligence with which they approached this project.

## Sidebar: Glossary of Terms

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**Charter school:**

a public, nonprofit school that operates with an independent governing board under a contract with a sponsor. It is also known in Ohio as a community school.

**Sponsor:**

an entity that approves a charter school to open and is responsible for monitoring its academic performance, financial operations, and compliance with laws and regulations. It is also known as an authorizer.

**Governing board:**

the board of a charter school. It is also known as a governing authority.

**Management organization or company:**

an entity that provides services necessary for the operation of a charter school. A school may contract with a management organization or company (but is not required to do so). It is also known as an operator.

**Educational Service Centers:**

a regional entity that may provide administrative support for district or charter schools.

# Finding 1: Quality Matters

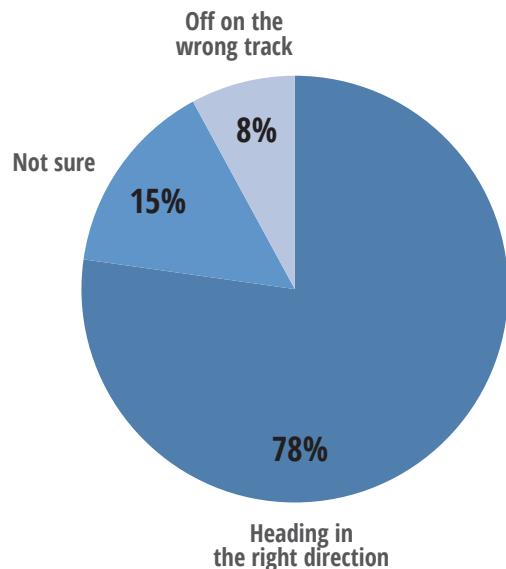
Leaders of Ohio's highest-performing charter schools are optimistic that their sector is headed in the right direction and believe it has even pushed the traditional public schools to work harder. They want the charter school sector to grow but insist that growth be accompanied by excellence. To achieve this goal, these leaders recommend a two-pronged strategy: replicate successful charter schools and close the ones that perform poorly.

## Doing Well, Thank You Very Much

Leaders of Ohio's top-performing charter schools believe their sector is beginning to deliver quality education for the state. Almost eight in ten (78 percent) say that in terms of overall quality, Ohio's charter schools are headed in the right direction, and only 8 percent say they are pointed down the wrong track. What's more, they believe the impact of charters has extended beyond their sector to the broader public school system. More than eight in ten (84 percent) say that "charter schools have pushed traditional public schools to work harder to hold on to their students."

**Figure 1: Views on Quality**

*Q1: In terms of overall quality, would you say that Ohio's charter schools are heading in the right direction, off on the wrong track, or are you not sure?*



In one-on-one interviews and focus groups, school leaders talked with pride about the virtues of their schools and lauded the freedom and flexibility that the charter structure gives them.

*Our biggest advantage is that we have a way, we have a mission. . . . So when you have a mission and a particular method and belief system, it's that analogy that everyone is on a boat with an oar rowing in the same direction as hard as they possibly can.*

*We don't have all these layers and all these different departments that you have to go through for whatever an administrator or a teacher wants to institute. You don't have this lengthy approval process. If everyone agrees then you have the option of instituting that day or the next.*

*We can make changes instantly. We are going into our third year and we want all the kids to excel. If we make a mistake or if we want to improve, we sit down and we decide what we are going to do and we do it. To me that is amazing. We visited a lot of schools and got some really great ideas, so to make quick changes to me is a benefit that is unbelievable.*

## Growth with Excellence

Although leaders of successful charter schools want Ohio's charter sector to grow, they state clearly that theirs would be a selective, quality-first approach to expansion. Fully 80 percent say "Ohio could use more charter schools—but only if they are high performing." Only 8 percent simply say, "The more charter schools that open, the better off Ohio will be." As one leader said in a focus group,

*I don't think about it in terms of needing more charter schools. I think of it in terms of needing better schools.*

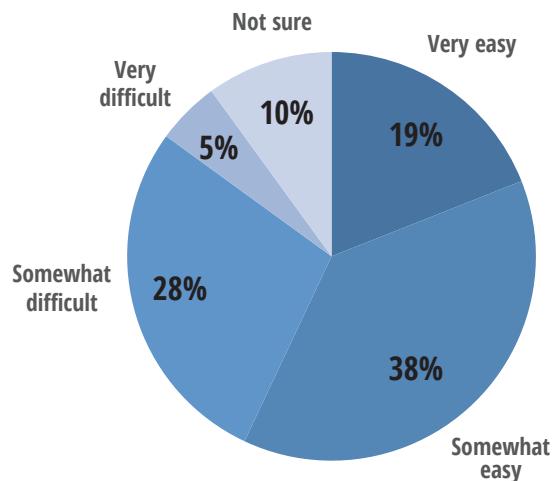
## Replicate the Best . . .

These leaders recommend a two-pronged approach to expanding the number of charter schools while improving their quality: (1) make it easier for the highest-performing charters to replicate and (2) move more quickly to close down the lowest-performing charters.

Nine in ten (91 percent) say a suggestion for “making it easier for high-performing charter schools to replicate” would be an effective way to improve the charter school sector. What’s more, most of these leaders are confident that their own schools could pull it off. Almost six in ten (57 percent) say—all things being equal—that it would be very or somewhat easy for their own charter to replicate; only 34 percent that it would be very or somewhat difficult.

**Figure 2: Replicating Schools**

*Q25: All things being equal, how easy or difficult would it be to replicate your school in Ohio—that is, open at an additional location with a similar educational vision and approach?*



#### ... And Close the Worst

Their focus on quality continues to the point where charter leaders support a proposition to speed up the closure of failing charter schools: three in four (75 percent) believe “moving faster to close failing charter schools” would be an effective way to improve Ohio’s charter school sector.

As they made clear in face-to-face conversations, they would want a careful, critical examination of the decision rules for closing schools. But given a fair set of rules, the leaders of Ohio’s highest-performing charters would argue that it’s in their own interest, the interest of their sector, and the interest of students to promptly do so.

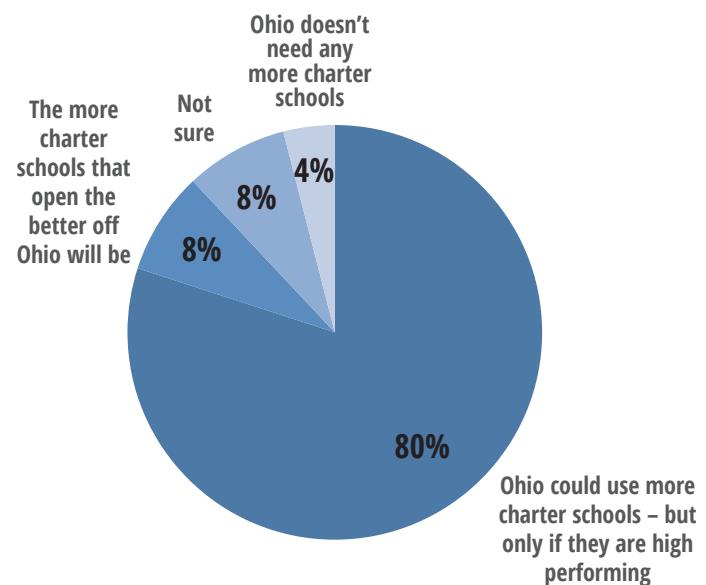
*There needs to be a rubric, and there needs to be more than two years of a report card. But I do think we need to be firm and close the schools that are not doing well. Bring more on board that are doing well and let them open and flourish. But I think we need to be faster on closing the schools that are doing a disservice to kids.*

The priority they place on quality is underscored by the following: 52 percent of the charter leaders say that “tightening the oversight and regulation of Ohio’s charter schools is necessary because it will improve charter school quality and strengthen the overall sector,” while just 35 percent say that this would be “counterproductive because it undermines the very idea of charter schools and restricts their freedom to innovate.” The call to tighten oversight is simply a continuation of their desire to improve the sector by ridding it of bad apples. One leader described her rationale this way:

*There needs to be less bad schools. . . . If you are not doing great things for kids, then those kids need to be put in schools that are doing great things.*

