Are You Leaving? : A Case of Succession in the Willow Tree Charter School

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Abstract

This case study asks readers to contemplate what leadership practices may facilitate leadership succession at charter schools. The case narrative is followed by an activity designed for students in principal preparation programs. In this activity, students develop an exit strategy for the departing leader, a hiring plan for the charter school leadership, and an entry plan for the charter school’s successor, each of which outlines the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate change and maintain the charter school’s ongoing success.

Keywords: leadership succession, charter schools, leadership development
Strong and stable leadership is among the factors that indirectly improve achievement in schools (Sullivan, 1995). In charter schools, leaders possess a great deal of autonomy concerning the organization and operation of their schools, and thus stable leadership is particularly important to the success of these schools (Author, 2008; Bulkley, 2004; Wohlstetter & Chau, 2004). At the same time, charter school leaders are much more likely than the leaders of traditional schools to leave their schools (Campbell, 2010). Seventy percent of charter school leaders surveyed said they expected to leave their schools within five years and 10% expected to move on to new opportunities or retire in the next year (Campbell, 2010). Interviews in charter schools reflected these active turnover rates. During the two years researchers spent in the field, they encountered turnover among 20 percent of the leaders interviewed. Of 24 schools examined in this study, 5 changed leaders—and 1 of those schools had three leaders during that two-year period. Four other leaders were planning on imminent departures within the year or two following the study (Campbell, 2010). A study conducted in Utah shows that charter school principals have higher turnover rates than traditional public school principals and very different principal transition patterns. When charter principals left, they tended to move to nonprincipal positions or leave the Utah public school system altogether, instead of moving to another school as principals. In contrast, when traditional school principals left, they tended to continue to be principals in another school, mostly within the same school district (Ni, 2014). Given that nearly 6,200 charter schools served more than 2 million children in the 2012-13 school year, and an additional 400 charter schools opened each year, turnover among charter school leaders is a growing concern (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2013).
All schools face a variety of issues when recruiting and hiring a new leader; however, for several reasons, the challenges of leadership transition may be heightened in charter schools. Schools are vulnerable during leadership transitions because their leaders are a source of stability; a succession in leadership makes it more difficult to maintain ongoing successful programs and limits the charter school’s capacity to remain legitimate in the eyes of observers (Hannan & Freeman, 1984). Charter schools can face serious difficulties when the founding principal leaves, because the school has never undergone a transition in leadership and because the school’s identity and stability are often closely linked to the founder (Campbell, 2010). In addition, charter schools specifically seek a leader who firmly embraces the school mission (Campbell, 2010), and given the high turnover rate described above these schools may have difficulty consistently finding new leaders who fit the school mission and culture.

Stacey Smith was one of the original founders of the Willow Tree charter school, a small urban charter school that has been in existence for 11 years. Prior to founding the school, Smith taught elementary school in the West Palm Beach District. When Willow Tree’s original acting leader, who had served for approximately one year, stepped down for medical reasons, Smith volunteered to act as interim director of the charter school.

During her initial nine-month term, the board conducted a search but did not find a candidate whose required salary they could afford, so they asked Smith if she would consider serving as the school’s leader on a permanent basis. After obtaining a master’s degree in administrative leadership, she became the official leader and principal of the Willow Tree charter school. Her main concern at the inception of her appointment was academic achievement, specifically, how the school could increase and sustain its
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academic performance. Smith enjoyed a successful tenure as the leader of Willow Tree charter school and exhibited the core leadership skills that Leithwood and Riehl (2005) contended are necessary for success (i.e., setting directions, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional programs). While Smith characterized her leadership style as “collaborative,” she ultimately made the decisions concerning the school. After a 10-year tenure, she announced that she would be leaving Willow Tree to retire.

