

## **Charter School Innovation Versus Replication and Expansion: Complementary or Competing Goals?**

### **Roundtable Proposal Submission**

#### **Purpose and Research Questions**

A primary aim of charter schools is to facilitate innovation in school governance and educational practices. This theory of action argues that charter schools, unfettered from the public school district bureaucracy and granted financial and regulatory autonomy, operate as “laboratories of innovation,” free to experiment with new approaches in order to meet local community needs (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Furthermore, many charter school advocates argue that freedom to innovate allows charters to experiment with curricular and instructional strategies that can lead to improved student learning and close the racial achievement gap (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2013).

While so-called “independent” charter schools continue to emerge, in recent years, the charter sector has increasingly included charter management organizations (CMOs). CMOs are non-profit organizations comprising a central “home office” which oversees a network of multiple schools (Scott & DiMartino, 2010). Unlike independent charter schools, CMOs have the organizational capacity to scale up rapidly and “offer a way to replicate ‘what works’” (Farrell, Wohlstetter, & Smith, 2012, p. 504). CMOs typically seek to add additional schools to their networks over a period of several years. Policymakers and philanthropists have increasingly supported CMO expansion as an education reform strategy (Reckhow, 2013; Scott, 2009; Wohlstetter, Smith, Farrell, Hentschke, & Hirman, 2011).

In 2010, the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) launched its Grants for Replication and Expansion of High-Quality Charter Schools (R&E), a competitive grant program managed by the DOE’s Office of Innovation and Improvement. Between 2010-2015, the DOE has awarded R&E grants totaling over \$200 million to 46 CMOs (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). But as CMOs replicate and expand with federal policy and funding support, we know little about the implications for innovation. Some researchers have argued that many charter schools fall short of their goals to innovate, and instead, conform to widespread instructional approaches in order to gain support from families, funders, and policymakers in a competitive educational market (Huerta & Zuckerman, 2009; Lubienski, 2004). However, this body of scholarship has not yet engaged in exploring how federal initiatives to expand CMOs may enable or constrain innovation across charter networks. Such an investigation is significant and timely, as the R&E was formally incorporated into the 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

This descriptive study aims to understand the extent to which R&E grantees experiment with innovative approaches to school administration and curriculum and instruction. Focusing on the 2010 grantees, I ask the following research questions:

1. What are the R&E grantees’ administrative practices?
2. What are the R&E grantees’ curricular and instructional practices?
3. To what extent are the grantees’ administrative and curricular and instructional practices similar to or different from one another?

These questions are especially fitting with the 2016 UCEA Convention Theme, “Revitalizing Education in Complex Contexts,” given that the current policy landscape embraces charter school replication and expansion as a preferred strategy for lifting the achievement of

poor students and students of color, particularly in major urban districts characterized by complex socioeconomic and political environments. I seek to illuminate the extent to which federal charter school policy advances or undermines the theory of charter school innovation, and whether CMO expansion can revitalize public education through novel approaches.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study employs a multi-focal framework (Young, 1999), drawing upon concepts from *neo-institutional theory* and *critical policy analysis*. First, neo-institutional theory assumes that organizations are rewarded with resources and legitimacy by conforming to the norms, scripts, and ritualistic behavior dominant in the environment (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). In doing so, organizations come to resemble one another in “structure, culture, and output,” a process DiMaggio and Powell (1983) describe as *isomorphism* (p. 147). This study builds upon scholarship employing concepts from neo-institutional theory, including isomorphism, to understand similarities and differences across charter school practices (Huerta & Zuckerman, 2009; Lubienski, 2004). Specifically, I examine the extent to which federal funding through the R&E grant program produces isomorphic pressures for CMO grantees, and the implications for innovation.

However, neo-institutional theory attends little to power and politics. Given that CMOs disproportionately serve poor students and students of color in major urban areas, while CMOs’ school leaders and advocates tend to be White and from elite backgrounds (Scott, 2011), frameworks that pay explicit attention to political and power dynamics can provide a more nuanced picture of federal charter school policy. Critical policy analysis takes for granted that policymaking is inherently political, as “policy is the legitimation of values” (Prunty, 1985, p. 136). In examining the extent to which federal CMO grantees are similar and different in organizational practices, I aim to illuminate the dominant ideas and values around charter school administration, curriculum, and instruction that have been legitimized and validated through federal policy and funding.