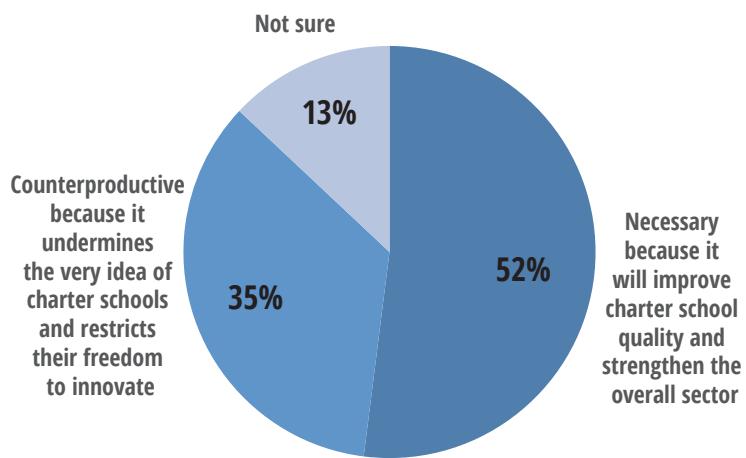
**Figure 3: Growth and Quality**

*Q5: Which of the following comes closest to your view about opening new charter schools in Ohio?*



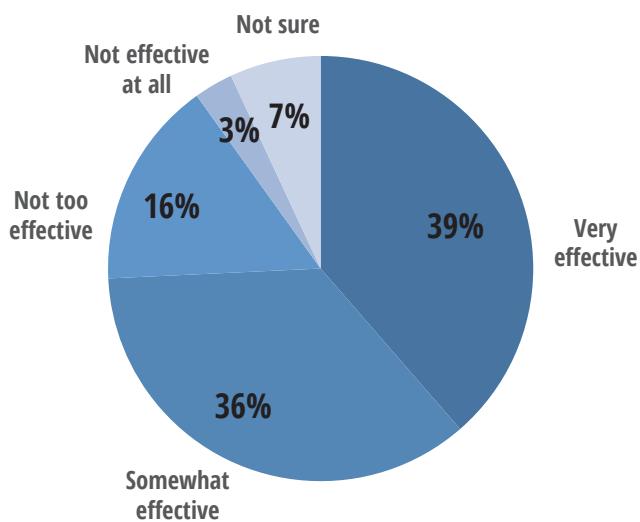
**Figure 4: Oversight and Regulation**

*Q23: Which is closer to your view? Tightening the oversight and regulation of Ohio's charter schools is:*



**Figure 5: Closing Low-Performing Schools**

*Q24(g): How effective would moving faster to close failing schools be in improving Ohio's charter school sector?*



### Explaining the Focus on Quality

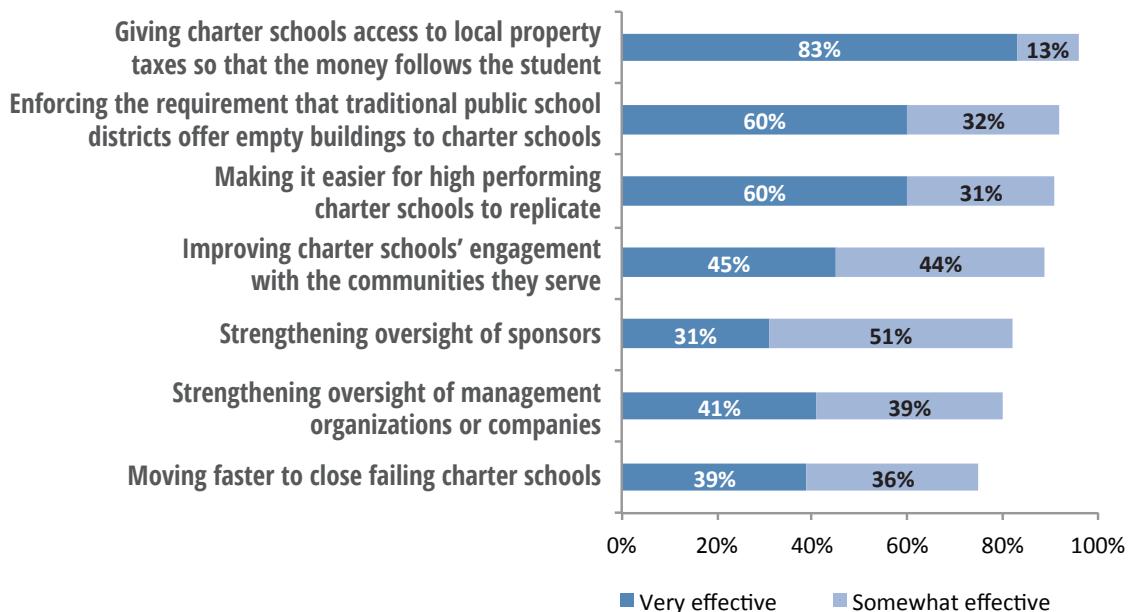
It may seem unusual to find professionals urging greater accountability in their field. But because these leaders want their sector to succeed and thrive over the long haul, some of their emphasis on quality may simply reflect a common-sense response to the modest track record of Ohio's charter schools and the reputational challenges facing the sector. It may also reflect the character of this sample, because as the leaders of the better-performing segment of charter schools, they want to distinguish their own school's prestige and that of their field. More than six in ten (62 percent) view themselves and their own school "as part of a charter school movement in the state or nation."

They are also upholding a core tenet of charter school doctrine: freedom to innovate, coupled with accountability and consequences for failure. Their professional experiences may also contribute to their focus on quality. One-third (33 percent) are leaders of stand-alone schools, operations that often struggle to survive tough years before thriving. They are probably alert to the role that delivering quality education played in their school's survival. And though the other two-thirds (66 percent) are part of formal networks of charter schools, they are undoubtedly judged within those networks by their capacity to deliver quality education.

In the end, their focus on quality makes the analysis and recommendations of these leaders more compelling. They are critical advocates, people who believe in their cause even as they are clear eyed about how to improve it.

**Figure 6: Policies to Improve the Charter Sector**

*Q24: How effective would each of the following suggestions be in improving Ohio's charter school sector?*



## Finding 2: The Challenges to Growth

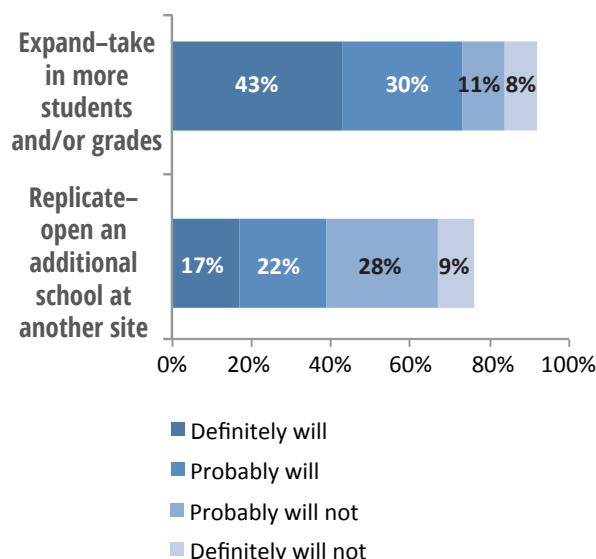
Charter leaders believe that replicating quality schools is a promising strategy, and most report that their own schools are planning to grow. At the same time, they believe that Ohio has become distinctly less friendly—even unfair—toward charter schools. They point to serious challenges facing their sector, including the persistence of a negative image and lack of funding. These challenges make it more difficult to find quality teachers and facilities.

### The Future: Expansion and Replication

The survey data suggest that Ohio will see growth in the size and the number of quality charter schools, as most leaders report that the future of their current school points toward expansion. Almost three out of four (74 percent) say their school will either definitely or probably expand in the near future by taking in more students or adding grades. Another four in ten (40 percent) say they will either definitely or probably replicate—that is, open an additional school at another site.