Complexity of School Principalship Roles

Several common characteristics of charter schools complicate the responsibilities of school principals. Although some charter school principals (typically those at schools in charter school networks) receive strong principalship support from a central office, the principals of typical start-up charter schools (which make up 89.4% of charter schools cannot rely on a central office for support (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2014). Stand-alone charter schools face many operational and financial challenges and have frequently closed because of financial and governance mismanagement issues (Center for Education Reform, 2011). In addition to managing traditional principalship duties, the principals of stand-alone charter schools are responsible for finding and maintaining school facilities, raising money, recruiting students, and negotiating relationships with boards and charter school authorizing agencies. Charter school principals also face context-specific concerns ranging from economic, health, and cultural problems (Bush & Oduro, 2006) to marketing-related expectations and accountability concerns (Briggs et al., 2006; Walker & Qian, 2006).
Willow Tree Charter School

Willow Tree charter school is a K-8 school with 375 students; the school is located in southern Florida in the city of West Palm Beach in Palm Beach County (population 1.6 million). The city of West Palm Beach has become more diverse and more densely populated over the past 10 years. The school’s demographic profile is representative of the county as a whole. The student population is 20% African American, 26% Latino, 6% Asian American, 45% White and 3% other race. Ten percent of teachers are African American, 15% are Latino, and the rest are White. At Willow Tree, 39% of the students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch and 10% of the students are not fluent in English; other languages spoken include Spanish and French.

Willow Tree students come from diverse backgrounds and are not all high achievers. Smith noted that “the kids aren’t coming to us as high-level kids; they’re coming just like every kid wanting to learn with the same family problems, with maybe disabilities, or struggling with reading or math.” The school’s population includes students whose parents are incarcerated or divorced, as well as students who are adopted or being raised by grandparents. The students are not from families with high levels of income and education; rather, most of the families are middle class or lower middle class. Despite the challenges that many of its students face, Willow Tree has received an “A” rating for the past seven years of its ten-year existence, and is a recipient of Florida’s Blue Ribbon award for outstanding schools.

All Florida public schools are graded annually based on student performance, state assessments, and the percentage of students making learning gains; each school (including charter schools) is assigned a letter grade corresponding with their rated
performance (‘A’ represents the highest performance and ‘F’ represents a failing school). In the most recent round of assessments, Willow Tree received an ‘A.’ However, the school has struggled to maintain its ‘A’ grade because it encompasses a large percentage of at-risk students and English Language Learners (ELL). Like most charter schools, it is challenged by a deficiency of resources yet manages to accommodate its students.

Smith explained that Willow Tree employs Project Child, a research-based teaching and learning framework for elementary classrooms that differs from the traditional model designed around a single teacher in a single grade. Three teachers form cluster teams—one for reading, one for writing and one for math. Cluster teams work across three grade levels organized as primary and intermediate clusters. A group of three teachers work with the same students for three years. Smith noted that Project Child allows teachers to be “very creative; they’re creating stations and they’re able to be teachers and not have someone micromanaging every single little thing they do. With the pressure of student achievement on them [at public schools] it’s hard for them to be creative teachers.” In the classroom, after students receive direct instruction from teachers, they work independently at three types of learning stations within their cluster. Teachers are encouraged to think outside the box—to analyze how a child is learning and foster different styles in the classroom.

Laying the Foundation for Succession

When Smith began to contemplate leaving Willow Tree, the school had no leadership succession plan in place, but Smith realized that the school might be able to engage with the public school district to find a candidate for her replacement. Ideally, the
candidate would start as an assistant principal (AP) and then transition into Smith’s position as principal, since, as Smith explained, “We were growing to a point where we needed to bring an AP here.” Smith recognized that many of the potential candidates, even those from outside the district, would have a “district” mindset, which would make it difficult for them to transition into a charter school such as Willow Tree. Nonetheless, Smith approached the superintendent and requested a roster of potential candidates. She explicitly mentioned that she wanted someone with strong instructional leadership capacity, proficient professional development skills and an operational focus that would include building maintenance, facilities and overall management. After reviewing several qualified candidates, she hired a potential replacement; the candidate, however, was not assigned the title of director because Smith was waiting to assess whether she embraced the school culture. It was critical to both Smith and the teachers that the new candidate shared their vision for the charter school and embraced the school’s culture. The initial candidate remained for two years, but was not hired as a permanent director because, in Smith’s assessment, she tried to use her administrative position to “throw her weight around and then force what she wanted on others.” The candidate had plans to move the school to another building, eliminate some of the creative tasks teachers had designed for their students and mainstream the curriculum. At the time, Smith felt that she had exhausted the hiring possibilities within the district and thus she shifted to a different approach.

