

EDUCATORS FOCUS ON CHARTER SCHOOLS AT PPE INSTITUTE

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By Jill Anderson

As charter schools come to the fore in the national education debate, 69 charter school educators attended the Ed School's [Programs in Professional Education](#) institute, [Charter Schools: Practices for High Performance](#), in July with the goal of developing skills and strategies to build capacity and improve student outcomes.

The four-day leadership development program drew on the expertise and research of Harvard faculty and leading practitioners in framing the challenges faced by charter schools and their school communities while also addressing the larger state-level policy environment. During a concluding session of the institute, the educators contemplated whether the changing political landscape could help to eliminate the misperceptions long faced by charter schools. "We've never had a moment like this before," said Nelson Smith, president of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, who led the session called, Obama and Charters: Are We Ready for Lift-Off? "You have a federal [leadership team] talking about charter schools without any prompting from us."

Recently President Barack Obama discussed plans to expand funding available to charter schools, and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has voiced his support and encouraged states to open more charter schools. Changes are also occurring at the state level. In Massachusetts, for instance, Governor Deval Patrick and Boston Mayor Tom Menino recently announced the proposal of new state laws in favor of opening more charter schools and expanding the schools' power.

Today there are 4,600 charter schools in the United States, Smith said, noting that the number could rise to 5,000 as early as September. As waiting lists at charter schools continue to grow nationally, the educators shared stories of how local politicians expressed interest in their children or family members having an opportunity to attend their schools. Smith wondered aloud to the educators at the session if the apparent federal push - also seen in several states -- signifies that charter schools finally have lift-off. While many of the participants remain hopeful that this is the case, they also recognize the continued difficulty of dealing with two separate entities when managing charter schools. "It's not so much confusion but exhaustion in keeping up with the state and federal requirements," said one educator from Texas. "I think a line should be drawn from serving two masters."

Smith urged the educators to have conversations locally and at the state level. "Begin every one of those conversations with 'Charter schools are public schools,'" Smith said explaining that it is important for people to understand that charter schools are there to serve all students and, as is the case with all public schools, exist to educate students effectively.

As for whether the political landscape showed any promise of change among charter school nationally, Jean Wallace, CEO of the Green Woods Charter School in Philadelphia, remained unsure. "I think all politics are local," she said, noting that unfortunately the federal government needs to follow up any push with funding at the state level. "I'd like to see us work together better because then there can be a change."

Regardless of whether a change occurs politically for charter schools, one thing the institute

promised is change among its participants. Professor [Kay Merseth](#), faculty chair of the institute, encouraged participants to write three things they will take with them, including two things to start right away, on an index card to be exchanged with a fellow participant. Merseth then asked each to follow-up in a few months to make sure everyone was putting their goals into action. "This is hard work, but we are not going to give up on you," Merseth said. "You can do the work!"