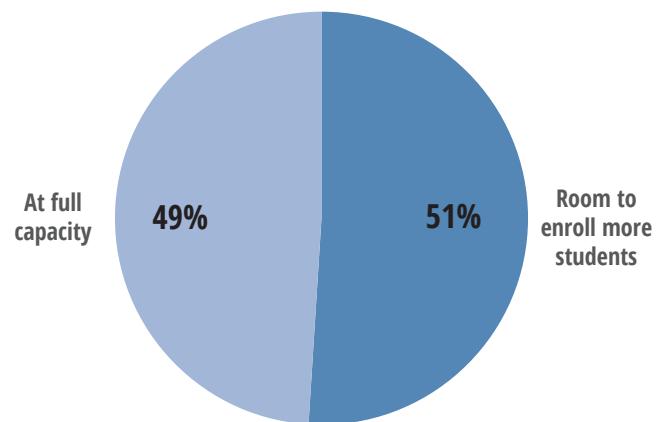
### Figure 7: Plans to Replicate or Expand

*Q10: How likely is it that in the near future your school will expand or replicate?*



**Figure 8: Facility Capacity**

*Q8: This school year, do you have room in your building to enroll more students, or is your building at full capacity?*



Other survey results signal that charter leaders' anticipation of growth is realistic. Their customers do appear to be showing up: only 11 percent say "too few students" is a serious problem facing their schools. And although 51 percent say they had room in their own buildings to enroll more students in the 2014–15 academic year, nearly the same proportion (49 percent) report they were at full capacity. "Our high-performing schools don't have empty seats," said an executive working for a charter school network.

### An Unfriendly Environment

Even as most of these leaders believe that the state's charter schools are getting stronger and report plans for growth, they also believe Ohio is becoming less and less welcoming toward them. Over half (54 percent) describe Ohio today as "mostly unsupportive" of charter schools. Over half (55 percent) also believe that it has become "a lot harder" to open new charter schools in recent years.

The feeling that charters are beleaguered came through in the focus groups. When asked if being known as a charter school was a hindrance, they answered in unison, "Yes!" The reputation of charter schools has been tarnished, they said, and their high-performing schools have paid the price. Nearly six in ten (57 percent) report that "the negative image of charter schools has made it harder for my school to

attract teachers and students.” What is more, these leaders believe much of the criticism has by now crossed the line: fully 75 percent say that “these days, criticism of Ohio’s charter schools tends to be unfair and exaggerated,” while only 12 percent say it “tends to be fair and reasonable.” Four in ten (40 percent) say the news media impede their school’s success.

One school leader described how the anti-charter school bias had even seeped into her teacher-training program:

*Just going through my teacher-prep programs, they would say, “Well, charter schools steal money from our regular schools.” You hear that union mentality. As you are being prepared to go into that environment, you have to completely shift your mindset.*

Another typed this comment at the conclusion of her survey:

*We are not given the same opportunities that traditional schools are given. We are still treated as third-class citizens. I really do not*

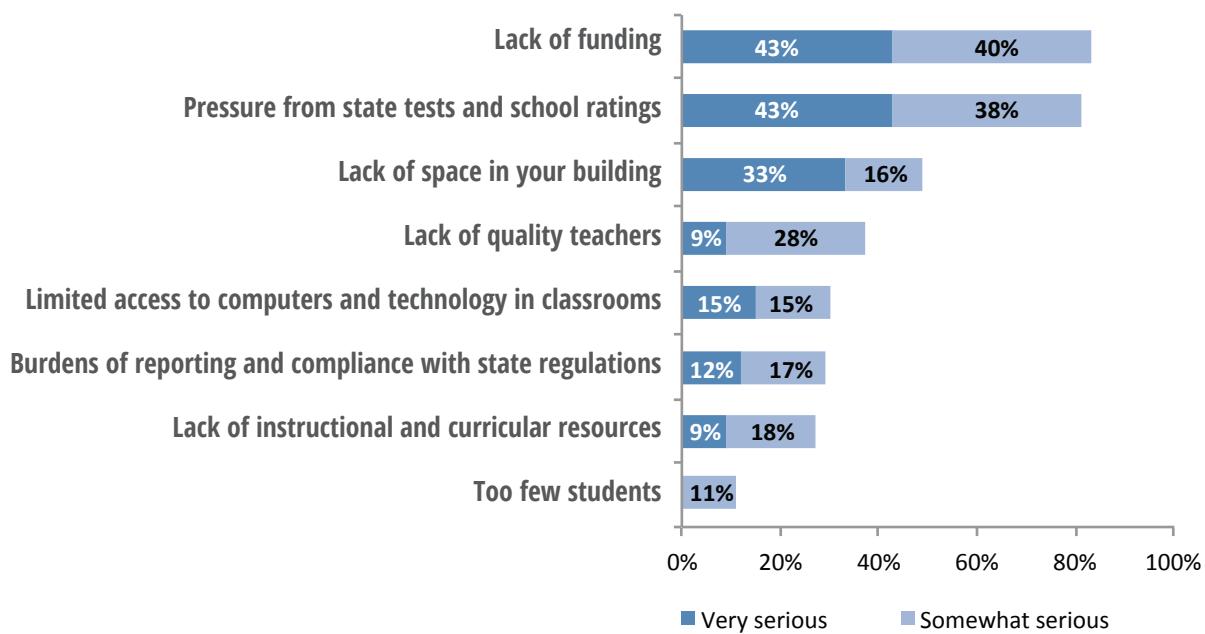
*think that it matters to the state if you are high performing or not. They just do not give charter schools their just due.*

### An Uneven Playing Field

According to charter leaders, not only is their sector fighting an image problem, but it is also required to make do with fewer resources. Of the respondents, 83 percent cite a “lack of funding” as a serious problem facing their schools. It may seem mundane to hear school leaders complaining about funding, but charter leaders point out that their schools are at a special disadvantage in comparison with traditional public schools. Although charter students bring the state’s funding with them, they leave behind the funding that comes with local property taxes to the traditional school district. Virtually all leaders (96 percent) would change this policy, saying that “giving charter schools access to local property taxes so that the money follows the student” would be effective in improving the charter school sector. This is the most intensely favored idea of seven suggestions to improve Ohio’s charter school sector: 83 percent call it very effective.

**Figure 9: Challenges Facing Charters**

*Q9: How serious a problem is each of the following for your school this year?*



The revenue shortfall disadvantages charter schools in two critical ways, according to these leaders. The first is in securing quality teachers, an issue they tie so closely to success that it is more fully discussed in the next finding. The second, discussed below, is in accessing physical space—or what education professionals call facilities.

### **Space: A Known Challenge**

Charter leaders say it can be difficult to expand within their existing space or to find a new building that is suitable and conforms to regulations. Approximately half (49 percent) say that “lack of space” in their building is a serious problem for their school. Just over half (52 percent) say that “finding a suitable building” is critical to the success of a new charter school.

*Facilities. We are not located in a school. We are in a renovated spot. . . . So we started in a little building and expanded enough to a second building. The building was supposed to be done in September, but it didn't open till December. . . . They kept saying, “Oh it will get done.” But if you are renting from someone who is not a school person, his or her sense of urgency is way different than a school person. Expanding to make this a campus, we are now doing two years in advance because it was so horrific.*

*The financial issue is we don't get to raise public funds for the purchase of a building—we have to use our own. So it cuts off the money being able to be spent on a book or computer.*

One charter leader in our focus groups wondered if the building and facilities argument was overdone. He suggested that a modest physical space could paradoxically bring some benefits, such as clarity of mission for children and staff.

*You need your basic space needs met for what your model is. . . . There is a book *The Town by Dan Coile*, and he says, “Choose Spartan over luxury,” meaning like we tell our kids we are gritty, we don't have to have the nicest things, we are going to get smarter regardless of the hand we were dealt. We just make it work.*

But the others in the group were not buying it. To them, inadequate buildings lead not only to limits on classroom instruction but also to morale issues. Having a proper building sent a reassuring, this-place-matters signal to staff, students, and community.

*The facilities do hinder us right now because there are things that our kids could be doing in science but we can't get the lab that they could be using. We also ability group high, higher, and highest, but we don't have the room to break them out into the small groups that they should be working in.*

*I think it matters. . . . We are educating large groups of students that come from little to nothing. So we are trying to establish an environment that they can depend on. They can expect it is going to look a certain way, and that there will be certain things provided that may not be provided at home or outside school walls. . . . I am not saying it has to be luxurious, but you don't want little house on the prairie or dirt floors.*

In the survey, one charter leader wrote in this plea:

*We currently do not have a facility. We operate out of modular units. We are successful, but it is imperative we receive funding in order to build a building.*

### **The Local District: No Trespassing**

In interviews conducted at the initial phase of the study, leaders pointed out that traditional school districts will sometimes have suitable buildings that, according to state law, should be made available to charter schools but in reality are not. One leader said, “Traditional school buildings that are empty should be sold by district, but they don't want to do it.”