Changing the Focus to Growing a Leader from Within

After a failed attempt to hire someone from the district, Smith turned to grooming teachers from within the school as a way to ensure the development of future leaders. She
realized that this is typically a long-term plan, but felt that with only a few months left to find a replacement it was a necessity. Her primary challenge in this endeavor was that most of the teachers at Willow Tree enjoyed being in the classroom and did not want to forfeit classroom time to complete administrative duties. Nonetheless, Smith found a teacher who was interested in engaging in leadership, and Smith assisted her in identifying and contributing to a community of leaders. Hence, the Willow Tree charter school decided to groom a current teacher for a future leadership position. As Smith explained:

Well, right now I’m taking one of my teachers (Sarah) who has been here for 9 years and she actually wants to go into the leadership track and she’s doing that right now. Last year, she started on issues [administrative tasks], so she’s a teacher on assignment. She is getting leadership-like administrative-type duties to do and training her into those positions so every year she’s learning a little bit more.

At Willow Tree during this period, the work of developing leaders was accomplished largely internally and through informal mechanisms, which signals a departure from more traditional forms of leadership development. Smith appointed Sarah as the chair of the School Advisory Council (SAC), assigned her to the role of administrative intern, and supported her training as an administrator through professional development as a curriculum developer and a lead teacher. Sarah was, in effect, a protégé of Smith.

Willow Tree utilized a shared decision-making model, so all teachers were involved in important decisions, whether or not they were training for a leadership position. Smith made the following remark about creating an inclusive decision-making environment:

I take into consideration all the information I’ve gotten from everybody. And I try to give the teachers a share in that decision-making because I want them to feel like this is their school, they’re stakeholders here.
Smith did not exercise unilateral decision-making at Willow Tree. She deliberately included the teachers in a shared decision-making model. The teachers shared an appreciation for this model and found Smith to be inclusive. They reported feeling as though “she really listened to our concerns and assisted us in any way possible.”

This decision-making environment was coupled with Smith’s contextual understanding of the organizational climate. This shared leadership approach reflects community-based strategies, which emphasize the importance of both the teaching context and the organizational development of schools. Smith emphasized that Sarah, the teacher leader, “knows what built this school and made it a success; she’s seen how I’ve operated it for it to be successful; she knows the history and background because she’s been here for a long time.” Thus, having institutional knowledge of the charter school informed the prospective leader’s socialization process and facilitated the replication of Smith’s leadership style.

Teaching Notes and Activities

In this case, Stacey Smith, the founding principal of a small urban charter school in southern Florida (Willow Tree charter school), planned to retire. Her imminent departure at the end of the school year raised questions about how the school initiatives implemented at Willow Tree would be sustained, and what succession process should be utilized at the school. The need for school leaders to strategically plan and manage the succession of leaders is not limited to Willow Tree; research has shown that this need is
widespread throughout schools (Hargreaves, 2008; Fink and Brayman, 2004, 2006; Hargreaves et al., 2003; Hart, 1993).

Two central issues in leadership succession are whether or not a transition in leadership establishes continuity or discontinuity, and the extent to which the succession is planned (Hargreaves, 2005). A comprehensive study (Hargreaves et al., 2003) found that leadership succession is one of the most significant variables affecting school climate and sustainability efforts. The authors’ results showed that successful succession depends on careful planning, employment of leadership knowledge, limiting the number of succession events, and maintaining leadership (Hargreaves et al., 2003; Hargreaves, 2005).

The education literature identifies distinct types of leadership succession. The first, planned continuity, occurs when the assignment of a new leader coincides with a well-intentioned succession plan designed to sustain the legacy of a predecessor (Hargreaves, 2005). This type of succession plan is typically found in the most innovative schools and in cases of transitions that are the result of a new principal being assigned to a failing school or some top-down reform agenda. The second type of succession plan is planned discontinuity, in which succession events are designed to help complacent or drifting schools meet students’ needs more effectively (Hargreaves, 2005). Planned discontinuity is effective in creating significant changes at a school, but not necessarily in making these changes permanent. This succession strategy often yields rapid results, but at the expense of school leaders not having enough time to consolidate the new culture and address the disruption that succession inevitably creates. Most cases of succession are of the third type—a hybrid of unplanned discontinuity and continuity; in these cases,
there is a clear break from the achievements of a previous leader, but a continuous maintenance of the status quo (Hargreaves, 2005). This type of succession is sometimes characterized by the transfer of a leader from a more successful school to a school facing challenges (Hargreaves, 2005).

