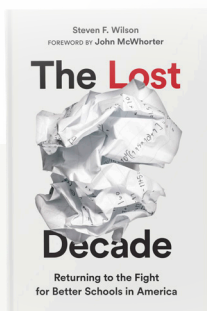


Charter School Toolkit:

A Practical Plan for Returning to Academic Excellence

By Steven F. Wilson



“The Lost Decade”
is now available on [Amazon](#).

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Executive Summary

The charter sector ought to be riding high.

After three decades of the experimentation charter laws were meant to foster, particular charter schooling models emerged that are driving near universal academic proficiency with historically marginalized students. In the nation's largest district, New York City, 93 percent of students in the 59 schools of Success Academy and the 4 schools of Classical Charter Schools were found proficient in 2025 by the state in English Language Arts and 96 percent in math.¹ In these schools, nearly every child was on path to college and career. (In the city's schools, scarcely more than half were.²) Urban charters schools offer a path out of poverty in a single generation. And yet they cost less to operate than their host districts.³ Better still, these achievement-gap closing models can scale without limit.⁴

Parent support for the schools is remarkably robust: In a 2025 Morning Consult poll, 64 percent of parents supported charters—nearly four times as many as opposed them (17 percent, of which only 7 percent opposed strongly).⁵ Among those with the fewest options, Black and Latino parents, support is stronger still. Democrats for Education Reform found that 80 percent of Black parents and 71 percent of Latino parents view charters favorably.⁶

Urban charter schools are the most successful educational innovation in a century.⁷ And yet academically serious charter schools today find themselves with surprisingly few friends.

In our hyper-polarized political environment, politicians are pressed to adopt ever more extreme positions, and moderate leaders find themselves without a

constituency. Many Republican politicians have shifted their focus away from public charter schools to private choice programs, including vouchers and educational savings accounts. Meanwhile, while charters schools once enjoyed the outspoken support of many Democratic politicians (including presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama), support from Democratic leaders turned increasingly tepid and conditional after 2015. As elected officials' support for charters waned, it became increasingly challenging to pass state legislation to improve and expand the charter sector, including bills to lift arbitrary caps on the number of charter schools (including in New York City, where growth is stalled by such a ban on new school openings, despite their popularity with parents) or to repair defective enabling legislation that hinders the quality of schools or denies them school buildings and capital funding. Meanwhile, in just the first five months of 2025, five states established or expanded private school choice programs, including Texas's universal ESA program, funded at \$1 billion.⁸

The polarized political environment had other adverse consequences for charters schools. They have long depended on recent college graduates as teachers, but over the last ten years college students have turned increasingly skeptical of them. A 2025 poll found that, while 69 percent of school parents supported charters, only 56 percent of members of Gen Z did.⁹ Recent graduates of liberal institutions, including Ivy League schools and top liberal arts colleges, are still less likely to be supportive. Not only is this making it harder to staff charters, it may also be contributing to a notable slowdown in the number of new charter school openings.¹⁰



Courtesy of Success Academy

But perhaps the greatest headwinds have come within existing schools, as demands from staff for “Antiracism” and “equity” swept through the sector, particularly in the Northeast, portions of the Midwest, and the West Coast. Paradoxically, these demands often resulted in schools and state education agencies *lowering* academic rigor—reducing passing scores on state tests, shortening the school day, reducing homework, curtailing testing, dismantling school report cards that revealed to the public low-performing schools, and reducing curriculum rigor (including delaying the teaching of algebra from middle school to high school).¹¹

High-performing urban charter schools were particularly hard hit. In the 2010s, just as the charter sector was posting striking academic results, many schools and networks turned away from their North Star of student achievement.¹² In the thrall of the new ideology of Antiracism, they renounced their disciplinary practices without instituting an effective alternative, replaced rigorous curricula with less effective alternatives that promoted “social justice” messages, and ditched longstanding internal accountability systems that ensured quality at scale. School cultures turned parlous, as staff members called out their colleagues as “white supremacists” (for instance, for supporting an extended school day or a celebrated writing program that happened to be written by white authors).¹³ Longstanding peers stayed silent lest they too be targeted, and many accomplished staff quit. Academic outcomes collapsed, and some formerly high-flying urban charter networks that were closing and even reversing longstanding achievement gaps of race and class now performed no better—or worse—than their school districts.¹⁴

These ideological currents on the left and right were mutually reinforcing. As charter schools gave priority to social justice education over traditional academics, some education reform advocates who helped build the sector were repelled and now emphasized vouchers for private schools and educational savings accounts, even if they continued to give lip service to charters.¹⁵

Both choice programs—charters and vouchers—have a track record spanning decades and have been exhaustively studied. Urban charter networks, as Stanford’s Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) found in its definitive study of millions of students, raise student test scores and promote opportunity; voucher programs have equivocal—and, not infrequently, adverse—effects on student tests scores.¹⁶ While research on private choice programs should continue, the imperative today is to sustain and expand what we know works: rebuild the charter sector, restore its

commitment to academic excellence, and continue to expand the sector’s reach by opening new high-performing public charter schools that offer a reliable path out of poverty and dependency. This toolkit sets out specific actions for policymakers, regulators, school leaders, funders, and advocates.