In the survey, about half (49 percent) report that local school districts are “generally uncooperative” when it comes to making buildings and facilities available. Charter leaders speculate that they might be denied an available building by the local district because they are viewed as the competition or because district leaders are reluctant to rile organized groups such as the teachers’ union.

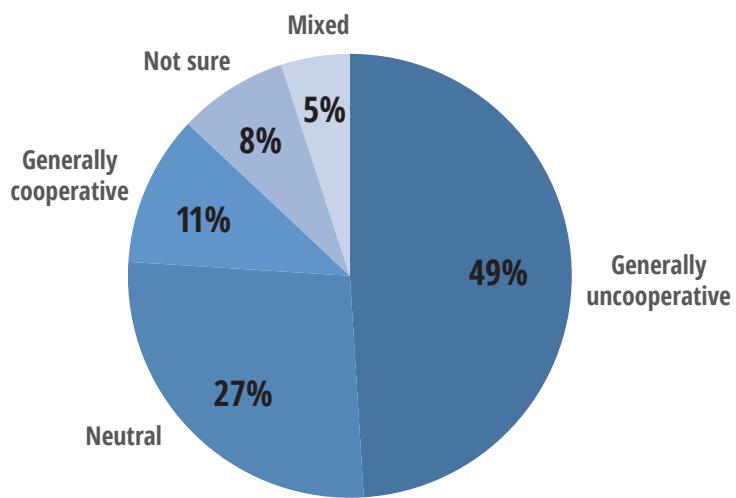
One leader remembered her school's frustrating search for a building:

*It took us a year and a half to find the right building—and this is in a town filled with empty buildings. We finally moved into a Catholic school building that was consolidating.*

It seems likely that many charter schools eventually find ways to surmount the facilities challenge, as most report that their schools have plans to expand or replicate in the near future. But it also makes sense that they would endorse measures that would ease their schools' efforts to grow, especially if some of the obstacles seem unfair to them. Of the charter leaders surveyed, 60 percent say that "enforcing the requirement that traditional public school districts offer buildings to charter schools" would be a very effective way to improve the charter school sector, with another 32 percent saying such an approach would be somewhat effective.

**Figure 10: Access to District Facilities**

*Q15(c): Are the local public school districts generally cooperative or generally uncooperative toward your school when it comes to making buildings and facilities available?*



# Finding 3: Top-Notch Teachers Are Key—and a Constant Challenge

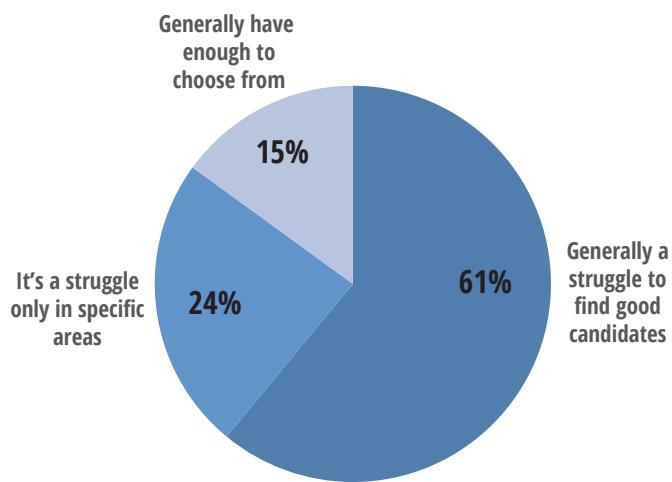
Charter leaders say top-notch teachers are critical to school success, but recruiting and keeping them is a constant battle, given the funding disparity. Their main competitors are neighboring school districts that offer teachers substantially higher pay scales. Leaders resort to a variety of strategies to mitigate losses and keep teaching talent.

## Competing for Teaching Talent . . .

Of the charter leaders surveyed, 81 percent say that “attracting high quality teachers” would be critical to the success of a new charter school. Still, although these leaders head Ohio’s top-performing charter schools, most admit they sometimes struggle to build a strong pool of candidates for teaching positions in their buildings. More than six in ten (61 percent) say they “generally struggle to find good candidates” when they have teaching vacancies, and only 15 percent say they generally have enough to choose from. Another 24 percent say it is a struggle but only in specific areas.

**Figure 11: Teacher Recruitment**

*Q19: When your school has teaching vacancies, do you generally have enough quality applicants to choose from, is it generally a struggle to find good candidates, or is it a struggle only in specific areas?*



## . . . With Lower Pay

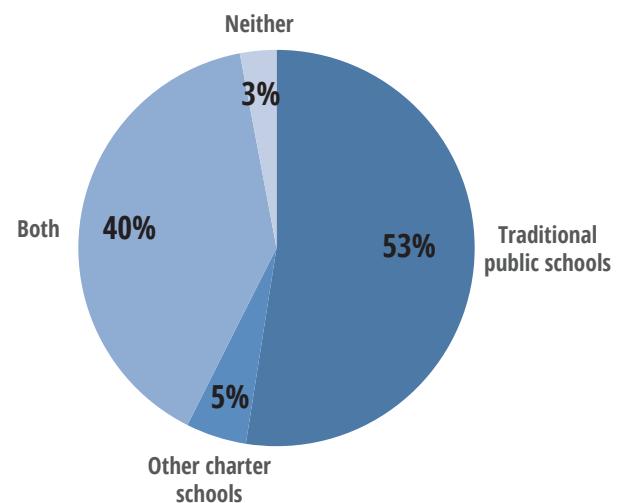
The perennial problem facing these schools is their teacher pay scale. Seven in ten leaders (71 percent) believe that “charter schools will always be at a serious disadvantage because they offer significantly lower salaries than traditional districts.” More than half (53 percent) say that when it comes to attracting teachers, their school is mostly competing with traditional public schools. Only 5 percent say it’s mostly other charter schools, while another 40 percent say it’s both. The difference in teacher salaries between school districts and charter schools are stark, leaders said in the focus groups.

*Now we already had a hard time pooling candidates, and we are posting everywhere. How do you fill it? City schools are opening up, and they start at \$46K and we start at \$30K. So that is very difficult, and it is hard because you want to and you have to be picky.*

*Our salaries are low compared to public schools. I am right across the street from a public high school where the salary is probably around \$84K, where ours is in the 30s. So they don't leave and come knocking at our doors.*

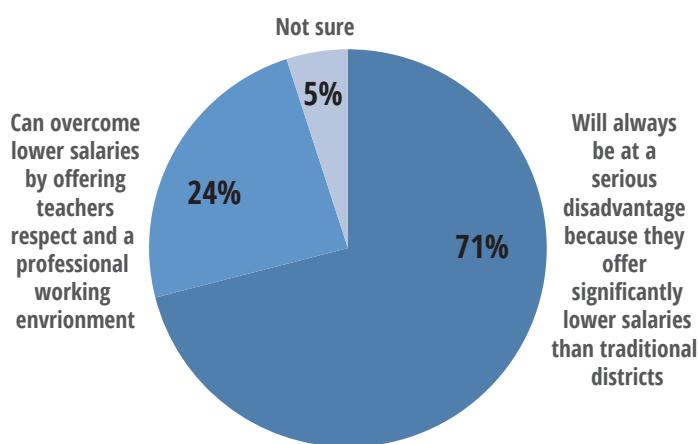
**Figure 12: Competition for Talent**

*Q12: When it comes to attracting teachers, do you think your school is mostly competing with traditional public schools, other charter schools, both, or neither?*



**Figure 13: Teacher Salaries**

*Q22: Which is closer to your view? When it comes to recruiting and retaining quality teachers, charter schools:*



Again and again, we heard school leaders complain that they would take on new teachers, train and develop their talents, and then lose them to traditional public schools because of money.

