

Taking Charge of Choice: New Roles for New Leaders

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Abstract:

This paper examines the policy context of charter school *adoption* and *implementation* in Indianapolis -- the only city in the U.S. with independent mayoral authorizing authority. Our study identifies specific *implications* of this hybrid of mayoral control, including expanded civic capacity and innovation diffusion across Indianapolis area public school systems. This qualitative study utilizes over 30 in-depth interviews conducted with key stakeholders. Legislative, state, and school district documents and reports were analyzed for descriptive evidence of expanded civic capacity, school innovation, and charter/non-charter school competitive pressures. The case of Indianapolis reframes the mayoral role in education reform, and expands the institutional framework for charter school authorizing.

Keywords: school choice, mayoral control, urban education reform

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Introduction

In 2001, Indiana became the 38th state to pass a charter school law, ending a seven-year debate that had rumbled through the hearing rooms and hallways of the Indiana General Assembly. Just five years later, charter schools numbered 36 in the state, with a total enrollment of 10,000 students, including almost 4,000 in Indianapolis alone (Office of the Mayor, 2007). The rapid growth of Indiana's charter schools and the debate that preceded passage of the law are commonplace features in the political landscape of school choice in the U.S. The distinguishing feature in Indiana – the one-of-a-kind element in this charter school law – relates to the set of eligible chartering authorities. The law stipulates only three in the state: local school boards, public state universities, and *the mayor of Indianapolis*. From the passage of the law in 2001, until his unexpected defeat following a second term, Mayor Bart Peterson of Indianapolis authorized 16 charter schools and closed one financially troubled one. The current Indianapolis mayor, Greg Ballard, has authorized nine charter schools since taking office in 2008.

The paper explores how charter school politics are nested within a larger framework of interest group politics and idiosyncratic social and political contexts (Kirst, 2007). The focus centers on examining the political and educational values of public and nonpublic organizations, state officials, and local actors. How did these stable (and shifting) coalitions form? How did these groups coalesce to produce the nation's first mayoral chartering authority? What are the implications of this "mayoral charge" for choice policy, innovation diffusion, and civic capacity in Indianapolis? Against the backdrop of vast variability of charter school laws and charter school performance (Gill, Timpane, Ross & Brewer, 2001; Lake & Hill, 2006), the Indianapolis context provides a

distinctive yet informative political and cultural canvas to explore charter school policy formulation.

Conceptual Framework: Public Policymaking Process

Mayoral Control, Influence, & Impact

This paper examines the origins and implications of this unique mayoral function in charter school authorization and accountability against the backdrop of urban school politics in which mayors play increasingly pivotal and powerful roles (Henig & Rich, 2004; Kirst, 2003; Viteritti, 2009a; Wong, Shen, Anagnostopoulos & Rutledge, 2007).

Recent research focuses on the formal structures that expand mayoral authority over city schools, including mayoral selection of school board members (versus ward or city-wide election), the appointment of a schools chief/chancellor/CEO, and the shift from managerial to advisory board functions (Viteritti, 2008). A myriad of questions are raised (and answered) regarding the consequences of mayoral control in a comprehensive empirical analysis of mayor-managed (or “integrated governance”) urban school districts and traditionally managed (elected school board) counterparts (Wong et al., 2007). The authors focus upon outputs related to governance (evaluated in terms of financial operations), productivity (assessed in terms of student performance), human capital (appraised in terms of teacher and administrator characteristics), and public confidence (measured by public opinion and awareness). Wong et al. (2007) analyses suggest that expanded mayoral influence and control over public schools contributes to “streamlined governance, an alignment of political incentives, a politics of partnership, and a reallocation of resources to their most efficient use” (p. 95). While the research purposes and scope of data analyses in the work conducted by Wong and colleagues (2007) offer a

far more expansive examination than is undertaken here, some pertinent parallels add perspective to this project. This study of Indianapolis mayoral charter school authority responds to the need for case-study level analysis of mayoral control (see Alsbury, 2009), with specific focus upon mayoral authority in charter school policy and the associated claims of increased program transparency and accountability. This project also adds analytical insights to arguments made regarding growth in institution-building and strategic partnerships associated with mayoral control (see Wong et al., 2007). The second part of the paper explores the implications of the Mayor's Office of Charter Schools on the city's capacity to move forward with public education reforms, undergirded by new alliances, expanded trans-institutional trust, and external interest and investment (Author, 2009).

In sum, unlike the mayoral "take-over" analyses of urban education reforms in Philadelphia (Bulkley, 2007), Chicago (Shipps, 2006; Shipps, 2009), Baltimore (Orr, 1999), New York (Hemphill, 2009; Viteritti, 2009b), Boston (Portz & Schwartz, 2009) and other cities, this paper focuses on the "advocacy coalitions" (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999) and policy streams (Kingdon, 1995) that made Indianapolis the first – and only – city with *independent* mayoral control over charter school authorization and accountability. The unique contribution here is the intersection of charter school politics with mayoral control of urban schools. As the Obama Administration and the Secretary of Education urge mayors to take greater responsibility for improving school performance (Quaid, 2009), this paper makes a timely contribution to the debate regarding the appropriate role and scope of authority of these city leaders in public education.