In sum, a multi-focal approach allows me to examine the extent to which the R&E program steers CMOs toward isomorphism or innovation. Together, concepts from neo-institutional theory and critical policy analysis uncover how similarities and differences in CMOs’ practices reflect certain ideas and values regarding school administration, teaching, and learning and, conversely, which ideas and values remain unrepresented.

### **Methodology and Methods**

I employ qualitative case study methodology, focusing on the 2010 R&E grant program as a single case. Given the descriptive nature of this study, case study methodology is an appropriate approach (Yin, 2003). Data sources include the following publicly available documents related to the 2010 R&E program: The DOE’s Notice Inviting Applications, the grant applications for the 12 CMOs awarded R&E grants, and the reviewers’ comments on the winning applications. Data collection involved downloading each of these sources from the DOE’s R&E website.<sup>1</sup> These documents provide insight into the DOE’s application requirements and criteria for deeming a CMO “high-quality” and worthy of replication and expansion. CMOs’ grant applications illuminate the organizational and instructional approaches proposed to ensure high quality during the scale-up process. Finally, reviewers’ comments reveal how CMOs were evaluated on their plans to replicate and expand.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/charter-rehqcs/index.html>

### **Data Analysis**

To analyze the documents, I employ both deductive and inductive coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Deductive codes emerge from my descriptive research questions, and I code instances in which specific administrative, curricular, or instructional approaches are mentioned. Inductive codes are empirically grounded in the data; for instance, if a CMO, in its application, addresses strategies related to student data analysis or school culture, I generate additional codes. As I recognize patterns while coding, I write analytic memos to capture “emergent patterns, categories, themes, concepts, and assertions,” which, in turn, helps me to identify instances of CMOs’ convergence versus innovation (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 95-96). The memos help to inform the next step of data analysis: developing data matrices and displays, particularly to discover how the data map onto my conceptual framework (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

### **Preliminary Findings**

Preliminary findings related to CMOs’ administrative practices are consistent with previous scholarship outlining common organizational characteristics among CMOs (Farrell et al., 2012; Scott & DiMartino, 2010). R&E grantees discuss in their applications the capacity of their central and regional offices, particularly their ability to provide high levels of operational support to existing and emerging network schools. CMOs highlight the complementary and efficient division of labor among central and regional office staff and school leaders, facilitating network expansion. Regarding curriculum and instruction, preliminary findings similarly point to multiple shared approaches across R&E grantees. For example, many grantees note an explicit college preparatory mission, with classrooms named after universities and curricula designed with an eye toward college readiness. Additional commonalities include extended instructional hours and a longer school year, periodic assessments and data-driven instruction, and a special focus on literacy and mathematics.

### **Significance**

In 2009, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan delivered a keynote address at the National Charter Schools Conference, where he stated, “The charter school movement is one of the most profound changes in American education—bringing new options to underserved communities and introducing competition and innovation into the education system” (quoted in Wohlstetter et al., 2011, p. 153). Duncan went on to name nine examples of “great charter schools” that have effectively raised student achievement, all of which were CMOs. Since then, six of these CMOs have been awarded R&E grants. As federal education policy and funding propel the growth of CMOs based on the premise that charter schools spur innovation, and, in turn, lift student achievement, an examination of the extent to which CMOs experiment with novel approaches is significant and timely. Findings from this study will illuminate how the charter school theory of innovation holds regarding the 2010 R&E grantees. Specifically, findings will demonstrate the extent to which R&E grant funding might push CMOs toward isomorphism, thus undermining innovation, or, conversely, provide CMOs with the resources to experiment. Finally, given current scholarly and media attention surrounding some CMOs’ questionable approaches to discipline and instruction (Golann, 2015; Taylor, 2016), illuminating the extent to which CMOs share controversial practices carries critical implications for educational equity.

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