*After a couple years, what we have put into them makes them very attractive to a public school. The fact that the teacher has very good test results or how they are able to manage the classroom, so now that person is very attractive to a regular public school. . . They will put in applications. Now they know what to say in an interview and they are seasoned and can be confident and have some teaching experience under their belt.*

*One of the biggest challenges our school has faced has been in the area of attracting and keeping great teachers. Over the years, we have lost many very effective teachers to the larger district because we could not compete with the salaries they offered.*

*This is a personal challenge I wasn't used to. Coming from a suburb, I could post a vacancy and have fifty candidates easily in one hour. Here, I'm lucky if I have two people that qualify for the job. Even then, they are usually in the top 50 percent tier and not the top 10 percent.*

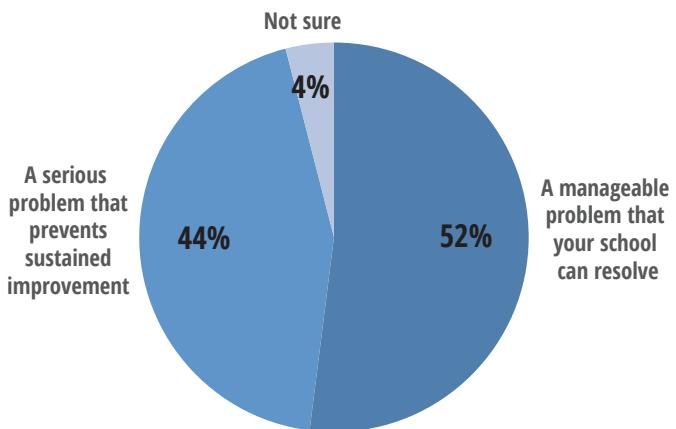
**How They Cope**

Still, many charter leaders say that keeping their schools staffed with quality teachers is not an insurmountable task. Although 44 percent say that in their experience teacher turnover is “a serious problem that prevents sustained improvement,” a slightly larger 52 percent believe it’s a “manageable problem” that their school can resolve. In fact, 63 percent say “lack of quality teachers” is not a serious problem at their school.

Thus, the survey data appear to be somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, teacher turnover appears to be constant, and recruiting and retaining quality teachers is not easy. On the other hand, most leaders say they do not lack quality teachers in their schools. The focus group discussions revealed that charter school leaders have adapted to an uneven playing field through a variety of coping strategies. These strategies mitigate the inevitable losses in talent and sustain the quality of teaching.

**Figure 14: Managing Turnover**

*Q21: In your experience, is teacher turnover:*



One school leader counted on a team of veteran teachers to maintain instructional quality in the face of turnover.

*I think you need a core. For us especially, the training and professional development is best done by those who have been there. . . Then if there is some turnover I think you can deal with it.*

Other charter school leaders described putting greater effort into finding and recruiting newcomers—or even retirees—who were passed over by the traditional public schools and may have given up on teaching. They invested in finding and recruiting these walk-on players by motivating them with personal appeals and mentoring and developing their talents so they could join the starting lineup. Like successful baseball teams in smaller markets, they have to be clever, even as they know that wealthier teams may lure away the stars they developed with bigger contracts.

*For us it has been a lot of word of mouth . . . finding teachers who couldn't get jobs in the public schools and have decided not to be in teaching at all. Finding those people, meeting with them and talking with them and bringing them in and what we do and how we mentor and support and that we really want you to get started with your license, don't postpone. A lot of support services. You will have a full time aide, we are going to have people constantly observing and meeting with you, and teacher based meetings each week. A lot of support is what we offer.*

*You have to go cast a really wide net. You post everywhere and hit every state. We use Teach For America, which has been really good for us. Even better are the original core alumni. The other thing that is going to be really big for us is partnering directly with the universities. The University of Dayton has an awesome urban education program. We have already gone down there and establishing those connections, they have set aside five students that want urban schools and are really good, and they pre-screen them for the job.*

At least two charter leaders we interviewed believed that their most reliable teachers were ones who had left traditional public schools. They thought the district school experience had shown those teachers the comparative advantage of working in charter schools, virtues that had nothing to do with money.

*The ones that have experience in a public school district may stay because they know what is on the other side.*

*We had two teachers that decided to take a job with the district. A week later they called me back saying, "Can I have my job back?"*

# Finding 4: How to Start a Successful Charter School—and Keep It Going

This unique group of leaders, whose schools are the more successful charters, are well placed to provide real-world advice and reflection: What would a charter school need to get right during its start-up phase or when it expands? What are the key factors that helped their own charter schools achieve?

## Plan Carefully, Start Modestly

The first piece of advice these leaders would give a start-up charter is to proceed carefully and not rush to open its doors. Three-quarters (76 percent) of the leaders say it's critical to go through "a careful planning phase." Another 85 percent say it's critical to have a "solid financial plan." Most (63 percent) also emphasize "starting small and expanding carefully."

*Start with a minimum and don't take on more than you are really able to handle. There are so many deadlines that you have to meet. Just trying to take on too much too soon and just being too aggressive can be a real challenge.*

*That plan is crucial. I think that the only reason that we were successful starting in our first years out the gate with really good results [was] because we had a very prescriptive blueprint of what we did. I spent six months traveling from Boston to San Francisco to watch other schools that looked and felt just like ours just to see and to borrow from them. Get that all solidified well before you are opening the doors.*

What about a school that wants to expand? Here, too, almost nine in ten (87 percent) counsel that "a charter school has to manage expansion very carefully—a lot can go wrong." Experience has sensitized them to the myriad unexpected challenges that crop up. Starting small means that these obstacles can be more readily addressed.

*Even with the best plan there are a lot of monkey wrenches that come . . . situations that you have not anticipated like things with parents and the*

*students. You just can't consider everything, and starting out smaller helps you to build. Once you have mastered it, then you can take on more.*

One of the influentials who we interviewed said there were so many variables to manage in the replication process that his organization decided it would no longer pursue the opening of more than two schools during any given year. "You have to pace the expansion. Even when you have a great management company it's too hard; there are too many moving parts."

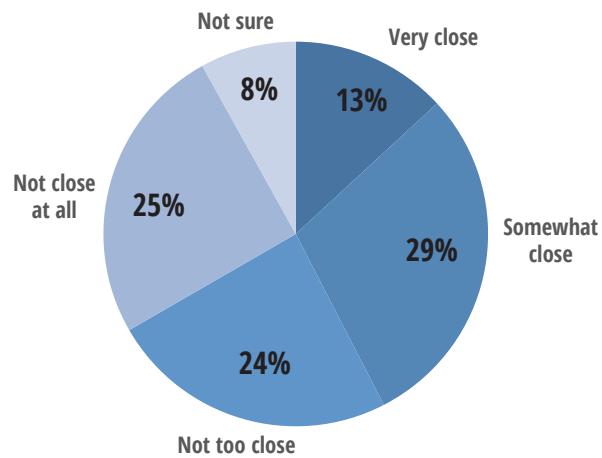
The leaders surveyed evince a sober realism and appreciate good planning, but their caution should not be mistaken for lack of confidence. When asked about replicating their own charter school in Ohio, 57 percent say—all things being equal—it would be very or somewhat easy to do, while 34 percent say it would be very or somewhat difficult.

## What Will the Market Bear?

Along with opportunities for growth, leaders advise paying attention to limits connected to what the market can bear in a particular locale. For example, 43 percent of leaders in our survey believe that their local area is already saturated with charter schools and warn that "opening more would be a mistake" (49 percent say this is not the case in their areas).

**Figure 15: The School Marketplace**

*Q20(d): How closely does each of the following come to describing your view? My local area is saturated with charter schools—opening more would be a mistake.*



An executive working for an authorizer pointed out that Ohio's legal restriction on where charter schools can open has led to overload in specific areas:

*Our markets are saturated. Only eight districts are always open to charters. We are demographically capped; we can't just spread anywhere. The Department of Education releases a draft of where you can open: the urban eight and then the bottom 5 percent of the state. And that 5 percent is your area of opportunity.*

### Pick a Strong Leader—and Prepare for Succession

People matter, they told us, and perhaps the most crucial personnel decision is choosing the school leader. Almost nine in ten (88 percent) say it is critical to hire a principal who is an effective leader. When forced to pick just one from a list of ten potential keys to success, 19 percent picked leadership, tied with 19 percent who chose the ability to attract high-quality teachers.