As Sarason (1972) noted decades ago, the first and biggest challenge for an innovative school is the departure of the founding principal. New schools often reflect the founding leader’s advocacy and vision, and these leaders sometimes underestimate the capacity and will necessary to sustain school improvements upon their departure. Moreover, different leadership approaches or styles may be needed as an innovative charter school matures or faces new constraints.

Giles and Hargreaves (2006) conducted a longitudinal study of innovative schools and found that when schools failed to pay attention to succession planning, the charisma and presence of the founding leader was difficult to replace. A new leader must understand and manage changes to sustain school successes while ascertaining how to move the school forward. Hargreaves (2005) found that leaders use three types of knowledge during the succession process. **Inbound knowledge** is leadership knowledge needed to make one’s mark on a particular school or turn it around. **Insider knowledge**, which is used to improve schools, is gained after becoming known, trusted, and accepted within the community. **Outbound knowledge** is the expertise needed to preserve past successes, maintain improvement, and leave a legacy (Hargreaves, 2005, p. 169)

Activity 1: Group Discussion
This group discussion activity can be used in principal preparation courses to facilitate students’ exploration of the leadership succession issues involved in the case of Willow Tree charter school. The questions are designed to help students understand the outbound, inbound, and insider knowledge that will facilitate succession and sustain school improvement at Willow Tree charter school.

First, the class is divided into three groups, and each group takes one of the three leadership perspectives (outbound knowledge, inbound knowledge, and insider knowledge) regarding Willow Tree charter school. Because this case study is intended to shed light on the issues that arise when no leadership succession plan is in place, students should feel free to offer thoughts about what actions should be taken before, during, and after the founding leader leaves. In addition, students should identify whether the transition in the case study was characterized by planned continuity, planned discontinuity, or unplanned discontinuity and continuity, and list the potential outcomes of the transition. Once discussion begins, each subgroup should feel free to examine and integrate their responses to the questions into the larger group discussion. Discussions should focus on the outbound, inbound and insider knowledge.

Discussion Questions

Group 1: Smith’s exit plan (outbound knowledge). Assume you are Stacey Smith and describe your exit strategy for leaving Willow Tree charter school. Use the following questions to guide your thinking, and be sure to include outbound knowledge that will help preserve your legacy.
1. What types of actions would you implement with staff, students, and parents to ensure that Willow Tree’s success is sustained? How would you ensure planned continuity?

2. What information do you believe is important for the new leader to know about Willow Tree?

3. If changes were to be made at the school, what advice would you give the new leader concerning decision-making and the implementation of changes? How would you ensure that planned discontinuity would result in changes that are maintained?

Group 2: Charter school board’s plan (inbound knowledge). As the charter school board responsible for staffing Willow Tree, describe your plan for leadership transition using the following questions to guide your thinking about the inbound knowledge that the new leader will need to be effective:

1. What issues did Smith overlook when she turned to the district to recruit a new leader?

2. What information do you think the new leader would need about Willow Tree charter school? How would a potential leader cope with unplanned discontinuity and continuity in this case?
3. What changes, if any, should the new leader make at Willow Tree and how would he or she decide what to change? How could the new leader deal with planned discontinuity in a way that would ensure that changes are adopted?

Group 3: New leader’s entry plan (insider knowledge). Assume you are the new leader of Willow Tree charter school and use the following questions to develop an entry plan that will ensure that you gain the insider knowledge that will allow you to be an effective leader:

1. What type of information about the school and staff would you want to have before assuming the new leadership position? How would you deal with unplanned discontinuity and continuity?

2. Which of the innovations described in this case study would you choose to maintain in the school? Would this be an example of planned continuity or unplanned discontinuity and continuity? Why?

3. How might your entry plan be different if Willow Tree was not a successful charter school?
References


September 23, 2011.


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