Background

Since the Great Society initiatives of the 1960s, policymakers have despaired at the low performance of America’s urban schools. Time and again, efforts to reform big-city systems from within ended in failure. At best, they yielded incremental improvements, and even these were not durable.¹⁷ The “operating system” of large urban school districts—their three-hundred-page collective bargaining agreements, tenure policies, thickets of regulation, and ever-changing central office policy mandates—was wholly incompatible with high-performing schools. Big school districts functioned as employment systems not education systems. (Yes, there were a handful of schools in every large district that performed well, but these were led by principals expert in *breaking* the district’s rules; district administrators looked the other way because these principals amassed political power with powerful community leaders.¹⁸)

Another obstacle to success at scale, then and now, is the weak technical core of K–12 education. Only recently, with the science of reading movement, is the first charge of schools—to ensure that children can read—increasingly rooted in scientific research on what works.¹⁹ For five decades, since Project Follow Through, the largest study of educational practice, conducted during the Great Society era, we have known that explicit phonics instruction is by far the most effective way to advance not only basic skills but also critical thinking and children’s self-esteem.²⁰ Yet the findings were ignored, and schools of education instead continued to emphasize child development theory, not effective practices. Still worse, knowledge and academic rigor were shunned in many schools of education, and their curricula and values encouraged teachers to push for social justice and engage their students as therapists, not educators.²¹ Unlike healthcare, which benefits from a strong technical core rooted in medical science and the rigor of medical school, education’s weak technical core made it extraordinarily vulnerable to fads and quick fixes.²²

In the 1990s, school reformers changed tack. Charter school legislation, beginning with Minnesota in 1991, invited enterprising educators to build new, high-performing public schools, open to all students and accountable for their results.

At first, the new schools, often pursuing fanciful ideas about children and learning, were scarcely better than their districts. But a decade into the movement a particular schooling model—“No Excuses” education—emerged that generated striking results for historically marginalized students. Networks of schools like KIPP, the Knowledge is Power Program, combined a safe and orderly environment, effective instruction, and high expectations to forge a reliable path to college for all students. No longer would school staff make excuses for why their students weren’t succeeding; together, they pledged to do whatever it took to ensure every child was prepared for college and career.²³

By the late 2010s, there were more than a thousand schools nationally that had closed racial achievement gaps, many of them run by “charter management organizations” (CMOs). Nearly all were organized as nonprofit organizations. Studying achievement data from 2015 to 2019, Stanford’s CREDO found that some two hundred networks, mostly following the No Excuses model, were closing or even reversing longstanding achievement gaps in reading, math, or both: Their Black and Latino students were outpacing their white counterparts in their state.²⁴ No Excuses education offered a scalable solution to education inequality. “These schools deliver hundreds of independent proof points that learning gaps between student groups are not structural or inevitable; better results are possible,” CREDO wrote. The researchers concluded, “These ‘gap-busting schools’ show that disparate student outcomes are not a foregone conclusion: People and resources can be organized to eliminate these disparities. The fact that thousands of schools have done so removes any doubt.”²⁵



Courtesy of Classical Charter Schools

The Wrong Turn

When she was an undergraduate at Princeton, Wendy Kopp founded Teach for America (TFA) to recruit students from top universities to teach in high-poverty schools, and many CMOs, including KIPP, were later launched by TFA alumni. Seniors flocked to join the highly competitive program. In 2011, just 11 percent of nearly 48,000 applicants were accepted; TFA was the most popular choice of graduating seniors at Yale.²⁶ Part of the program’s allure was its stirring call to corps members to advance racial justice and do “whatever it took” to ensure the students in their classrooms succeeded. But TFA’s allure faded with a changing ideology on campus. The program was denounced on campus as promoting “white saviorism,” neoliberalism, and a neocolonial reform agenda.²⁷

By 2014 or 2015, CMOs found that new college graduates joining their ranks arrived with entirely different expectations from freshly minted teachers just years earlier. The highly disciplined environment of the schools that enabled purposeful classrooms, welcomed by parents as a haven from the chaos and incipient violence of many urban schools, was now regarded by many teachers as racist and a “symptom” of a “white supremacist” culture. The schools’ efforts to promote civility, good manners, and aspirations for college were newly decried as instilling “whiteness.”

Rather than defend their commitments to a liberal arts education, many CMO executives engaged diversity, equity, and inclusion consulting firms to navigate these currents. From writers like Ibram Kendi and Robin DiAngelo, staff members learned that their white peers were inherently racist (for they were acculturated in a racist society), that their “white supremacist” behaviors were scarcely distinct from those of the Ku Klux Klan, and that prominent historic figures long acclaimed for their activism—abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass, civil rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois, Presidents Lincoln and Obama—harbored racist beliefs that sustained racial injustice.²⁸ In 2020, KIPP dropped its longstanding slogan, “Work Hard. Be Nice” as, KIPP explained, “working hard and being nice is [sic] not going to dismantle systemic racism.” The slogan, KIPP said, “passively supports ongoing efforts to pacify and control Black and Brown bodies in order to better condition them to be compliant and further reproduce current social norms that center whiteness and meritocracy as normal.”²⁹

The consultants knew nothing of education and could not anticipate how their prescriptions would undermine the networks’ successful practices in three essential domains: school culture, curriculum, and internal accountability. CMOs had established calm and order by “sweating the small stuff” (like talking in class); when

this was decreed racist, no practicable alternatives substituted. Classroom cultures collapsed and discipline problems skyrocketed.³⁰ The consultants’ solution was therapeutic: Before students could learn, they held, schools needed to engage the “trauma” teachers and students carried from living in a racist society. Charter networks, with few exceptions, had from their inception offered a diverse curriculum foregrounding Black and Latino writers and protagonists. These curricula, honed over many years, reliably accelerated learning and led to exceptional results in student achievement. When hastily written “Antiracist” curricula were substituted (where even daily math lessons featured a problem in racial justice), learning slowed and student outcomes fell, often dramatically.³¹ Some networks’ results have still not recovered today, five years later: their outcomes are scarcely better than their school districts’.