It might seem self-serving for school leaders to highlight the importance of their own role, but the

influentials interviewed in the first phase of the research said approximately the same thing, repeatedly pointing to leadership as the key to success. For example, an executive in a management organization pointed to building-level leadership as something to which his group paid special attention:

*Great leaders are key—they're not going to get a lot of support from a central office. . . . We're going to train that principal for fifteen to eighteen months before they take over a building. You can't hire a principal one month before the school opens.*

Interviews suggest that leadership is seen as so integral to success that many charter schools begin to groom future generations well in advance. Charter leaders said they are often on the lookout for teachers with leadership potential and encourage them to develop their skills. These schools often prefer homegrown talent because such candidates have already absorbed the culture and values of the school. The credentials come later.

*The stand-out teachers, right from the start, I talk to them about their futures. And if they are outstanding teachers, they go right into the*

**Figure 16: Critical Elements in Starting a School**

*Q16: Suppose you were giving advice to a new charter school during its start-up phase. How important would you say each of the following would be to its success? (Percent responding 5 on a 1-to-5 scale)*



*leadership role. And the one that is the director of school culture, she already has a master's degree, and I asked her what do you think about being a principal? And she is getting her licensure.*

*We can't bring people from the outside into administration, we need to grow our own. It's a cultural mindset they need to have. We need to ID aspiring leaders and to replicate, you have to have them. When we spot them, we give them incrementally more responsibilities, give them more voice. Then we help them take care of the credential part.*

The executive of a charter school management organization had all but given up on principals who were not homegrown:

*We have tried to hire principals retired from traditional schools, but they're so indoctrinated with union mentality, they can't think outside the box. We have our own principal training, a one- or two-year shadow internship. The best course is to move assistant principals up. Find effective, homegrown talent. Those are the people who know our program. They know it and have bought into it.*

Grooming the next generation of leaders is important to the replication of successful charters. But it also connected to sustainability, as successful charters are less likely to get knocked off course when a strong leader leaves. In this survey, almost half of charter leaders (49 percent) are very confident that if they had to leave their current school with little time to prepare a transition, "the succession would be handled smoothly and the school would continue to move in the right direction." Another 43 percent are somewhat confident.

### **Engage the Community**

Fully 80 percent of charter leaders say "building trust with families and the community" is critical for a charter school to do during its start-up phase. Several leaders interviewed in the focus groups seem to have a real feel for how local residents think and the importance of reaching out to them.

*To the community at large, it is an empty brick building with boards on the windows. Are you really going to open and be any better than the school that was there or the school down the street? Getting people to leave their school and trust you to attend a school that didn't exist a month ago, to enroll their child into your care ... to have people choose you was really tough.*

Yet, only 20 percent of charter leaders say that "local community leaders and organizations" do a lot to help their schools succeed, an apparent signal that their relationships with local communities could be better and that there is untapped potential.

### **Sustaining Success: The Management Organization, the Board, the Sponsor**

Asking charter leaders what matters most to sustaining the success of their schools is arguably as important as asking for advice on the start-up phase.

Initially, the leaders were most likely to pick three institutional structures closest to them as doing a lot to help their school succeed—their sponsor (59 percent), their governing board (56 percent), and their management organization (51 percent). Nevertheless, when pushed to choose only one factor that has been most helpful to their own school's success, 44 percent point to their management organization—far more than the proportion picking their governing board (20 percent) or their sponsor (11 percent). Just as they advise new charter schools to pick an effective management organization, many of these leaders also say that management organizations have been most helpful to their schools' success.

Charter leaders were explicitly thankful about the administrative burdens that their management companies take off their plates.

*I would say we are very fortunate to have a really good management company. They take care of a lot of stuff that takes it off of the principal's shoulders. We have central accounting, HR, operation facilities, and acquisitions. . . . The better they have gotten, the easier our lives have been. We are only really successful because we have really strong support from them. [They are] our biggest*

*cheerleaders, but they don't really form what we do.*

*My management company is a mix of professionals, lawyers, and former educators. And they take care of everything. When I have a problem, I don't go to my sponsor, I don't go to the board. I call this person and they have a coordinator and send someone out and have all these bases covered.*

*My management company is everything. We had one of the people leave for vacation and she said if you need anything don't hesitate to call. She would literally drop everything to answer the call.*

Although many charter leaders obviously appreciate the help of management organizations, Ohio has also seen management organizations that have caused lasting damage to charter schools and hurt the reputation of the sector. This may be why most respondents (80 percent) believe that "strengthening oversight of management organizations" would be a very or somewhat effective way to strengthen the charter school sector in Ohio.

### **Missing in Action—Educational Service Centers, Other Charters, and the DOE**

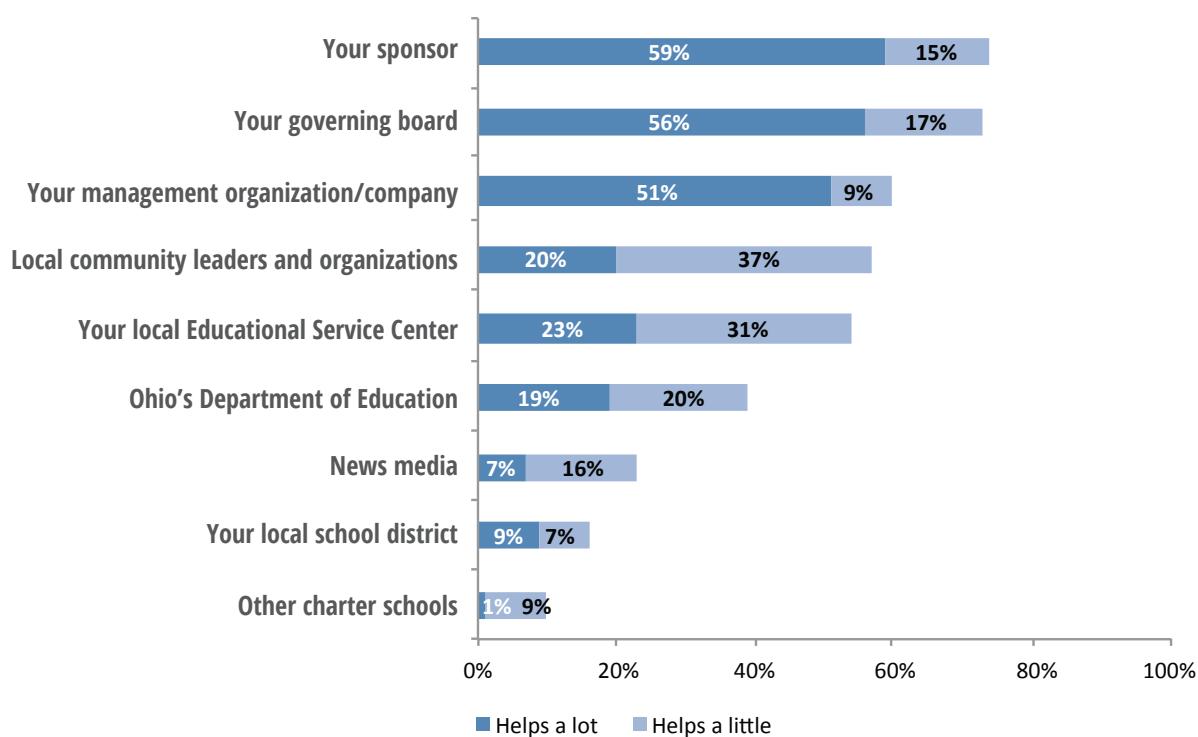
Other agencies or organizations are seen by charter leaders as only slightly helpful or missing in action altogether. For example, a plurality (40 percent) says their local educational service center (ESC) is neutral in terms of impact, while 23 percent say it helps a lot and 31 percent say a little. Additionally, 36 percent say Ohio's Department of Education is neutral in its effect, while 39 percent say it helps at least a little.

Perhaps most surprisingly, charter schools do not appear to be cooperating or sharing solutions and knowledge with each other. Two-thirds (67 percent) say other charter schools are neutral in terms of their impact.

