



HEAD OF THE CLASS

Charters develop the next generation of school leaders

Behind every great school, there is a great leader. A principal who inspires, nurtures, and imprints the school's philosophy, culture and identity in every interaction that occurs under its roof.

"When you look at really great schools, there is often a school leader that has an idea of how to make that school run well," says Richard Wertheimer, CEO/Principal of City Charter High School, named one of the country's best high schools by U.S. News & World Report.

Nowhere has the connection between great leadership and great schools been embraced more than in charter schools. Charters are autonomous public schools run by non-profit boards, not a local school district. Consequently, charter school leaders have an even greater influence on the way their school is run than a district-run school.

"A charter leader has to be prepared to do anything," says Vas Scoumis, CEO of Manchester Academic Charter School. "You don't have a central administrative office, where a superintendent and a group of administrators are telling you, 'This is what you have to do, here's your music teacher, here's your curriculum.' The biggest attribute you need is the energy and the willingness to do it all."

Because charters usually have very specific school cultures, they often strive to produce their own leaders.

"If you have a culture in a school, and you want to keep that culture, it makes a lot of sense to develop leaders from within," says Scoumis, who had been a teacher at the school before becoming its CEO.

At City High, for instance, grade level teachers serve as

"floor leaders", where they coordinate the efforts of a team of 10 to 12 teachers who follow a group of students over their four years in the school.

"I have found that this is a first step in getting teachers to think more globally," Wertheimer says. "It's fertile ground for seeing who might be interested in developing their own leadership abilities."

At the Environmental Charter School at Frick Park, part of a teacher's evaluation is based on parent communication, a crucial facet for any building principal.

"We look for school leaders that have teaching and learning at their core and unique skills around that," says Jon McCann, the school's director. "What we're interested in are competencies that will service our institution at a leadership level, and build our evaluations around that."

The importance of school leadership comes down to the fundamental nature of charter schools, Wertheimer says. In order to survive, they've got to offer a quality product. If parents don't send their children there, or the school misses academic targets, it risks closure.

"We are only as good as our teachers are, and good school leaders are able to find good teachers and make them better," Wertheimer says. "It's pretty simple—if we're not good, we're out of business."

As charter schools are proving, good school leaders, like good schools, aren't necessarily born—they're made.

This series is brought to you by a consortium of Allegheny County charter schools.



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