The professional cultures of CMOs also changed dramatically. Their North Star had been instructional excellence and student outcomes, including not just test scores but college admissions and persistence. Now their North Star was Antiracism, to which staff members sought to publicly demonstrate their commitment. Cultures turned toxic, as staff members turned on one another; many veteran staff exited. Results collapsed. Many networks that for years had towered over their districts now performed no better—or worse.³²

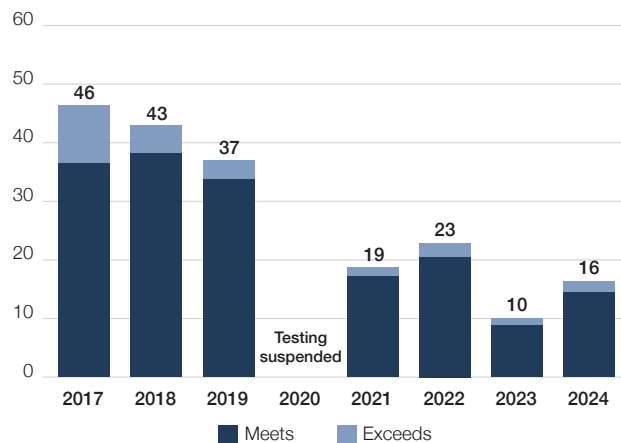
2018 Top Chicago High Schools

Rank	School	Enrollment
1	Noble Muchin College Prep	Open to all
2	Noble Street College Prep	Open to all
3	Noble Pritzker College Prep	Open to all
4	Noble UIC College Prep	Open to all
5	Jones College Preparatory High School	Selective admissions
6	Noble Mansueto High School	Open to all
7	Noble Rauner College Prep	Open to all
8	Noble Chicago Bulls College Prep	Open to all
9	Noble ITW David Speer Academy	Open to all
10	Walter Payton College Preparatory High School	Selective admissions
11	Northside College Preparatory High School	Selective admissions
12	Noble Golder College Prep	Open to all
13	Infinity Math, Science & Technology High School	Selective admissions
14	Devry University Advantage Academy	Selective admissions
15	Noble Academy High School	Open to all

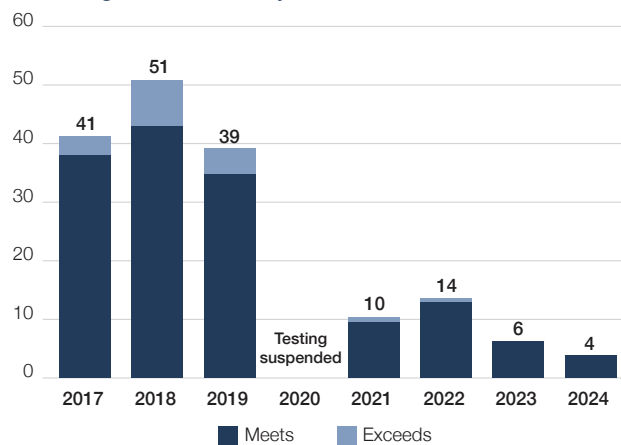
In 2018, Noble’s high schools held 10 of the top 15 slots in Chicago’s school ratings system (Chicago Public Schools School Quality Rating Policy). The remaining five were all selective-admission schools.³³

But networks that declined to be diverted by social justice programming continued their climb; in 2025 in New York City, Success Academy and Classical Charter Schools were routinely reversing achievement gaps of race and class and posting near universal proficiency on state exams.³⁴

Noble Academy: English Language Arts Percentage of Students by SAT Performance Level



Noble Academy: Mathematics Percentage of Students by SAT Performance Level



Citing “equity,” Chicago Public School “rescinded” its school quality rating system in 2022, obscuring school performance in the city. However, SAT scores show student outcomes tumbling at Noble Academy, as at other Noble campuses, from 2019 to 2024. (In 2025 the state switched to the ACT.)

Back on Track

We need to return to what worked—and do still better. This will require concerted actions by *charter school operators*, *charter authorizers*, and the *funding community*.

Charter school operators. The primary responsibility for rebuilding the sector falls on the leaders and boards of charter schools and CMOs. New schools and emerging networks should unequivocally embrace academic excellence, student achievement, and intellectual curiosity, which should be modeled by every leader and staff

member. Networks that pivoted to social justice education and saw their results fall should announce a return to these values as their North Star. The principal drivers of such excellence are unrelenting high expectations of what students can know and do, a rigorous and engaging curriculum, effective instruction, a strong student culture, and a distinctive professional culture where staff commit to doing whatever it takes to ensure their students succeed.

- **Unrelenting high expectations.** The foremost problem in American schools is the underestimation of what students are capable of academically and the tendency to regularly place before them learning tasks that are not worthy of them. Yet teachers who respect children believe in them and push them. When children are offered poorly constructed tasks with below-grade-level content, educational opportunity is denied. In its seminal 2018 study of large urban school systems, the education research and consulting organization TNTP found that most lessons were far below grade level. Students, TNTP wrote, “spent more than 500 hours per school year on assignments that weren’t appropriate for their grade and with instruction that didn’t ask enough of them—the equivalent of six months of wasted class time in each core subject.”³⁵ The first step in building effective schools is to insist that children are capable of radically more, and then to ensure that every lesson is at grade level or above.
- **Rigorous and engaging curriculum.** Every teacher must be equipped with a highly engaging curriculum that has been refined over years, where students tackle texts and ideas that are at or above grade level, that has generated striking gains in student outcomes, and that stimulates curiosity and a passion to learn more. The curriculum should offer both “mirrors” to students (by foregrounding and celebrating authors and thinkers of color and elevating their voices and perspectives) and “windows” (by exploring other countries, cultures, and ideas).
- **Effective instruction.** In most American classrooms, the bell rings at the end of the class period and only a few students have mastered the content of the lesson. The most effective urban charter schools are obsessive about creating the conditions for effective teaching. That includes ensuring that the learning objective of each period’s lesson is crystal clear, that teachers arrive deeply prepared in both the content and the lesson, that every minute of the period is used purposefully, and that each lesson ends with an exit ticket or other quick measure of how many students mastered the learning objective. There are clear systems of support and accountability to ensure that no student languishes in an ineffective

classroom; when a classroom is failing, school leaders act urgently to fix the room—when there is still enough time for students to meet that year’s learning goals.