*We do not interact. But if we showed up at school meetings and all of our staffs meet, and if they talked about commonalities and what we could make better and present issues on the table and how to fix it, that would help each of us. And it wouldn't put us in competition but it would help each of us be better.*

**Figure 17: The Impact of Various Institutions**

*Q13: To what extent do each of the following impede or help your school's success?*



## **School Districts: Not Helping, Sometimes Hindering**

Meanwhile, some other organizations are more likely to hamper than help charter schools. About four in ten (39 percent) of the successful charter leaders point to the local district as impeding success, with a plurality (43 percent) saying it is neutral. As mentioned earlier, 49 percent believe that local districts generally take an uncooperative (49 percent) or mixed (5 percent) attitude when it comes to making buildings and facilities available to charter schools. Approximately three in ten (31 percent) say their districts are generally cooperative when it comes to transportation of students, and 40 percent say they are generally cooperative when it comes to sharing updated student records.

*One issue that hurts us is transportation.*

*Districts don't transport our kids. There's a loophole with a \$300 credit to parents to use public transportation so they can get out of the obligation. And then a district flags kids for investigation and creates tough cash flow temporarily.*

*It is also about getting records, and that is tied to dollars because the sending school will lose money and the receiving school will lose, too.*

*Well, in the end if no one yields then no one gets any money.*

One interviewee pointed out that Cleveland had become the exception, an example of district and charter schools collaborating to develop a positive working relationship.

*Cleveland has had a paradigm shift. They are doing it; there is cooperation with the mayor and the Transformation Alliance. But the traditional mindset is negative. It's trying to change, but the verdict is still out and it's the exception.*

# Conclusion

Overall, these leaders convey a sensibility that is mature and clear eyed, optimistic but uncluttered by the hubris and overconfidence that may have typified Ohio's earliest experiences with charters. Their thoughts on how to vitalize the charter sector are informed by direct experiences and hard-won lessons. Given that they lead the Buckeye State's top-performing charters, they're worth listening to.

Policymakers and advocates will notice, for example, that although these school leaders recommend growing their sector, the growth they champion is conditioned by quality. Instead of opening charter schools as quickly as possible, they counsel thorough planning, careful leadership selection, and working through the financing and facilities challenges. In this context, it makes sense that their go-to growth strategy would be for Ohio to ease the replication of high-performing charter schools. Give the job to folks with a track record of successfully handling these hurdles, they seem to be saying, because it's not easy. It's noteworthy that most of the leaders report that their schools have plans to expand or replicate. They also have some semblance of succession planning in place, having flagged teachers with the moxie and talent to keep their schools moving forward. They are alert to the challenges of going to scale.

Policymakers and advocates will hardly be surprised that charter school leaders complain about being short on resources—it's a perennial concern voiced by leaders of traditional public schools, as well. There are two areas of potential trouble, however, that seem to demand special attention. Inequitable funding makes it difficult for charters to compete with traditional public schools over top-notch teachers. They are often scrambling to replace talent lost to more lucrative offers from nearby districts. A measure of the severity of the problem is that this is the topic leaders wrote about most in the open-ended commentary section of the survey. Then there is the question of facilities—the term professionals prefer to use for school buildings. Charter leaders might say that school districts would rather mothball empty buildings than make them

available to charters. They'd ask for a correction here, because they are left spending precious dollars and time converting other less-suitable buildings.

Something interesting also seems to be happening in the relationship between charter leaders and good management organizations. In the survey, charter school leaders point to them as providing the most valuable kind of help. More than one leader in the focus groups expressed thanks for being relieved of having to comply with financial or regulatory requirements, noting it was never their forte to begin with. The praise management organizations receive may seem misguided, given that some have been responsible for scandals that have badly damaged the reputation of Ohio's charter sector. But these leaders are answering the question, "Who is most helpful to you today?" not "Who has hurt the sector in the past?" To paraphrase Longfellow, when management organizations have been bad, they have been horrid; when they have been good, they have been very good indeed. Those outside of Ohio may find this part of the research less relevant since management organizations are scarcer in other states or they might be provoked to take a closer look at what the fuss is all about.

Finally, it would be easy to overlook several smaller pieces of data that hint at missed opportunities for helping the charter school sector. Educational Service Centers—a hub of support for traditional school districts—appear to have muted impact on the success of charter schools. The cause is not clear, but improving ESC utilization might pay dividends for charters. More surprisingly, collaboration among charter schools themselves appears to be at a low level, as two in three school leaders say other charters have a neutral impact on their effectiveness. Are they too busy to help each other, or are they too focused on competing with each other? Would they rather keep to themselves or broaden their networks? Finally, authorizers and governing boards get muted discussion from charter leaders. Is that because their work is done at levels less visible to on-the-ground leaders, or is it because they could be doing more?

Ohio has had a relatively long history with charters—both the state and its charter schools have been through a lot. The disappointments are hard to forget. But at the same time, it is also worthwhile to remember the success stories and to understand what makes their narratives different. The lessons these schools have learned can help Ohio, and perhaps other states, chart a smoother path to success.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Methodology

This study is based on a survey of seventy-six leaders of top-performing charter schools in Ohio. The research was conducted by the Farkas Duffett Research Group (FDR Group) for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. The survey was fielded in Spring 2015 and was preceded earlier in the year by eight in-depth telephone interviews with key influentials in Ohio, as well as two focus groups with charter school leaders, one each in the Columbus and Cleveland areas.

### The Survey

The criteria for defining the leaders of top charter schools involved two components of Ohio's school report card system: a school's performance-index letter grade and a school's value-added letter grade. A charter school leader was included in the sample if his or her school received a letter grade of C or higher on the performance index or a B or higher on the value-added for both the 2012–13 and 2013–14 school years. Applying the criteria yielded 109 potential respondents. In total, seventy-six out of 109 completed the survey, for a response rate of 70 percent.

The questionnaire was designed and programmed to be completed online or on paper. It included sixty-seven items. Each charter school leader was provided a confidential and unique survey link to ensure (1) authenticity of the data and (2) that each potential respondent could complete the survey only once. Up to three email messages were sent to each respondent: an original on April 10, 2015, and reminders on April 14 and April 16 to nonrespondents. On April 28, nonrespondents were sent a paper version of the questionnaire via USPS Priority mail with a stamped self-addressed return envelope. Finally, follow-up phone calls were made to remaining nonrespondents between May 26 and May 28.

Dr. Darlene Chambers, President and CEO of the Ohio Alliance for Public Charter Schools, assisted the research by sending an email to OAPCS members encouraging participation in the survey.

The survey instrument was pre-tested with charter school leaders to ensure that the language was accessible and appropriate. Questions were randomized and answer categories rotated. The FDR Group crafted the questionnaire, conducted the pre-testing, programmed the instrument using SurveyMonkey, and managed the data collection. It is solely responsible for the interpretation and analysis of the survey findings contained within this report.

### In-depth Interviews and Focus Groups

Qualitative research was conducted prior to the design of the survey instrument. In the qualitative phase, interviews were conducted with eight influentials—that is, professionals such as charter school authorizers, network leaders, and executives in management organizations. These interviews provided context and understanding for the issues facing Ohio's charter schools and also provided insights on what to expect to hear from the charter school leaders themselves. The eight confidential interviews were conducted by Steve Farkas, either by telephone or in person.

Two focus groups were conducted with charter school leaders, one in the Greater Columbus area and one in the Greater Cleveland area. The purpose of the focus groups was to gain firsthand understanding about the issues of relevance to leaders of top-performing charter schools, to develop new hypotheses based on their input, and to design the survey items using language and terms with which these educators would be comfortable. Quotes in the report are drawn either directly from the focus-group discussions or from verbatim responses entered for open-end questions in the survey. Both focus groups were moderated by Steve Farkas of the FDR Group.

## Appendix 2: Complete Survey Questions and Results

### Top-Performing Charter School Leaders in Ohio Online Survey, Fielded Spring 2015

N=76

*(Percent responding for each item is reported below. There may be slight discrepancies between the complete survey results and the findings in the report due to rounding or omission of answer categories.)*

#### 1. In terms of overall quality, would you say that Ohio's charter schools are:

- 78 Headed in the right direction
- 8 Off on the wrong track
- 15 Not sure

#### 2. Would you say that in Ohio today the general environment for charter schools is:

- 34 Mostly supportive
- 54 Mostly unsupportive
- 12 Not sure

#### 3. As an environment in which to open new charter schools, would you say that in recent years things in Ohio have:

- 7 Become a lot easier
- 25 Stayed about the same
- 55 Become a lot harder
- 13 Not sure

#### 4. And would you say that these days, criticism of Ohio's charter schools:

- 12 Tends to be fair and reasonable
- 75 Tends to be unfair and exaggerated
- 13 Not sure

#### 5. Which of the following comes closest to your view about opening new charter schools in Ohio:

- 8 The more charter schools that open the better off Ohio will be
- 80 Ohio could use more charter schools – but only if they are high performing
- 4 Ohio doesn't need any more charter schools
- 8 Not sure

#### 6. Is your school:

- 66 Part of a formal network of charter schools
- 33 A stand-alone school
- 1 Not sure

#### 7. Broadly speaking, do you tend to think of yourself and your school as part of a 'charter school movement' in the state or nation, or is that not really how you see things?