Policy Streams

This study is nested in a policy research tradition that focuses upon policy formulation and change (Lindblom, 1968). Specifically, the interest rests with the political contexts, problems, and preconditions that facilitate charter school policy *formulation*, rather than the structural reforms, school-level innovations and student *outcomes* associated with charter school policy (see Fuller, 2000; Lubienski, 2004).

The Indiana charter school law was passed following seven years of sustained effort and investment by an array of public and non-public stakeholders, or what Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith (1999) refer to as an “advocacy coalition.” How (and why) did the policy landscape change to secure passage of the IN charter school law? This project applies Kingdon’s (1995) three-part model of the public policymaking process to unpack the pivot points (“windows of opportunity”) that converged to produce this landmark charter school law. The model includes three integral parts or process “streams” – the problem stream, policy stream, and political stream (Kingdon, 1995).

Problem stream. This stage underscores the conditions that anchor subsequent (and simultaneous) concerted action and policy development. Informal and formal communication processes play a critical role, creating the policy networks that establish the channels of information and influence. As Mintrom (2000) notes, members of the policy networks, including elected officials, interest group representatives, national advocacy groups, philanthropists, foundation officers, university researchers, and business leaders, cross public and non-public roles. During this phase, a central problem emerges as the focus of attention (problem identification), constituting legislative or

governmental action. A “policy entrepreneur” who translates the problem to a policy solution sets the agenda.

Policy stream. Policy solutions emerge through a process of debate, discussion, and reformulation. The policy entrepreneur navigates the political changes and organizational innovation necessary for action during this phase, when coalitions are built around collective action. In Indiana, Senator Teresa Lubbers, the long-time chair of the Senate Education Committee, played this central role with skill and influence.

Political stream. The political process is dynamic, involving changes in executive and legislative control by different political parties, new elections that bring new mayors with different political philosophies to office, triggering new agenda setting. The change in the Office of Mayor following the election in 1999 produced monumental change and momentum – all in the direction of the “middle ground” sought by the coalition built by Senator Lubbers and other members of the charter school policy network. In Mayor Bart Peterson, Indianapolis citizens transformed the political tilt and trajectory of education and urban reform.

Urban Regime Theory

Recent research studies on public housing, urban education, and economic reform utilize urban regime theory (Stone, 1989) to explore the nature of public and nonpublic sector relationships involved in policymaking. Although not a formal theory (Mossberger & Stoker, 2001), regime analyses explore “the formal arrangements by which public bodies and private interests function together to make and carry out governing decisions” (Stone, 1989, p. 179). This assumes a set of political arrangements and trade-offs that complement the interests of both actors – public and private – and

maximize or effectively utilize the political clout and material resources each represents. As Bulkley (2007) notes, “understanding the nature of a governing regime (and whether a regime is even present in a particular context) is critical for understanding the path of policy change and its potential for sustainability” (p. 157). Following Stone’s (1989) description of various types of regimes that match coalitional arrangements and policy agendas, Shipps (2003) underscores the importance of further refinement of a typology around distinctive education policy goals, including an *empowerment* regime found in school choice policy initiatives (e.g., charter schools) designed to enhance the power of parents to choose schools from an array of options beyond their zoned school. At a minimum, members of a governing coalition engaged in these policy shifts include parents, educators, elected and appointed government officials. Shipps also highlights two types of *market* regimes: entrepreneurial and corporate. School choice policy, including charter schools, invokes both types. Entrepreneurial regimes are embedded in the effort to drive education reform through market-style mechanisms of supply (new charter schools) and demand (expressed parent preferences/choices). In a corporate market regime, business interests coalesce with public officials/organizations to advance greater efficiency and accountability in schools, a key principle undergirding the push for charter schools across the U.S. (Lake & Hill, 2006).

Though the descriptive analyses in this study are not anchored to a regime theory perspective, the underlying processes provide the scaffolding for considering the broader policymaking process (Kingdon, 1995) outlined above and underscore the value and utility of applying a critical element in regime theory – civic capacity -- to the evolution and impact of the Indiana charter school law in Indianapolis.

Civic Capacity

In one of the most thorough set of analyses and detailed applications of urban regime theory, Stone, Henig, Jones & Pierannunzi (2001) identify the conditions that give rise to education reform. The authors refer to “greater civic capacity” (p. 12) as the foundation for comprehensive public policies that result in material change and improved outcomes. Civic capacity enables “a community to come together to address its problems” (p. 12) over a sustained period of time. Civic capacity involves linking integral structures and processes across disparate entities – formal (public, governmental, institutional) and informal (private, inter-personal) relationships among key stakeholders, common understandings and trust, and an interest in engaging in collective action for a set of shared, mediated goals (Stone et al., 2001). This scaffolding supports the framework for moving forward with decisive and collective action toward solving public problems – in education, housing, community redevelopment, and other social policies. Civic capacity, then, constitutes a *pre-requisite* for policy reform and change.