- **A strong student culture.** Many urban parents knew their neighborhood district schools were not only low-performing but dangerous and disorderly. No Excuses schools offered refuge and a setting where their children could learn. Urban charters need to return to respecting their students by ensuring that classrooms are free from the incessant low-level disruptions that derail teaching and learning. To be stuck in such a classroom is misery for children.

No Excuses schools had it right: They knew children thrive in structure and that they had to “sweat the small stuff” so they didn’t end up with a chaotic or unsafe school. Manners and civility, they understood, are not expressions of submission. They do not oppress students; they empower them. So equipped, students gain confidence, empathy, and personal influence. As the statesman Edmund Burke wrote, “Manners are what vex or soothe, corrupt or purify, exalt or debase, barbarize or refine us, by a constant, steady, uniform, insensible operation, like that of the air we breathe in.”³⁶ Urban charter networks successfully tapped established cultural models like [Responsive Classroom](#) that equip their teachers with effective practices for reliably creating orderly, joyful classrooms where students feel secure, known, and heard. The solutions for building such classrooms are readily available to all schools.

- **Distinctive professional culture.** Where professional cultures have turned toxic, school leaders need to act decisively to restore the values and practices that drove excellence—and attract top teaching talent to join their ranks. The cornerstone commitment must be that every member of the team will do *whatever it takes* for the school’s student to succeed at the highest levels and eschew excuses for low achievement, including racism and poverty. Within the four walls of the school, they have what it takes to succeed. Teachers will be recruited not for their ideology, but for their passion for the subjects they teach and their drive to constantly improve their craft. Everyone, the culture will hold, is looking to get better. That means a lavish investment in professional development, including a culture of frequent observation and feedback, live coaching (where a dean of instruction coaches a teacher as he or she teaches), mentor teacher programs, and an intensive summer program of differentiated professional development institutes for new teachers, returning teachers, and school leaders, where staff members practice in front of their peers, get feedback, and rapidly gain skills.

Over the last two decades, the urban charter school sector has invented effective practices in each of these five areas. Effective operators are eager to share these practices, at no cost, and they can be replicated by any new school determined to achieve excellence.

Best Practices

Three decades into the charter school experiment, the practices of the highest performing charter school sectors are clear.

- **Enabling statutes and regulation.** The highest performing charter sectors, including New York State's, uphold the charter bargain that drives success: authority and autonomy for the charter operator in exchange for accountability for student results. Where that bargain was never fully afforded or later eroded, weak schools predictably resulted.³⁷ *Authority* includes control of human capital—the right to hire and fire staff, subject only to the same constraints as the private sector (including the obligation to afford teachers progressive discipline), unshackled by tenure and teacher licensure—and resources—the school is afforded the full per-pupil spending of the host district, not a reduced amount. *Autonomy* entails the freedom to implement policies and practices that the school's leadership believes will drive academic excellence, without inheriting the failed policies of its district. Most notably, this requires that schools not inherit their union contracts (while ensuring that the charter's teachers are free to form their own bargaining unit). *Accountability* requires that charters submit to rigorous public oversight for student outcomes, including participation in annual state assessments and reporting on progress toward the commitments made in their charter agreements.
- **High-capacity authorizers.** State law varies greatly in who may award charters. At this point, it is clear what works: two or more large, technically proficient authorizers.

Effective authorizers operate independently of their competition (school districts), have as their sole purpose to launch and oversee a portfolio of new, high-performing schools, and have adequate scale to meet their responsibilities (evaluating applications on their academic and technical merits, not their adherence to faddish ideas; conducting in-depth annual school visits; maintaining a sophisticated database of school results; and shutting down low-performing schools after a probationary process, even when they remain popular with parents), and are funded through state appropriation, not from fees charged to their portfolio schools. School districts meet none of these tests as authorizers, and worse,

have often financially profited from authorizing schools far from their communities and of questionable merit. A single competent authorizer in each state is insufficient; just as venture capitalists place varied bets and entrepreneurs may be backed by one and declined by another, school founders must have at least two venues to which to bring their proposals.

- **Boards of trustees.** Boards have the ultimate authority for charters schools; they are the stewards of the school's mission and ways. When they fail in this role—as they often have—years of effort and success can be erased. Thirty years of charters show that the highest-functioning boards are composed of trustees chosen not for their influence (political reach) or fundraising capacity but for their rock-solid commitment to the founders' mission of academic excellence and the school's distinctive ways.

K–12's weak technical core is a challenge in board selection and preparation. In the absence of robust education science, charter school board members have proved impressionable. When pressures mount, they have been quick to depart from the iconoclastic practices of the schools' founders and swing back to perennial education school shibboleths (“child-centered learning”), the latest misguided trends (“tablets for every child,” “trauma-informed pedagogy”), or ideological demands (“Antiracist education”). Notably, during the peak of Antiracist fervor, many boards lost their way. Trustees proved feckless in the face of ideological pressures and betrayed their mission of academic preparation. Boards that fared the best were composed of courageous individuals who stayed true to their founders' *academic* mission.
- **Operators.** The most effective charter schools and networks follow a remarkably similar set of practices in seven domains of their design: *talent recruitment, curriculum and pedagogy, student culture, college advising, growth, internal accountability, and professional development*. Together, these practices drove *accelerated learning* that put students securely on the path to career and college.

