

NEW DIMENSIONS OF SPONSORSHIP

A paper for Education/Evolving

Ted Kolderie, Center for Policy Studies

As things change and evolve our ways of thinking need to evolve. This is certainly true in the new and rapidly-developing area of public education that was at its beginning called “charter schools”.

In recent years it has been ever-clearer that “charter schools” is not the most useful way to think and talk about what is happening in this new sector of public education. “Charter schools” is really two quite different things. First, it is a radically new arrangement for creating and running public schools. Second, it is the schools created. The first says: “Charter schools is . . .” The second says: “Charter schools are . . .”. The discussion is confused and confusing; muddling the two. It will be better – more useful - to talk in somewhat different terms; of “charter/ing” and of “charter/ed schools”.

Within charter/ing the function of sponsorship (authorizing) has been changing, evolving. Sponsorship now needs some serious rethinking.

Early on, not much attention was given to sponsorship: Perhaps no element got less attention in the course of the law-making. Most of the attention was on the school: on what it must be and do, on what it must not be, on what it could be. But the importance of the sponsor became clear as states began to get experience – good and not-good - with the schools created. So by the end of the 1990s there was a growing discussion about the sponsor’s role – in the ongoing oversight of the school as well as in its initial approval. Partly in response a national association of sponsors (authorizers) appeared.

Some of the thinking about the sponsor role has emerged from work of [Education/Evolving](#), a joint venture in Minnesota between Hamline University and the

Center for Policy Studies. In the spring of 2002 E/E approached five non-district sponsors in the Twin Cities area about forming a collaborative. All agreed: Augsburg College, Hamline, the Minneapolis YMCA, the University of St. Thomas and the Volunteers of America (Minnesota). They were joined later by the College of St. Catherine and Saint Paul College, a public post-secondary. Quickly the collaborative became a much-valued support group for the organizations. It also became a vehicle through which the sponsors could consider new dimensions of the sponsor role.

The old/original role: to react to proposals

At the start the concept was that the sponsor would be passive. The vision about the school was the organizers' vision. The prospective operator approached the sponsor, explained the idea. The sponsor then said 'yes' or 'no'. The sponsor, it was assumed, had no ideas of its own, either about the kind of 'school' it would be or about the educational needs of the community, the students, the school would serve.

There was not even discussion of a different role for the sponsor. Perhaps this was because in so many states there would be only a single sponsor available in any area: It is easy to feel that a single sponsor should have a kind of 'utility responsibility' to consider proposals for all manner of schools. Whatever the reason, to this day the concept for the sponsor in charter/ing around the country is to be passive; reactive.

A new role: to seek out proposals

Clearly it is conceivable that an individual sponsor could have ideas of its own about the educational needs of the children of the community and about the kinds of learning programs best able to address those needs.

This is especially true as, with improvements in the law, there come to be multiple, 'alternate', sponsors available in and for a given community. The presence of several sponsors reduces the risk that a single sponsor with its own, fixed ideas would close off the opportunity to establish equally worthy, simply different, kinds of schools.

Moving out of the passive mode could mean a sponsor both indicating the kinds of schools in which it is interested and acting affirmatively to seek proposals to create such schools. In such a role the sponsor could choose one of several approaches.

o Indicate general areas of interest – The sponsor might simply say it is particularly interested in schools of a particular kind, or schools to serve a particular category of student, and wait to see if proposals appear. The ‘area’ could be as general as secondary schools, vs. elementary, or could refer, say, to a particular educational philosophy. It could state a preference for established models or for new models; for schools with traditional ‘instruction’ or for schools in which students learn as they explore the world of information. Some of the foundations supporting new schools have been expressing this kind of general preference. So might a sponsor.

o Run an RFP process – Even without having identified an area of interest the sponsor could invite proposals and select the proposal/s it considers most attractive. It would then see several proposals; see a variety of school-models; see how the proposers define the learning needs of the community. It would amount to “a competitive”. Massachusetts, where the state is the sole sponsoring authority, runs such a process. The board of education in Duluth MN ran a competitive in chartering a school in the mid-‘90s. So did the board in Wilkesburg PA, earlier, in seeking a program for Turner Elementary school.

o Specify a particular kind of school – A sponsor that did have in mind a particular kind of school it wants to see created might ask for a proposal from organizations interested simply in coming in to set up and run that school. This happens in other fields . . . as when a business firm wanting a new corporate headquarters has the building designed and then invites proposals from contractors interested in constructing it.

In charter/ing the initial decision to approve a school is very important. Less-than-rigorous decisions up-front to approve weak proposals lead to troubles down the years: lead to operations that are weak financially and academically - and so produce a cry for ‘more accountability’. But simply trying to “improve accountability” misses the main point. It’s like every other cry to deal with symptoms. Far better to get good

proposals and to make good decisions about the proposals in the first place, so as to minimize the controversies later about failure, revocation and renewal.

A fair share of the troubles with the schools through the first decade of charter/ing can be attributed to the weakness in the original concept of sponsorship . . . in the decisions made about who the sponsor was to be, and in the decision to have the sponsor simply react-and-respond, yes-or-no, to proposals, one at a time.

Also: to know the needs of the community

An obvious question then arises. What basis would the sponsor have for its decision to focus on, or solicit proposals to establish, some particular kind of school?