In this study, findings indicate that civic capacity expanded in *response* to the convergence of the policy streams (Kingdon, 1995) related to the formulation of charter school policy and passage of the IN charter school law. The analyses suggest that civic capacity coalesced measurably following charter school policy implementation and the establishment of the Mayor’s Office of Charter Schools. Mayor Peterson’s efforts to elevate public accountability and program transparency established Indianapolis as a strategic template for national urban education reform initiatives. The capacity to change the direction of education policy in Indianapolis was constituted by a public

demonstration of collective action, inter-institutional trust, and investment from partners (e.g., national foundations) external to the formal governance structures in the city.

Methods

This qualitative case study of Indiana charter school policy development involved purposeful sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Interviews were conducted with key “advocacy coalition” (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999) members across public and nonpublic entities, including: two former Indianapolis mayors, state legislators and members of the governor’s legislative staff, members of the former and current mayors’ staff, urban school superintendents (reps from the Indiana Urban Schools Association), urban school board members, teacher union representatives, business groups and business leaders (including the CEO of Eli Lilly), foundation officers (Annie E. Casey Foundation), philanthropists, university leaders and education researchers (Ball State University and the University of Indianapolis), parent group representatives, national charter school advocacy group representatives, local charter school technical assistance group representatives, editorial writers for the Indianapolis Star, local civil rights leaders (e.g., Indianapolis NAACP), community activists, and leaders of faith-based groups in the three largest urban districts in the state. The interviewees were selected purposively based on professional roles (e.g., legislative committee chair) and reported participation (via news reports and official IN state government reports) in the charter school law adoption process in Indiana. Some interviewees were selected based upon interviews with key informants, using “snowball” sampling. A total of 34 interviews were conducted with key stakeholders during the time period of February, 2008 – March, 2008.

We utilized a semi-structured interview protocol, asking participants to address questions linked to our conceptual framework on policy adoption and formulation (see Kingdon, 1995). Questions were clustered under categories related to policy networks, policy innovation and diffusion, politics of charter schools, charter school authorization and mayoral control and urban education. See appendix for interview protocol. All interviews were audiotaped, with participants' permission, and transcribed verbatim. Each interview lasted one hour on average, although interview length varied.

Documents were analyzed for descriptive evidence of the nature of governing coalitions and their members' educational/political values related to charter school policy; these documents include: transcripts from legislative hearings on charter schools from 1994-2001, press releases from the offices of state legislative leaders and the mayor of Indianapolis, transcripts of campaign speeches from the mayor (1999-2001), editorials and articles published in local media, including the *Indianapolis Star*, and press releases from the state teachers' union and urban superintendents' association.

Pattern coding was used to discern patterns of thought, action, and behavior among interview subjects (Fetterman, 1989; Yin, 1989). Accordingly, interview transcripts and documents were coded and summarized according to general descriptive categories derived from the conceptual framework, using the constant comparative method (Patton, 2001). This process was both iterative and theory-driven, and reflected inductive and deductive analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Our coding process was guided by the key themes in the data and the concepts unpacked from the theoretical frameworks linked to our project questions and interview protocols (e.g., charter school law adoption, charter school politics, and mayoral control of schools). The final coding

template involved procedures that were guided and open, with codes that are categorical and thematic. Following the coding, converging pieces of information from interview transcripts, field notes, and document analyses were arranged according to broad themes and categories. In sum, we used methodological procedures designed to produce a reliable and valid qualitative report, including an examination of countervailing evidence, constant comparative method, and iterative coding (Patton, 2001).

Results

Politics of Charter School Policy: Case of Indianapolis

“Window of Opportunity”

Charter school policies mark a convergence of national, state, and local political contexts that are complex, characterized by clusters of coalitions and active policy network members (Bulkley, 2005; Kirst, 2007). This case study of the adoption and impact of Indiana’s charter school law provides an instructive illustration of the public policymaking process against the canvas of these connected political contexts. Following Kingdon’s model (1995), policy changes emerge when three streams – problem, policy, and political – come together to create a “window of opportunity.” Changes in local and state leadership, a fiscal crisis, a massive program failure, or creeping incrementalism may help trigger an opportunity. The tipping point -- whether or not an opportunity translates to policy change -- requires political leadership or a policy entrepreneur. The policy entrepreneur manages the policy network by anchoring the new agenda to a well-defined set of problems and solutions. As Kingdon (1995) explains:

But their defining characteristic, much as in the case of a business entrepreneur, is their willingness to invest their resources -- time, energy, reputation, and sometimes money -- in the hope of a future return. (p. 122)

In sum, the problem definition stage sets the agenda for particular set of policy responses. In Indianapolis, the city's education and economic "problems" were easily identifiable, though the "solutions" remained highly contested across political contexts and policy communities. What were the problems? How did "political streams" galvanize policy networks toward the charter school "solution?"