Talent recruitment. Effective schools and networks build a talent function that unabashedly seeks out top teaching talent. Instead of subjecting candidates to ideological tests, they search for aspiring teachers who are passionate about their subject matter and have the drive and humility to develop their teaching craft. These schools build strong talent pipelines that create opportunities for advancement in both teaching (as grade team leaders and mentor teachers) and leadership tracks (as deans of instruction and principals), and they

operate their own rigorous, competitive-entry leadership development programs for cultivating and assessing aspiring school principals. New schools in the network are launched by graduates of the program and staffed by veteran teachers from the network's existing schools.

Curriculum and pedagogy. Most commercial curricula do not embody high expectations of students and fall far short in rigor. Effective charter schools turn to the rare exceptions (McGraw Hill Direct Instruction, Core Knowledge, International Baccalaureate), borrow curricula from other networks (Achievement First, Great Hearts Academy), or build and hone over years their own rigorous curricula, complete with embedded assessments and daily lesson plans. Each lesson embodies a specific, explicit pedagogical model, whether it be “teach, practice, check,” cognitively guided instruction, or independent learning, and in highly effective schools, teachers are extensively *trained* on the specific components of each such pedagogy, not on child development theory or trending topics ancillary to instruction. For example, in preparing to teach a math lesson deploying “teach, practice, check” (also known as “I do, we do, you do”), teachers learn what exactly makes for an effective “teach” portion of the lesson and how, in the “practice” portion of the lesson, the skill is then generalized to similar math problems. In another math pedagogy, “cognitively guided instruction,” students all solve the same word problem independently, and then, in the “discourse” portion of the lesson, three students share, in their own words, how each solved the problem. Their methods vary, but each reaches the same numerical answer. The choice of the three students is critical; their strategies must vary in sophistication and efficiency, so their peers can learn

from them and reach for a more efficient strategy the next time they confront a similar problem. Teachers are taught to circulate through the class and strategically pick the students whose work will be showcased.

Student culture. Effective schools begin with strong routines and procedures, and they may devote weeks at the start of the year for students to practice them before instruction fully ramps up. The investment may seem excessive, but it pays off many times over through the remainder of the school year when every minute is used well. Students enter a classroom and get right to work, and they feel safe, known, and invested in learning and supporting one another. Procedures include those for arrival and dismissal (teachers greet students warmly as they enter the building and move quickly to class), transitions between classes, and dismissal—even the best way to pass out and collect papers is taught and practiced. To avoid larger disciplinary problems, schools “sweat the small stuff”—the low-level disruptions in class (e.g., students talking to one another during teaching) that plague most classrooms and derail learning for the majority. Teachers are equipped with proven practices like Responsive Classroom that both create community and belonging and equip them with specific skills for effective, non-punitive classroom management. Among them are the “three Rs” of teacher language: reminding language (reminding all students of what they should be doing), reinforcing language (commending students with specific praise who are doing the right thing), and redirecting language (presenting students who are off task with an alternative action). The school celebrates student curiosity and academic achievement, and academic excellence is as venerated as athletic prowess is in other schools.



Courtesy of Great Hearts Academies

College advising. College is emphasized as a destination from kindergarten, and students learn about and visit area colleges. In high school, an ambitious program of college advising not only helps students apply to schools but continues to support them after graduation to ensure they persist through college and build the professional networks (though summer internships and the like) that will secure them their first jobs—and launch their careers. Schools closely track college persistence outcomes.

Growth. Effective charters open with at most two grades and expand year-by-year. Only by opening with a very small number of students were schools able to build and sustain a strong and distinctive school culture. Effective networks operate in a single jurisdiction where all their school principals can meet face-to-face with ease. They decline invitations to open schools in other states with foreign regulatory regimens and academic standards, and where distance undermines effective oversight.

Accountability. Schools borrow from other networks or build their own internal accountability systems, including teacher performance review instruments and school report cards, both of which gauge teacher, parent, and student satisfaction. Schools move with alacrity when a classroom is failing to get off the ground in the fall, surging resources into the classroom, and ultimately, replacing the classroom's lead teacher, if necessary to ensure that students remain on track toward the grade's year-end goals. Learning is protected at all costs.

Professional development. Effective schools know that, to succeed, they must operate, in effect, *two* businesses: schools, during the school year, and a professional development institute for teachers during the summer months. Effective schools devote three to eight weeks each summer to running programs both for their school leaders (“Leadership Institute”) and new and returning teachers (“Teacher Institute.”) Becoming an effective teacher requires immersion and guided practice in a wide range of practices, so teachers learn both select *general* teaching techniques (drawn from the likes of Doug Lemov’s codified practices of exceptional teachers in *Teach Like a Champion*) and practices *specific* to the school’s curriculum, pedagogies, and cultural systems (for example, the “three Rs”).³⁸ As important, throughout the school year, teachers meet weekly for ongoing PD (typically on Friday afternoons) and, most importantly, in grade-team meetings with their peers for one of three rotating activities: deep group study of the content of the material they are about to teach, student work analysis (examining what their students are actually producing and what it tells them about their teaching and

common misconceptions of their students), and data analysis (what assessments reveal about their students’ progress and learning gaps).

Charter authorizers. Effective charter authorizers adopt the practices and systems of authorizers with the strongest record of success, including the Charter School Institute of SUNY.

Although it is important to charter some number of novel models (while not being seduced by applicants’ dubious claims of “innovation”), the greater imperative is to expand the number of schools that have a record of raising student achievement and present a low risk of failure. To this end, effective authorizers welcome applications from high-performing charter networks.

Effective authorizers have the courage and fortitude to close, after a probationary period, academically low-performing schools.

Authorizers that lack the resources and expertise—financial, leadership, technical—to evaluate charter applications, conduct regular site visits, monitor schools’ attainment of their goals, audit schools’ financial health and regulatory compliance, and close poor schools should cease operations.