A sponsor could educate itself over time about the different kinds of schools appearing. As more evaluations appear of the different learning models in use, there would need to be some reading, some talking with persons who know the general picture around the state and around the country. The collaborative in the Twin Cities area has begun to do this. (Obviously “requesting proposals” – the second approach mentioned above - is such a process.)

But the sponsor coming to favor a particular kind of school is like the operator favoring a particular kind of school: That preference says nothing about whether the kind of school is appropriate for the education needs of the students involved.

A sponsor might, therefore, want to become better educated also about the educational needs now not well met. There is a quick assumption that this is obvious: low-income and minority students in the central cities. But that snap answer – like most such answers – deserves some thought. Scott Miller at The College Board has long been trying, for example, to get more people to focus on the needs of high-potential African-American students, partly as a way to develop high-performing graduates whose example can weigh against whatever factors discourage high academic achievement in that community of young people.

How the sponsor would go about educating itself on the learning needs of the community is a question we cannot address here. It is possible the local board of education . . . its planning staff . . . might be helpful. Whether it could be, and would agree to be, is another question we cannot address here.

The need for new kinds of sponsors

Thinking about this new role for sponsors it quickly seems there might need to be a new kind of sponsor.

Any discussion of adding these functions – of making sponsoring both specialized and pro-active - is likely to cause existing sponsors to feel even more overburdened by the work already involved and thus even less inclined to take on this role.

They will say: It is hard enough just responding to proposals. Now when problems appear in the schools you expect us also to be responsible for ongoing oversight of the school. Nobody told us that sponsorship would be so complicated and time-consuming. We do not have that much time and staff to put into this work. We have our own work to do: running the district; running our university; overseeing statewide K-12; whatever. We do not get paid for this extra work. There is just no way that we can take on now, in addition, the job of identifying good learning models and unmet student needs.

This is hard to resist. The responsibility for sponsoring new schools has been assigned by the laws to organizations that have some other much larger thing to do for a living. For them sponsoring new schools is a sideline, and expensive. Conceivably they could become pro/active; conceivably they could specialize. What existing sponsors cannot do is to give their full attention to this job of creating quality public schools new.

State policy leadership may therefore want to think about creating new kinds of ‘single-purpose’ sponsors that can give their full attention to creating new schools and to overseeing their operation.

There are sponsors of this type. Arizona created one, which operates state-wide. Perhaps the best example is the board created in the mid-'90s by Congress acting as legislature for the District of Columbia: the D.C. Public Charter Schools Board. Other legislatures could create entities like this, able to give their full attention to new schools. If there were several of them in a state they could specialize and study educational needs and seek out quality learning programs. Minnesota this year may add a category of sponsor just to handle cases involving an existing school that for one reason or another – its own or the sponsor's – wants to switch from one sponsor to another.

Charter/ing is about both innovation and replication

It is important both to spread quality models as they appear and are 'proven' by evaluation, and to generate quality new models. It will be OK to think about new roles for sponsors and new kinds of sponsors if we keep both these objectives in mind.

Public education has had big problems with replication. It is hard to get really new and different models of 'school' introduced in the mainline district sector. And it has been hard to get these to spread – and even to last. Joe Graba remembers that as a legislator in Minnesota in 1971 he helped create the Council on Quality Education – essentially a public foundation set up to support good new ideas in the district sector. Ten years later as deputy commissioner he helped to shut it down. There had been good ideas, that worked where they were tried. But they did not last after the initial grant ran out. And they were not replicated in other schools *even in the same district*.

Change is hard. A district board and administration find it difficult to change its set of schools either through renewal or through replacement . . . either to change its set of chamber orchestras into a set of brass bands, so to speak, or to bring in a brass band to replace one of its chamber orchestras. This is why it is so hard to replicate new kinds of schools and to spread 'best practice'.

The charter sector should facilitate replication: ideas always spread faster between organizations than within them, as the strategic planning director of one of the big communications firms observed at one point. Charter/ing is available to district boards

of education, should they wish to use it. It is also available the states to produce change if the boards do not.

But there is a concern about bringing 'planning' into the field of new-school-creation. It is a concern about stifling innovation.

Planning tries to look forward . . . surely those doing planning mean to look forward. But inevitably the planners know only the past and the present. They see trends and small beginnings. But no one can be sure which really will become the future . . . will last and will grow. So people hesitate. "We dare not believe in creative discoveries until they have happened", Albert Hirschman wrote. The risks are real. How many – especially public - planning agencies are willing and able to push some unproven idea against interests vested in present ways of doing things and unenthusiastic about having their existing position challenged? The pressures are strong to stay with what is fashionable, with what conventional opinion considers 'right'. Warren Buffett says, "You're not wrong because people disagree with you". And he is right, for his work. But in the public sector the pressure is to define being-right as being-agreed-with.

The concern is that an effort to define 'educational needs' and to promote 'quality learning models' would fall in with current, conventional wisdom about what are the needs and what are the solutions. A good many foundations have been reluctant to try what seems 'unproven', and a sponsor granting approvals is essentially in the position of a foundation. The need for innovation is put further at risk by the pressure now to support only 'research-based' learning models, and by the predictable pressure next from commercial interests to get what they sell defined as 'research-based' and, as always, to limit the entry of new vendors.

It is important to keep charter/ing open to innovation . . . to keep sponsor/ing open to trying new and different kinds of schooling. State policy leadership will need to manage this situation carefully. Clearly the sensible course is to make sure there is always a diverse set of sponsors available and accessible to those proposing schools; some of these sponsors perhaps specializing in innovation and others specializing in replication.

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