Paddling upstream

According to an analysis of state education and economic development reports, and a set of interviews with elected state and local (Indianapolis) officials, business leaders, interest groups, philanthropists, foundation officers, and state agency officials, Indiana's problems were associated with two inter-related sectors: education and economic development. Indianapolis, the state's largest city with a population of more than six million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000), amplified some of the state's most critical economic conditions – declining economic activity and vitality marked by a steady outflow of corporate interests from the city to the suburban communities, coupled with plant closings and a steady decline in manufacturing (Indianapolis Private Industry Council, 2004). These economic issues were matched by a set of negative education indicators: one of the lowest high school graduation rates in the nation (31%) in the Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) (Swanson, 2008), and a large and persistent achievement gap between white and African American students in the district (Indiana

Department of Education, 2009). These conditions were fueling a precipitous population decline in the city (and school district) of Indianapolis that began in the late 1980s.

Officials interviewed for this project noted a cultural tilt and tradition in public education and other governmental services that tended to exacerbate these documented problems. These issues included excessive rules and regulations and an absence of public accountability and responsiveness. How did these problems open the window of opportunity and set the agenda for charter school policy after more than seven years of failed efforts to pass a charter school bill?

The Streams Converge: Problems, Policies & Politics

By 2001, the battle to win charter school approval in Indiana had been fought for seven years by Senator Teresa Lubbers, a former public school educator, and the reigning influential Republican chair of the Senate Education Committee. Lubbers, widely regarded as the “mother of the movement” toward expanded school choice in Indiana, had worked over the years to cultivate a policy network of other elected Republican members of the Senate and House, the Indiana and Indianapolis Chambers of Commerce, and local foundations (Friedman Foundation) and think tanks (Hudson Institute) with a long history and well established toe-hold in public education, school choice (notably, including tax credits and vouchers), and conservative Republican political circles. She held legislative hearings on the problems of low high school graduation rates, large and persistent achievement gaps, and the lack of public confidence in the Indianapolis public schools. She defined the problems and outlined the solutions, in committee hearings, public speeches, and meeting with members of the growing school choice policy network in Indianapolis. Lubbers embraced policy values with broad appeal as she set the agenda:

The idea of freedom with accountability was to me like as American as you could get. We are going to treat teachers as professionals. We are going to cut you free of a lot of these rules and regulations that may not be tied to student learning and in exchange, we are going to hold you accountable for what you do. So I think the whole idea of innovation, the idea of serving different populations...

In the late 1990's, Senator Lubbers joined forces with well-organized, energized forces within the Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce and national organizations and leading advocates in the expanding charter school movement, including Jeanne Allen and the Center for Education Reform (CER), and the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA). A local philanthropist (who later founded one of the first mayor-authorized Indianapolis charter schools), and other prominent business officials with links to the IN governor's office, played lead roles. The policy network was fully formed when Senator Earline Rogers, a Democratic from the economically hard-hit and educationally low-performing northern Indiana city of Gary, joined Lubbers in supporting the charter school effort. Rogers, a former school teacher and member of the American Federation of Teachers union, was instrumental in moving some reticent Democratic legislators from stiff opposition to all expanded forms of school choice, to what emerged as "middle ground" on the school choice policy agenda – charter schools. Rogers joined Lubbers, and examined other strong state charter school laws as a model for the IN law. In large part, she viewed charter schools as the solution to problems in the current public education system:

I absolutely believed in the concept of having incubators of learning where people could experiment -- that was something that I thought was attractive. When I was

teaching, there were some barriers there and I would have liked to have gone outside some of those barriers, but couldn't because of the bureaucracy. I basically wanted to make certain that we could get a law that everybody could agree to and give that opportunity for experimentation to teachers or to other groups who felt that there were some needs that a particular community had. Kingdon (1995) suggests that policy entrepreneurs move policies forward by seizing upon the "windows of opportunity" presented by the convergence of problem, policy, and political streams. How did the entrepreneur – Lubbers – provide the pivot point for school choice policy formulation and more specifically, charter school adoption? By 1999, Lubbers was building the momentum that would link a set of public problems to a set of policy solutions found in the charter school movement. As Mintrom (2000) explains:

Among the activities that policy entrepreneurs engage in, the most important include identifying problems, networking in policy circles, shaping the terms of policy debates, and building coalitions to support policy change. (p. 57)

During data collection for this project, numerous elected officials and interest group leaders described a culture of insularity and incremental policymaking in Indiana. Many officials noted that these traditions made education change challenging, and created some disconnections to the policy networks formed around the agenda of school reform and charter school adoption. As Senator Lubbers observed:

People will say that Missouri is the "Show-Me" state, but I think our state has a bit of that, especially when it comes to education. People are a little reticent to

embrace a new idea as the newest and greatest until they really have some reason to think it is a good, new idea.