The most effective authorizers today privately acknowledge the wrong turn in the charter sector. The next step is to announce an urgent pivot back to academic excellence.

Funding community. New and renewal grants are made only to schools and networks that have as their purpose outstanding student achievement on objective indicators (not a therapeutic or ideological purpose) and that have a viable plan, based in education science, of promptly realizing this purpose.

Recommendations

1. Restore the focus on accelerated learning and academic excellence in urban charters.

The largest philanthropic supporters of charter schools, including major foundations and the Charter School Growth Fund, together with the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools and the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, should convene a national urban charter school summit to undertake an urgent reckoning in the sector. Participants will wrestle with the turn away from instructional excellence in charters and toward ideological training and therapy—and the resulting decline in student outcomes. Acknowledging that the sector is at risk, they will tackle the erosion of bipartisan support from political leaders and the public at large and the

surge in support for private school choice plans. Participants will adopt a five-year plan for the restoration of academic excellence as the focus of charter schooling and the driver of equal opportunity and true empowerment of historically marginalized populations.

2. Establish a clearinghouse for best practices and intellectual property to fuel the sector's restoration.

With the support of leading charter funders and support organizations, a new nonprofit organization should collect, preserve, and make available to charter schools at no expense the most academically effective products of the sector from its 2014–2019 apex. This includes academically ambitious curricula, lesson plans, and assessments (often those retired in the last decade in favor of social justice curricula), professional development training materials and practices for teachers and school leaders (including for grade-team meetings and real-time coaching), student culture and disciplinary systems, college advising practices, and school report cards and internal accountability systems. This intellectual property, developed at great effort and expense, drove the highest-performing schools. Now it is at risk of being lost; the collection effort is urgent.

3. Arrest the talent drain and invite lost talent to return.

As professional cultures turned toxic in many schools, many of the most capable staff in networks, often veterans of a decade or more, felt unwelcome and left. The loss of their know-how and drive for results proved debilitating in many schools. The sector must not only arrest this ongoing brain drain but systematically seek to recruit back these veterans to the work of building excellent schools.

4. Sustain state testing regimens. High-performing charters welcomed testing; social justice educators rejected it. It is critical that states restore and sustain annual testing regimens in grades 3 through 8. Without a clear measure of academic performance, charter and district schools alike cannot be held accountable for their results, top-performing schools highlighted (and their practices studied and replicated), and failed schools closed.

5. Expand alternative teacher training programs and push schools of education to reform.

The anti-knowledge, anti-intellectual cultures of schools of education deter high-achieving college graduates from entering teaching—and require charter schools to undo the misteaching they impart. States can follow the example of Massachusetts, which improved its teachers colleges by adopting new rigorous tests for teacher licensure; teacher colleges strove to prove to their applicants that they could prepare their students to pass the teacher tests and to obtain a license to teach in the state. (Regrettably, the state later reversed these reforms.)

Alternative programs like the Relay Graduate School of Education that equip teachers with real teaching skills, not only child development theory, should be radically expanded.

6. Remake charter authorizing to yield higher performing portfolios of schools.

The poor performance of many states' charter sectors stems from an abundance of small authorizers who lack the scale and technical resources to fulfill their responsibilities; the result is injudicious authorizing and a failure to close weak schools. Each state should build a small number of high-capacity authorizers (preventing concentration of power in a single agency, allowing competition in which educational models are endorsed, and offering applicants more than one venue to pitch their proposals). School districts and other small entities should not be permitted to authorize schools, and all authorizers should be barred from collecting fees from their portfolio schools (eliminating the revenue motive in chartering). The systems and practices of top authorizers (including the Charter School Institute of SUNY, funded by state appropriation), including their academic data systems, school visit protocols, and the structure of annual school reports, should be widely disseminated.

7. Remake charter school laws, building on three decades of policy experience.

Three decades of research has revealed the essential features of effective charter law and regulation. Many states began with weak laws; others were degraded by amendment and reregulation. Stripping statutes and regulation back to the essential charter bargain is the key: authority and autonomy for charter school operators in exchange for strict accountability for academic outcomes, legal compliance, and financial responsibility. For charters to succeed, they must not be shackled with the practices of the districts in which they are located—their collective bargaining agreements and policies, including those of human capital (teacher licensure, assignment, and tenure), student promotion and retention, and student disciplinary policies. To impose such policies is to ensure that charters perform no better than the districts they seek to outpace.

8. Restore support for charters in the advocacy and philanthropic communities.

Urban charter policy works through its alchemy of market and non-market features. Market forces drive improvement: On the supply side, charters break the monopoly hold of the school district and invite talented and driven social entrepreneurs to create new schools that compete with the district. On the demand side, the new schools must sustain the support of their parent customers.

But equally important has been governmental scrutiny: Public oversight—by both authorizers and state education agencies (SEAs)—ensures that charters, as public schools, do not indirectly select their students, whether by excluding the difficult to educate (including students with low prior achievement or students with disabilities or English language learners), pushing out students who are challenging to manage, or charging families tuition or school fees that some cannot afford. Most important, authorizers and SEAs require charters and district schools alike to participate in their state’s annual testing regimen, creating a universal measure of schools’ results; chronically low-performing schools are shuttered, even if they retain the support of their parents.

Private school choice plans, including vouchers and educational savings accounts, do not have these policy features. In their absence, voucher programs (among the most studied of educational innovations) have in the main not boosted academic achievement. They may prove popular with some families, including parents seeking a religious education for their children, but there is no basis in research to anticipate they will raise the achievement of American students or close racial and economic achievement gaps. If the objective is to offer opportunity to the historically marginalized and advance equity, education advocates and funders should recommit to charters.

