Chartered Territory

Charter schools are using their autonomy and flexibility to innovate wraparound services

By Nina Rees

At the United Schools Network’s two elementary schools and two middle schools in Columbus, Ohio, nearly every student is economically disadvantaged. As a result, charter school leaders regularly survey families to find out about their needs and challenges, a process that allows them to “zero in on nonacademic barriers that we want to break down and get out of the way for kids,” says founder Andrew Boy.

Two of the biggest challenges are food insecurity and a difficulty keeping school uniforms clean. So United Schools Network opened family resource centers at its campuses, offering free food, clothing, and laundry facilities, with internet access to help parents with job searches. Boy says that at one campus, 80 of the 210 families have made use of family resource center services.

United Schools Network also offers high school placement assistance for students who are graduating from eighth grade. “Not every school is for everybody,” says Boy. “We want to help our students see what’s out there and make an informed decision.”
Thanks to partnerships with other organizations, the guidance extends beyond high school, helping former United Schools Network students make successful transitions to college.

**Breaking Boundaries**
Across America, charter schools are offering a variety of wraparound services to students and families. Some services are basic, such as free breakfasts, snacks, and dinners. Other services include academic enrichment and supports specific to college and career preparation. And others are following United Schools Network’s lead in pushing the boundaries of what’s expected of a school, making a variety of health and social services available to families.

While charter schools, which are free and open to all students, can be authorized by school districts, they typically operate independently, exercising more autonomy over the management of finances, personnel, and school time. This flexibility allows charter schools to innovate; for instance, if extra counseling or programming can benefit a segment of students, charter schools can make those things a priority without having to clear the decision with district officials.

**Special Needs**
Charter schools can also fill needs that districts aren’t able to fill on their own. After more than a decade helping teens in Spokane, Washington, through a local community organization, Shauna Edwards knew that teen parents needed help staying in school. She had seen too many drop out because they didn’t have the support necessary to balance life goals with their new responsibilities.

Edwards started talking with Spokane-area school districts about how to offer wraparound services such as in-school child care on their campuses. These conversations led her to an entirely new venture—opening a charter school oriented toward teen parents.

Edwards secured a charter from Spokane Public Schools in June, and her school, Lumen High School, will open in the fall. Lumen will feature wraparound services such as child care and other supports to help young parents stay in school, eventually ramping up enrollment to 120 teen parents and their children.

“The dream for our school was co-created with teen parents who are hungry for learning and want to learn alongside their children, so that their role as a parent isn’t at odds with their role as a student,” Edwards says.

**Complementing the Community**
Many charter schools are operated by organizations whose mission is to meet wider community needs. For instance, Passages Charter School was founded in 2001 when Chicago Public Schools awarded a charter to Asian Human Services, an organization that provides social services to people of any ethnic background. All programs and services offered by Asian Human Services are available to the school’s families, including adult literacy classes, computer training, employment services, health education, and behavioral health services.

Some charter schools are located inside other institutions. The Settlement Home for Children in Austin, Texas, is a foster home for abused and neglected children that houses a University of Texas (UT)–University Charter School with about three dozen students in middle and high school. Specializing in “serving special-needs students in unique settings such as psychiatric hospitals and residential treatment centers,” the UT school operates in 23 facilities, each of which provides educational and wraparound support services.

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While the flexibilities built into the charter school model are conducive to incorporating wraparound services into educational settings, charter schools still face challenges in providing such services. Foremost among them is funding: Charter schools typically receive less funding than district-run schools, though numbers vary across states. Autonomy over funding can allow school leaders to get creative in covering gaps, but at the end of the day, no school leader has as much funding as he or she would like, and no public school should have to choose between providing counselors and providing meals.

Charter schools are demonstrating new ways to deliver wraparound services, but they will require investment from federal, state, and local leaders to scale up. The return on investment should be clear: If pioneering school leaders such as Andrew Boy and Shauna Edwards can help more at-risk students stay on track for graduation and go on to higher education, rewarding jobs, and fulfilling lives, their communities will benefit for generations to come.

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