Lubbers needed to divert other (political) streams to a particular choice policy. She concluded that charter schools were the solution to the problems that state – and the state capital (Indianapolis) – were working to solve. Charter schools would emerge in the late 1990s as the middle ground to the decades-old debate in the state capitol on school vouchers as a policy solution – a position advocated by the Republican mayor of Indianapolis, some Republican legislators, influential Indiana business leaders, and scholars at the Indianapolis-based Friedman Foundation and the Hudson Institute. In 1999, the election of the first Democratic mayor in Indianapolis in 32 years provided a new advocacy coalition – this one tilted toward charter schools as *the* policy solution to the problem of poor-performing public schools.

Peterson's immediate predecessor, Stephen Goldsmith, the Republican mayor of Indianapolis from 1991-1999, advocated private out-sourcing and public-private competition to ensure greater innovation, accountability, and efficiency in city government. Sharp ideological differences and entrenched political battles with teacher unions, school superintendents in the city of Indianapolis, and Democrats in the city and state legislatures characterized his tenure as mayor. Goldsmith supported the idea of charter schools, but argued that the teacher unions, particularly in Indianapolis, would prevent passage of a strong law, something he favored. As Goldsmith framed the dilemma:

It would be such a weak law it could take all of the oomph out of the choice movement, without accomplishing anything for the kids. I just didn't feel like even if I could get a strong law, we'd get enough charters to reach a tipping point. Goldsmith pursued a policy of structural change through competitive pressures. He sought to fracture and then eliminate what he perceived as costly, bureaucratic monopolies throughout city government, and replace government-provided programs with privatized services. He sought market-based reforms in education as well, including publicly financed vouchers for private schools and tuition tax credits to defray the cost of parochial school tuition in the city. Goldsmith cultivated strong policy networks with the conservative Friedman Foundation and the Hudson Institute to bolster his beliefs in the efficiency and productivity of private providers. Goldsmith argued that charter schools could create "competitive pressures" on traditional public schools, if enough "strong" charter schools could be approved. He summed up his position on charter schools in a recent interview for this project:

What I was trying to do was change the system. I viewed the charters, innovative charters as important in and of themselves, but more important as a way to exert structural impact on the rest of the system... that is why I used competition in the city government because it changed all of the government, not just the stuff that was outsourced, all the rest of it.

During the 1999 campaign for Indianapolis mayor and throughout the first nine months of his administration, Bart Peterson sought a middle ground between two polarizing positions staked out by various political constituencies: privatization, vouchers, and market-based reforms sought by Mayor Goldsmith (and the Hudson Institute, members of

the business community), and the outright rejection of any public school choice policies (including charter schools), advocated by most of the Democratic caucus in the Indiana state legislature. In an interview for this project, Peterson noted this political climate raised particular challenges – and imperatives – for a vastly different direction in education policy:

The city government, the media, the business community – all had been working for close to a decade to change the schools. I felt that the environment was very antagonistic. I felt that if we couldn't find something that, not necessarily initially, but eventually might lead to consensus, that we would never have permanent change.

In the interview for this project, Peterson identified a related *problem* in need of policy *solutions* to those articulated by the charter school policy network led by Senator Lubbers. As noted earlier, these problems involved low student performance, measured by the low high school graduation rates in Indianapolis Public Schools. The issues were linked to a lack of accountability and innovation in the education system. These policy network members focused upon the “logical” (Miron & Nelson, 2002) and widely promoted changes triggered by charter school reforms, including teacher autonomy and improved student achievement. Peterson's view of the city's problems transcended classrooms and high school corridors. He shared his more expansive perspective of mayoral involvement in education problems and policies:

The reasons why a lot of mayors look to get involved in education is not just because they see how important it is for the lives of children and their future, but how many other issues and problems in our major urban community are

connected with bad education. Excuse me, there is also population decline associated with the perception and reality of poor schools. So if you believe that a city has to retain its population in order to be strong, in order to do all the things you want to do, you have to figure out a way to keep people in the city, and the people are going to vote with their feet.

While successive Republican and Democratic Indiana governors supported the concept of charter schools, none were as vocal or specific about support for charter schools as Indianapolis Mayor Peterson. Peterson vowed to work with state legislative leaders to get a strong charter school law passed during the 2001 legislative session. He coupled his strong support for charter schools with a specific endorsement for an expanded mayoral role in public education as a charter school authorizer. His position was punctuated by a major speech outlining his education policy priorities in his State of the City Address, on February 22, 2001:

A mayor is uniquely positioned to tap into the community resources necessary to make charter schools thrive. A sponsor must evaluate charter school proposals and hold the schools accountable for their performance...a mayor is accountable to the public for all decisions and the decisions I might make as a charter school sponsor would be no exception.