- 62 As part of a 'charter school movement'
- 33 That's not really how I see things
- 5 Not sure

#### 8. This school year, do you have room in your building to enroll more students, or is your building at full capacity?

- 51 Room to enroll more students
- 49 At full capacity
- Not sure

#### 9 a-h. How serious a problem is each of the following for your school this year?

	NET serious	Very serious	Somewhat serious	Not too serious	Not serious at all	Not sure
Lack of funding	83	43	40	7	8	3
Pressure from state tests and school ratings	82	43	38	12	7	-
Lack of space in your building	49	33	16	36	16	-
Lack of quality teachers	37	9	28	37	26	-
Limited access to computers and technology in classrooms	29	15	15	28	43	-
Burdens of reporting and compliance with state regulations	29	12	17	36	34	1
Lack of instructional and curricular resources	28	9	18	34	38	-
Too few students	11	-	11	34	53	3

**10 a-b. How likely is it that in the near future your school will:**

	Definitely will not	Probably will not	Probably will	Definitely will	Not sure
Expand – take in more students and/or grades	43	30	11	8	8
Replicate – open an additional school at another site	17	22	28	9	24

**11. When it comes to attracting students, do you think your school is MOSTLY competing with:**

- 9 Other charter schools
- 29 Traditional public schools
- 5 Neither
- 57 Both
  - Not sure

**12. How about when it comes to attracting teachers?**

**Do you think your school is MOSTLY competing with:**

- 5 Other charter schools
- 53 Traditional public schools
- 3 Neither
- 40 Both
  - Not sure

**13 a-i. To what extent do each of the following impede or help your school's success?**

	NET helps	Helps a lot	Helps a little	Neutral	Impedes a little	Impedes a lot	Not sure
Your governing board	3	7	16	17	56	73	1
Your sponsor	4	5	16	15	59	73	1
Your management organization/ company	5	9	17	9	51	60	8
Local community leaders and organizations	-	5	36	37	20	57	1
Your local educational service center	1	4	40	31	23	53	1
Ohio's Department of Education	7	17	36	20	19	39	1
News media	12	28	32	16	7	23	5
Your local school district	21	17	43	7	9	16	3
Other charter schools	5	13	67	9	1	11	4

**14. And if you had to choose ONE from the list above, which has been MOST HELPFUL to your school's success?**

- 8 Local community leaders and organizations
- 3 News media
  - Ohio's Department of Education
- 3 Other charter schools
- 20 Your governing board
  - Your local educational service center
- 3 Your local school district
- 44 Your management organization/company
- 11 Your sponsor
- 9 Not sure

**15 a-c. Are the local public school districts generally cooperative or generally uncooperative toward your school when it comes to:**

	Generally uncooperative	Neutral	Mixed	Not sure	
Sharing updated student records	40	27	9	24	-
Transportation of students	31	37	16	16	-
Making buildings and facilities available	11	49	27	5	8

**16 a-j. Suppose you were giving advice to a new charter school during its start-up phase. How important would you say each of the following would be to its success? Use a five-point scale where “1” is unimportant and “5” is critical. Percent responding “5/Critical”:**

- 88 16i. Hiring a principal who is an effective leader
- 85 16h. Having a solid financial plan
- 81 16a. Attracting high-quality teachers
- 80 16b. Building trust with families and the community
- 76 16e. Going through a careful planning phase
- 65 16f. Having an effective management organization/company
- 64 16c. Finding a helpful sponsor
- 63 16j. Starting small and expanding carefully
- 52 16d. Finding a suitable building
- 48 16g. Having a professional, engaged governing board

**17. And if you had to choose ONE from the list above, which would matter MOST to a new charter school’s success?**

- 19 Attracting high-quality teachers
- 19 Hiring a principal who is an effective leader
- 17 Going through a careful planning phase
- 16 Having an effective management organization/company
- 9 Building trust with families and the community
- 7 Having a solid financial plan
- 4 Starting small and expanding carefully
- 3 Finding a suitable building
- 1 Finding a helpful sponsor
- 1 Having a professional, engaged governing board
- 4 Not sure

**18. Imagine that you had to leave your current school next year with little time to prepare a transition. How confident are you that the succession would be handled smoothly and the school would continue to move in the right direction?**

- 49 Very confident
- 43 Somewhat confident
- 3 Not too confident
- 4 Not confident at all
- 1 Not sure

**19. When your school has teaching vacancies, do you generally have enough quality applicants to choose from, is it generally a struggle to find good candidates, or is it a struggle only in specific areas?**

- 15 Generally have enough to choose from
- 61 Generally a struggle to find good candidates
- 24 It’s a struggle only in specific areas
- Not sure

**20 a-e. How closely does each of the following come to describing your view?**

							Not sure	
							Not effective at all	
							Somewhat effective	
							Very effective	
							NET effective	
A charter school has to manage expansion very carefully—a lot can go wrong	87	51	36	7	3	4		
Charter schools have pushed traditional public schools to work harder to hold on to their students	84	29	55	8	8	-		
The negative image of charter schools has made it harder for my school to attract teachers and students	57	21	36	25	16	1		
My local area is saturated with charter schools—opening more would be a mistake	43	13	29	24	25	8		
The students who pick my school are typically among the most talented and motivated in the area	24	3	21	39	32	5		

**21. In your experience, is teacher turnover:**

- 52 A manageable problem that your school can resolve
- 44 A serious problem that prevents sustained improvement
- 4 Not sure

**22. Which is closer to your view? When it comes to recruiting and retaining quality teachers, charter schools:**

- 71 Will always be at a serious disadvantage because they offer significantly lower salaries than traditional districts
- 24 Can overcome lower salaries by offering teachers respect and a professional working environment
- 5 Not sure

**23. Which is closer to your view? Tightening the oversight and regulation of Ohio's charter schools is:**

- 52 Necessary because it will improve charter school quality and strengthen the overall sector
- 35 Counterproductive because it undermines the very idea of charter schools and restricts their freedom to innovate
- 13 Not sure

**24 a-g. How effective would each of the following suggestions be in improving Ohio's charter school sector?**

							Not sure	
							Not effective at all	
							Somewhat effective	
							Very effective	
							NET effective	
Giving charter schools access to local property taxes so that the money follows the student	96	83	13	1	1	1		
Enforcing the requirement that traditional public school districts offer empty buildings to charter schools	92	60	32	3	1	4		
Making it easier for high-performing charter schools to replicate	91	60	31	8	-	1		
Improving charter schools' engagement with the communities they serve	89	45	44	7	-	4		
Strengthening oversight of sponsors	81	31	51	12	3	4		
Strengthening oversight of management organizations or companies	80	41	39	7	8	5		
Moving faster to close failing charter schools	75	39	36	16	3	7		

**25. All things being equal, how easy or difficult would it be to replicate your charter school in Ohio—that is, open at an additional location with a similar educational vision and approach?**

- 19 Very easy
- 38 Somewhat easy
- 28 Somewhat difficult
- 5 Very difficult
- 10 Not sure

**26. Does your charter school rent or own its building?**

- 66 Rent
- 34 Own

**27. What percentage of your students are economically disadvantaged?**

- 17 Less than 50%
- 35 50% to 89%
- 49 90% or more

**28. What percentage of your students are students with disabilities?**

- 39 Less than 10%
- 32 10% to 14%
- 29 15% or more

**29. What percentage of your students have limited English proficiency?**

- 79 0 to 9%
- 21 10% or more

**30. What percentage of your students are African American:**

- 26 Less than 25%
- 22 25% to 49%
- 26 50% to 89%
- 25 90% or more

**Hispanic:**

- 71 Less than 10%
- 29 10% or more