Endnotes

- 1 New York City Charter School Center, “New York City Charter School Center Test Score Analysis 2025,” tab 8, “Scatter Plot by Network,” <https://nyccharterschools.org/new-york-city-charter-school-center-test-score-analysis>.
- 2 56.3 percent of students were found proficient in ELA and 56.9 percent in math. New York City Office of the Mayor, “Mayor Adams, Chancellor Aviles-Ramos Celebrate Grades 3–8 State Test Score Data Showing Increased Proficiency for 2024–2025 School Year,” August 11, 2025, <https://www.nyc.gov/mayors-office/news/2025/08/mayor-adams--chancellor-aviles-ramos-celebrate-grades-3-8-state-#>]
- 3 Researchers at the University of Arkansas examined 2019–20 funding levels in eighteen cities where there is a large charter sector or the potential for charter growth, including Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York City, and Washington, DC. To ensure the accuracy of the comparison, the analysis included all funding sources—local, state, federal, nonpublic, and nonmonetary resources shared with the district schools, such as facilities, special education services, food services, and transportation. Using the most recent funding data available, from the 2019–20 school year, the researchers found that charters received on average \$7,147 per pupil, about 30 percent less funding than at district public schools. In only one of the eighteen cities, Houston, did charters receive more funding than district schools—about \$417 per student. Alison Heape Johnson et al., “Charter School Funding: Little Progress towards Equity in the City,” School Choice Demonstration Project, August 2023, <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/scdp/88>.
- 4 Success Academy grew from one school to 59 schools in 20 years. Only the statutory cap on the number of schools in the city prevents further expansion.
- 5 “Charter schools are public schools that have more control over their own budget, staff, and curriculum, and are exempt from many existing public school regulations. In general, what is your opinion of public charter schools?” Morning Consult and EdChoice, February 2025, “The Public, Parents, and K–12 Education: National Polling Report #60, 45, <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/public-opinion-tracker-1.pdf>.
- 6 “Please keep in mind that when we talk about non-profit charter schools, they are schools that are operated independently from the regular school district system, but they are still public schools that are free for students and must meet state accountability standards. What is your opinion of non-profit public charter schools?” Democrats for Education Reform, memorandum, “National Education Poll Findings, Recommendations,” May 8, 2023, <https://dfer.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/May-5th-Nat-Poll-Findings-Memo.docx.pdf>.
- 7 Stanford researcher Margaret Raymond, in her monumental 2023 study of charter school performance, concluded that more than 1,000 “gap-busting” charter schools around the country were eliminating learning disparities on state assessments for their students. Dozens of charter school networks “have created these results across their portfolios,” the study noted, “demonstrating the ability to scale equitable education that can change lives.” The implications are stark: “These schools deliver hundreds of independent proof points that learning gaps between student groups are not structural or inevitable; better results are possible.” The researchers concluded, “These ‘gap-busting schools’ show that disparate student outcomes are not a foregone conclusion: People and resources can be organized to eliminate these disparities. The fact that thousands of schools have done so removes any doubt.” Margaret E. Raymond et al., *As a Matter of Fact: The National Charter School Study III 2023*, Center for Research on Education Outcomes, Stanford University, 12, 14, 120, 148. https://ncss3.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/DECK_CREDO-Report-10-31-23.pdf.
- 8 Chantal Fennell, “Texas Makes History with Landmark School Choice Law,” EdChoice, May 2, 2025, <https://www.edchoice.org/texas-makes-history-with-landmark-school-choice-law>.
- 9 Morning Consult, “The Public, Parents, and K–12 Education,” 44.
- 10 National Center for Education Statistics, *Common Core of Data: America’s Public Schools*, Table 3. Number of operating public elementary and secondary schools, by school type, charter, and state or jurisdiction: School year 2023–24, https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/tables/202324_summary_3.asp, and previous years.
- 11 The San Francisco Unified School District eliminated algebra classes in middle schools in 2014. By eliminating tracked classes, which consigned many Black and Latino students to lower-level classes, the reform would promote equity, the district claimed. Access by Black students to Advanced Placement math classes by twelfth grade declined. Unsurprisingly, choking off students’ access to rigorous math did not help marginalized students; it harmed them. Stephen Sawchuk, “A Bold Effort to End Algebra Tracking Shows Promise,” Education Week, June 12, 2018, <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/a-bold-effort-to-end-algebra-tracking-shows-promise/2018/06>. Elizabeth Huffaker, Sarah Novicoff, and Thomas S. Dee, “Ahead of the Game? Course-Taking Patterns under a Math Pathways Reform” (working paper, Annenberg Institute at Brown University, Providence, RI, March 2023), 11, 18, <https://edworkingpapers.com/sites/default/files/ai23-734.pdf>.
- 12 Steven F. Wilson, *The Lost Decade: Returning to the Fight for Better Schools in America* (Boston: Pioneer Institute, 2025).
- 13 Steven F. Wilson, *The Lost Decade*, 196–197.
- 14 For instance, the Achievement First network of charter schools had for years posted exceptional results in New York City. In 2025, 58 percent of Achievement First’s students were found proficient in ELA, compared with 56 percent in the district’s schools. In math, 59 percent were found proficient, compared with 57 percent in the district. New York City Charter School Center, “New York City Charter School Center Test Score Analysis 2025,” tab 8, <https://nyccharterschools.org/new-york-city-charter-school-center-test-score-analysis/>
- 15 Jorge Elorza, the former mayor of Providence, Rhode Island and current CEO of Democrats for Education Reform (DFER), has urged Democratic governors to support voucher and ESA programs; DFER historically emphasized charter schools and public-school choice. Kevin Chavous, who cofounded DFER now supports vouchers and helped design Louisiana’s voucher program. The billionaire Jeff Yass, who supported charter schools, is now one of the most outspoken supporters of vouchers and ESAs.