The Mayoral Charge in School Choice Policy

This expanded and exclusive role for Mayor Peterson – a Democratic – had been developed with Senator Lubbers and other members of the policy network over the previous months, and inserted in a bill that failed in late 2000. Peterson laid the groundwork for his key role as authorizer early – first during the campaign in 1999 as a

vocal proponent of a *strong* charter school bill, and later in his major public speeches. But more importantly, Lubbers and other members of the policy network –including the Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce, the Hudson Institute, and philanthropist Chrystal DeHaan (who was funding a separate foundation to provide technical expertise on charter school legislation) – viewed IPS as the major obstacle to charter school *implementation*. “Strong” charter school laws rated by Center for Education Reform (CER) include a wide range and type of authorizers (e.g., universities) in addition to local school boards. CER and the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) underscored this point with the charter school policy community led by Lubbers. The traditionally strong ties between local Democratic leaders, elected school board members in IPS, and teacher unions were a central matter of interest and concern as the charter school bill evolved. In an effort to avoid appearing radical, policy network members noted that naming a mayor as an authorizer was not new in 2001: the Wisconsin legislature granted the Milwaukee mayor specific authorizing authority in 1998, though the authority is more restricted – subordinate to a separate, independent Milwaukee board that forwards recommendations to the mayor. The Indiana law flipped this formal authority arrangement, making the mayor of Indianapolis the first mayor with *independent charter school* authorizing power in the U.S. In an interview for this project, Peterson underscored the rationale and significance of this unique approach:

I think this is where Senator Lubbers was visionary and correct – that you are less likely to get the kind of charter community that you are looking for if you only leave it to school districts to do the chartering. So who the authorizers are is key and then of course she is the one that came up with the innovation of getting the

mayor of Indianapolis a charter, which was not something that I had even thought of before.

The match between policy problems (low graduation rates, lack of accountability, population decline in the city) and solutions (innovation and accountability via charter schools) culminated in a final negotiation with the teachers union in Indiana. In exchange for restored collective bargaining rights for Indianapolis district teachers (suspended by legislation urged by Mayor Goldsmith and passed with Republican majorities in both chambers in 1995), and other provisions designed to provide a “level playing field” for charter schools and traditional public schools, House Democrats joined the Republican-led coalition in the Indiana Senate and passed the Indiana charter school law in 2001.

Mayor’s Office of Charter Schools: The One Best System?

Granted legislative authority to authorize charter schools in IPS and the surrounding 10 school districts in the city limits of Indianapolis, Mayor Bart Peterson and his chief aide, David Harris, set out to “create the best system.” Central to Peterson’s efforts was the argument he had embraced along the way to charter school law adoption: the quality of charter schools was ultimately tied to the quality, rigor, and integrity of the authorization process. The new Mayor’s Office charter school review process set out to establish a set of central organizing principles: scrutiny, technical assistance, on-going evaluation, and transparency. The new Mayor’s Office on Charter Schools collected information from leading scholars, consulted with charter school authorizing experts across the U.S., and examined “best practices” across an array of urban school districts. Simultaneously, the mayor and his team cultivated an inter-institutional infrastructure of

political and financial support. Under the new law, the mayor's recommendations for charters had to be approved by one other governmental entity -- the 29 members of the City Council in Indianapolis, a majority Democratic body. By Executive Order, Peterson created the seven-member Mayor's Charter Schools Advisory Board and named prominent local educators, business leaders, and university scholars to serve. The Board was charged with formal review responsibilities and for making recommendations to the mayor on all charter school applications. The Mayor's Advisory Board added credibility, expertise, and transparency to the process. Additionally, these steps stitched together the elements for gaining public support across the political spectrum -- both advocates and skeptics of school choice. Notably, all 16 of the mayor's recommendations for charter school passed with what became a routine 29-0 vote of Council support.

System of Support (Inputs)

With generous financial support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the mayor first established a process to promote the development of strong charter school models and applications. Interested individuals and organizations had immediate access to an array of technical assistance and material resources. These support structures were particularly critical for local, independent (non-affiliated) charter school operators who lacked a broader network from which to seek assistance and expertise. The support mechanisms focused upon administrative and instructional inputs for successful charter school management, such as adequate staffing and budgeting, concrete curricular materials and programs, aligned assessment systems, strong board oversight, and sustained leadership capacity.

Monitoring Mechanisms (Outputs).

The mayor's charter program included an extensive accountability and reporting procedure for all approved charter schools that emphasized early diagnosis of program weaknesses, and provided guidance for corrective action. These efforts led to the development of the Charter School Performance Framework, designed to foster on-going school improvement and high student achievement. The Charter School Accountability Handbook gave charter school operators detailed guidance and direction, and was a centerpiece of the mayor's promise of accountability. The Mayor's Office established an annual progress report that included specific academic, demographic, fiscal, and parent and staff evaluation data on every charter school. A grant from the Lilly Endowment supported a research and evaluation component, including "expert site visits" by independent evaluation experts at the University of Indianapolis.

Engine for Innovation and Expanded Civic Capacity

The charter school initiative, coupled with the mayoral team's growing reputation for high performance and accountability, attracted new interest from the Gates Foundation in 2003, culminating in a large grant to foster a small schools initiative in Indianapolis. In 2006, the Mayor's Office on Charter Schools was recognized by Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government for innovation in government. The charter school authorizing program was singled out for its "rigor, transparency, and results" (Harvard University, 2006). By 2008, the Mayor's Office on Charter Schools had become an incubator for new civic capacity in the city, culminating in the creation of Mind Trust, a non-profit organization headed by the mayor's former charter school team. Notable education initiatives were soon attracted to the potential assets and documented

expertise represented at Mind Trust, which quickly established a Venture Fund to “recruit top education reform programs to Indianapolis” (The Mind Trust, 2011a). Today, Mind Trust partners include Teach for America, College Summit, and The New Teachers Project. The Venture Fund has invested more than \$5 million in these and other new initiatives pegged to the organization’s goals to “incubate and invest” (The Mind Trust, 2011b).

Our findings suggest that the mayor’s charter school program created the scaffolding for expanded civic capacity in Indianapolis. These elements include new trans-institutional partnerships (e.g., Gates Foundation, University of Indianapolis, Teach for America), new mobilization of community interests focused on public education, and an expanded expertise and human capital within the city government and non-profit organizations. These developments represent the *potential* for achieving some of the promises of charter school reform through a new and novel approach to charter school authorization – one that identifies the office of the mayor as the *specialist* in fostering and managing school choice.

Discussion

Competition & New Conceptualizations

Part of the promise of charter school proponents in Indiana and elsewhere rests with the premise that innovation diffusion, increased student achievement (from competitive pressures), and heightened accountability will flow across both charter systems and traditional public schools. To counter competitive pressures and in an effort to differentiate itself from the charter school program, the IPS has embraced a strategy that highlights IPS magnet schools as explicitly *different* – in design and curricular focus

– from the rest. Most notably evident in the district’s annual report, press releases, and public presentations, district leaders have repeatedly referred to magnet schools as the “jewels in the IPS crown,” including but not limited to a new Law & Public Policy magnet, and an expanded collaboration with the KIPP charter organization. The superintendent’s webpage notes that IPS offers “the broadest range of innovative option programs in Indiana.” Still, the district acknowledges the persistent challenges it faces – measured by declining enrollment, low graduation rates, and overall poor academic performance (IPS State of the District Annual Report, 2009).

As the number of charter schools expands (24 schools by 2012), the Indiana charter school law remains an important case study that illuminates the potential role mayors can play in charter school promotion and management. More specifically, this case extends the framework for charter school authorizing from support and monitoring to an incubation and trans-institutional model.

Reconceptualizing the Mayoral Role in Education Reform

As urban school districts struggle to meet federal standards specified in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, some mayors have responded to these external pressures by playing a more active role in local public education reform. As Crowson and Goldring (2009) note, this “new localism” reflects an emerging paradox that situates federal mandates on one axis and local decision-making on the other, creating a unique pivot point for political leaders. In some cities, mayors have taken complete control of local schools – a controversial and politically risky move that typically involves the mayoral appointment of a new school “czar” with complete governing and decision-making authority in the district. The Indianapolis case provides an alternative platform for

mayors – one that is arguably more tenable and manageable than assuming responsibility for an underperforming school system.

Mayor Peterson moved to a platform a half-step outside the traditional public school system. His Office of Charter Schools developed a formula for school reform that laid the structural and political groundwork for new schools. The mayor’s monitoring mechanisms emphasized transparency, rigor and capacity-building. The mayor authorized only a few schools each year – evaluated as among the very best – and built support systems and oversight capacity incrementally. Through this process, Peterson transformed the mayoral role in education from one of a relatively removed “policy generalist” (Wong & Sunderman, 2007) to an involved, informed and invested policy *specialist*. In this role of policy specialist, Peterson was equipped to drive educational innovation and expand civic capacity.