- 16 EdChoice, formerly the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, an organization devoted to the advancement of school choice, including school vouchers, summarized in 2025 the test score findings of 12 voucher studies. Six studies showed positive effects for some or all students and six showed no effects or negative effects. EdChoice, “The 124 of School Choice: What the research say about private school choice programs in America,” 2025, 15, <https://edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/123s-of-School-Choice-2025.pdf>.
- 17 Joel Klein was the chancellor of the New York City Schools from 2002 to 2010, in the zenith of the school reform era. Nearly every reform of his administration has since been undone. Fourth-grade NAEP scores in both reading and math rose annually during his administration, only to fall back beginning in 2011—and then slip further in 2022 from the pandemic. Nation’s Report Card, “New York City,” https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/profiles/districtprofile/overview/XN?c-ti=PgTab_OT&hort=1&sub=MAT&sj=XN&fs=Grade&st=MN&year=2022R3&sg=Gender%3A%20Male%20vs.%20Female&sg=Difference&ts=Single%20Year&tss=2022R3&sfj=NL. Reflecting in 2011 on his tenure, Klein wrote: “Having spent eight years trying to ignite a revolution in New York City’s schools under Mayor Bloomberg’s leadership, I am convinced that without a major realignment of political forces, we won’t get the dramatic improvements our children need.” Joel Klein, “The Failure of American Schools,” *Atlantic*, June 2011, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/06/the-failure-of-american-schools/308497/>.
- 18 Steven F. Wilson, *Learning on the Job: When Business Takes on Public Schools* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 250.
- 19 Christopher Peak, “After Sold a Story, More States Spell Out Reading Instruction,” APM Reports, May 18, 2023, <https://www.apmreports.org/story/2023/05/18/legislators-reading-laws-sold-a-story>.
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- 21 Steven F. Wilson, *The Lost Decade*, 19–52.
- 22 Richard F. Elmore, “Bridging the Gap Between Standards and Achievement: The Imperative for Professional Development in Education,” in *School Reform from the Inside Out: Policy, Practice, and Performance* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Education Press, 2004), 3–26.
Douglas Carnine, *Why Education Experts Resist Effective Practices (and What It Would Take to Make Education More Like Medicine)* (Washington, D.C.: Fordham Foundation, 2002), 9.
- 23 Samuel Casey Carter, *No Excuses: Lessons from 21 High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools* (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, 2001). Abigail Thernstrom and Stephan Thernstrom, *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003). Jay Matthews, *Work Hard. Be Nice.: How Two Inspired Teachers Created the Most Promising Schools in America* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2009).
- 24 Raymond et al., *As a Matter of Fact*, 121, 122–35.
- 25 Raymond et al., *As a Matter of Fact*, 12, 14, 120, 148.
- 26 Eden Stiffman, “America’s hottest employer,” *The College Fix*, November 2, 2011, <https://www.thecollegefix.com/tfa-america-hotest-employer>.
- 27 Education scholars like Julian Vasquez Heilig and Eve L. Ewing led this critique.
- 28 Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (Boston, Mass., Beacon Press, 2018), 22, 95. Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Nation Books, 2016), 293, 493.
- 29 KIPP Foundation, “Retiring ‘Work Hard. Be Nice.’ as KIPP’s National Slogan,” July 1, 2020, <https://www.kipp.org/retiring-work-hard-be-nice>.
- 30 Steven F. Wilson, *The Lost Decade*, 203–204.
- 31 Steven F. Wilson, *The Lost Decade*, 200–201.
- 32 Steven F. Wilson, *The Lost Decade*, 204, 218.
- 33 Noble Schools, “Noble Charter Public High Schools Ranked Best in CPS,” press release, October 26, 2018, <https://mailchi.mp/nobleschools.org/noble-schools-earn-top-ratings-2018>.
- 34 Steven F. Wilson, *The Lost Decade*, 218.
- 35 TNTP, *The Opportunity Myth: What Students Can Show Us about How School Is Letting Them Down—and How to Fix It*, 4, https://tntp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/TNTP-The-Opportunity-Myth_Web.pdf.
- 36 Edmund Burke, *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, 1795–1797.
- 37 Boston boasted some of the highest-performing charter schools in the country. For years, authorities at the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education had honored the charter school bargain: Free the schools to innovate; gauge the schools by their academic outcomes, and don’t second-guess their practices; honor parents’ choices. But in the 2010s the state’s charter schools office began to bear down on the high-performing Boston charters for what it saw as unacceptably high levels of student transfers out of the schools (to less demanding schools), particularly in high school. In response to intense pressure from the state to improve retention, charters eased their expectations of students, fueling their academic decline. Had the state instead pressured the *Boston Public Schools* to address their chronically lax academic expectations, the majority system would have improved, and the charter sector would have remained a beacon of excellence. Wilson, *The Lost Decade*, 216–217.
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About the Author

Steven F. Wilson is a senior fellow at the Pioneer Institute for Public Policy Research. An education entrepreneur, policymaker, and writer, Steven founded and built Ascend Learning, a network of tuition-free, liberal arts charter schools in Central Brooklyn. The Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University identified Ascend as a “gap-busting” network for its success in closing—and reversing—achievement gaps of race and income. Previously, Steven was CEO of Advantage Schools, a network of twenty urban charter schools. His first book, *Reinventing the Schools: A Radical Plan for Boston*, drove the development and passage of the Massachusetts charter school law. His account of private involvement in public education, *Learning on the Job: When Business Takes on Public Schools* won the Virginia and Warren Stone prize for an outstanding book on education and society. His new book, *The Lost Decade: Returning to the Fight for Better Schools in America*, was published by Pioneer in 2025. More about Steven can be found on his website at stevenwilson.com.