Reframing the Role of Authorizers

Charter school authorizers play a critical “intermediary” role, translating state policy into charter school realities (Bulkley, 1999, p. 695), yet research attention has largely centered on the schools themselves and their operators (Finn & Hill, 2006). Scholars have emphasized the importance of identifying core authorizing practices that promote student achievement (Finn & Hill, 2006; Gau, 2006) and performance accountability (Bulkley, 2001; Vergari, 2000). These authorization models specify itemized support and monitoring checklists, which underscore concrete, easily observable characteristics. This implies that establishing a successful school merely requires a list of ingredients (inputs) and an evaluation of the end product (outputs). The support items identify tasks such as using data, hiring skilled personnel and providing adequate

resources. The monitoring mechanisms center on reporting student performance, reviewing admissions and attendance information, and examining fiscal health (see Figure 1). The case of Indianapolis illustrates that the roles and responsibilities of charter authorizers may be more complex and layered than the existing literature suggests, extending beyond charter schools and spilling over to the broader policy environment. Rather than subscribing to a checklist authorization process, the Mayor's Office of Charter Schools implemented a capacity-building *system*. The promotional, developmental and instructional support structures reflect a greater degree of involvement in the details of policymaking and practice. Similarly, the monitoring mechanisms adopted in Indianapolis shifted into a higher gear, stressing analytical, diagnostic, directive and corrective actions (see Figure 2).

The case of the Indianapolis mayor indicates that authorizers can embrace a multifaceted role in which the traditional functions that authorizers fulfill are amplified and extended. In addition to the support and monitoring roles, the mayor created an engine for innovation that drove a policy shift in the city and strengthened civic capacity. The Mayor's Office of Charter Schools has acted as an incubator for educational transformation that has rippled across the broader policy context in Indianapolis. This trans-institutional innovation has attracted public attention and private support from well established, highly regarded funding agencies. The case of Indianapolis prompts policymakers to think more deeply about innovation and charter schools, where innovation extends beyond the classroom, hallway and school building and has the *potential* to affect civic capacity system- and city-wide.

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Figure Caption

Figure 1. Traditional role of charter school authorizers

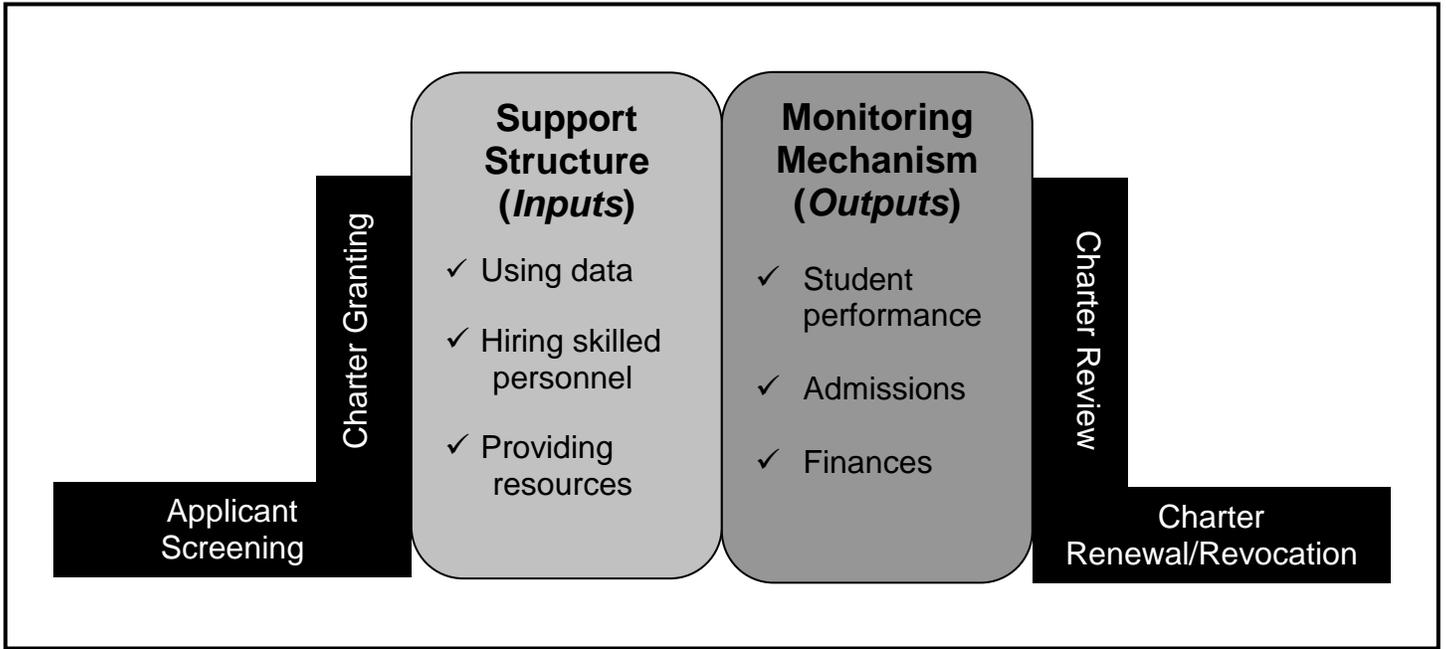


Figure Caption

Figure 2. Reframed role of charter school authorizers

